

DEVELOPING A CONSTITUTION

Congratulations! A church considering the development of a constitution has reached a milestone. Parents birth, support and guide their children with the hope that they will become productive adults. The developing of a constitution signifies a church has reach a point in maturity that it can exist on its own as a productive New Testament church. It is a time of celebration and coming of age.

A constitution establishes formal and informal relationships between a new church, its members and other significant entities. It seeks to give structure to a dynamic, growing organism.

Some Suggestions to Consider When Developing a Constitution:

1. Develop an original constitution.
Each church is unique and has individual personality. While a constitution from another church can be a useful frame of reference, do not copy or use another church as a model. Constitutions are frameworks to enable and support the work of a church's personality. Copying a constitution from another church is an attempt to take on another personality which usually does not work.
2. Resist the urge to develop a constitution early in the life of a church.
Structure should provide support for the ministry of a new church. Focus, instead, on developing the church's life and ministry at the beginning. When it becomes necessary to have a constitution, provide a minimum of structure at the beginning.

The support committee is the only necessary decision-making group for the first years in the life of a church. As the church grows and leaders are developed, members of the church can begin to serve on the support committee and will in time become the leadership team of the church. These individuals will then begin serving in leadership roles of the church (moderator or chair of the leadership team), treasurer, secretary and ministry team leaders. Sometime in this process, a simple constitution can begin to take shape. A simple structure will allow the church to focus on ministry and not on maintaining an organization.

3. Focus on gifts rather than elected officers and committees.
For the purpose of starting a church, individuals can function briefly in roles that do not utilize their gifts. However, to function with joy and enthusiasm, they need to be operating and serving in the areas of their giftedness. From the beginning a planter will want to recognize, develop and encourage the use of gifts. Every church will be composed of people with varying gifts, which will lead to specialized ministries for that church. Gifted people can be set free to minister rather than maintain the structure of the church. In fact, research indicates that younger generations desire to be involved in ministries that will make a difference, not in maintaining structures.

4. Institute servant empowering structures.
While churches may think that they are “permission giving,” most churches actually are “permission denying,” setting up so many hurdles and obstacles to keep the wrong things from happening that they inhibit the good. Discourage multiple layers of decision-making bodies that will take weeks or months to make a final decision before something can be done. People should be set free to act—providing that the purpose is in line with the church’s vision, goals and values. Of course, this is risky. And at times mistakes will be made. But attempts to keep mistakes at a minimum usually produce an inactive church.

5. Focus on vision, goals and values.
Most structures manage programs, raise money and maintain facilities. While seemingly necessary to the operation of a church, in reality these things often turn the focus of the church from its vision, goals and values. Programs, money and facilities are important only as far as they enable ministry to people. Churches need to structure around ministries.

The story is told of a layperson who constantly asked at every meeting, “What is the one thing you must accomplish in this project? If you can only accomplish one thing, what is the one thing that must be achieved in order to make this project successful?” Such reflection will keep a church on target with its vision and goals. Structure simply enables members to accomplish the purpose of the church—which is more significant than programs, money and facilities.

6. Simplify.
The more complex the organizational structure the more likely it will breed inactivity among its members. Added layers of decision-making and channels required to reach a final decision immobilize a church. Inactivity opens the door for power-seeking people to move into formal or informal positions that may turn the church away from its vision and goals. Indeed, many people are more interested in gaining and exercising control than they are interested in ministry. When there is disagreement (which is normal), the only approach of “controllers” is “win-lose” with the thought that everyone must agree (not true!), forcing people to either choose their side or get out. These two issues—inactivity and power—are deadly.

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1. State the vision or purpose of ministry, the goals and the values that define and describe the new church.
2. Consider the minimum number of officially elected people needed to lead the congregation. Identify these people and describe their basic duties. Consider how these persons will be selected or elected.

3. Determine which essential matters need to be brought before the congregation for support, direction and affirmation (which is a vital part of our Baptist roots).

Realize that in the future, more decisions should be made on the basis of consensus rather than on the basis of a majority vote. Acknowledge that congregational votes can seldom establish direction and provide leadership.

Look to the congregation for what it can provide. Among the historic matters, the congregation can extend a call to ministerial staff, elect officers, approve budgets, vote on the purchase and sale of property, and vote on changes to the by-laws (see 7 below). However, the most important element of church life for the congregation is for the congregation to know and value and affirm the vision and goals of the church while setting people free to provide leadership to accomplish them.

4. Identify relationships with the area, association, region and American Baptist Churches USA.

While the desire is to plant churches that will grow, succeed and maintain faithful ministry for years to come, it is possible that a new church may not succeed in that place at that time. However, the goal of reaching new people for Jesus continues in the American Baptist family. The new church ought to designate the region as the recipient of all real property so that the region can use the resources for another new church in the case of closure.

5. Identify the process of affirming and supporting ministries and of developing leaders.

Hopefully, the new church will have structures that will allow ministries to be added or deleted without having to be identified and organized into a constitution. This flexibility will allow a church to respond quickly to possible ministry opportunities and to conclude them when no gifted persons are in the congregation to lead. Simply tie the constitution of the church to its vision and ministries, not to any specific program.

6. Acknowledge that constitutions will not solve every problem.
It should provide enough spiritual basis so that the leadership and the congregation will acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus in dealing with issues and concerns in a loving, biblical way. This means that the congregation could allow differences in thinking to coexist while living and serving together in the bonds of covenant love. Simply acknowledge that a congregation is not a collection of individuals but a community that exists for each other and for the world.

7. Keep the constitution short and simple using only enduring elements that do not have to be changed. Have separate by-laws that are flexible and can be changed easily in accordance with the needs of the church at the time. If the constitution must be changed frequently, the document contains too much detail, much of which should be in by-laws.

Refer to the Constitution and By-Laws for the Good Shepherd Baptist Church found in Appendix J as an example of a basic constitution and by-laws with a traditional church pattern. Note that this probably offers too much structure for most churches in the future. See the outline of organization for the Emmanuel Community Church for another structural model. This also is found in Appendix J.

John Wanamaker, retired area minister for West Virginia Baptist Convention, has provided some helpful guidelines for constitutions that should be considered. See Appendix J for this guide as well.

Additional Thoughts

In the book *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*, Kennon L. Callahan offers these considerations.

A church constitution is:

- a decision-making process that contributes to the development of wise decisions and thoughtful directions for the life and mission of a congregation
- a participatory process where ownership, openness and a dynamic relationship between the informal and formal arenas of participation
- a process that allows participants to proceed in a caring manner since the structure is provided to enhance the experience of community
- a process that is streamlined
- a process that encourages people to take initiative and responsibility in ministry

Thom S. Rainer in his book, *Eating the Elephant*, warns against allowing the church to become attached to the structure rather than to the vision and ministry. A clear vision and a strong outward focus in ministry should control the church. In that light, vision and ministry determine the type and shape of the supporting structures.