

## How The Church is Governed and Led

(Taken from three Wednesday night Bible Studies that Pastor Nelson taught on July 7, 14, 21 in 2004)

### **Acts 20:28; Ephesians 5:25-30**

Our goal in this study is to find answers to the following questions:

*How is the church governed?*

*Where do leaders come from?*

*How do we recognize them?*

*How is authority and responsibility given to them?*

*How are the leaders selected?*

*What are their qualifications?*

*What do our leaders do?*

*What are the practical service oriented committees and positions?*

### ***First, let's ask what is the church?***

The word translated church in the New Testament is *ekklesia*, which is the Greek word meaning 'called out ones' or 'assembly'. Believers in the book of Acts began to use this word when they gathered, so they became known as the church. The word is used a few times in the broadest sense in the New Testament; however, it is mostly used to specify a specific group. There is the concept of both the universal (all believers) and the local church. The universal church is believers of all ages: past, present, and future called out from the world and under the authority of Christ. The local church is a specific group of believers meeting in an atmosphere of love, acceptance, and forgiveness who voluntarily associate around Christ.

*Our purpose as a local church, in organizing ourselves with effective government and leadership, is to carry out the following vision and mission.*

### **Gulfhaven's Vision and Mission:**

The vision of Gulfhaven Mennonite Church is – "To Know Christ and to Make Him Known."

As a local church, operating under the direction of Jesus as Lord and head, Gulfhaven's mission is to:

Bring people to the saving knowledge of faith in Jesus Christ and membership in His family (evangelism and fellowship)

Develop them to Christ like maturity (discipleship)

Equip them for ministry in the church and a life of mission in the world (ministry)

...in order to glorify God's Holy Name. (worship)

**Gulfhaven Mennonite Church has a leadership team of elders made up of its called Pastor(s), and elected elders.**

**Gulfhaven also has elected positions to several practical service oriented committees and positions: trustees, finance committee, and Gulf States Conference delegates.**

*Before we look at these elected positions, let's first consider some other questions.  
How is Gulfhaven governed?*

First, we must understand several presuppositions:

Christ is the head of the church. (Ephesians 1:22-23; 5:23-24; Colossians 1:18)

Principles for governing the church are not a matter of human preference, but of divine revelation. (Matthew 28:18-20; Colossians 1:18)

The office of elder is clearly local in authority and function; thus, the church is autonomous and is governed by elders, not by broader assemblies. (Acts 14:23; 20:17, 28; I Timothy 3, Titus 1:5)

Associations do not belong to the essence of being the church; rather, they serve the well-being of the church. These relationships are voluntary and are possible only on the basis of unity in faith and in confession. (Acts 15:1-35; Romans 15:2-27; Colossians 4:16, Titus 1:5; Revelation 1:11,20; I Corinthians 10:14-22; Galatians 1:8-9; Ephesians 4:16-17)

In order to manifest our spiritual unity, local churches should seek the broadest possible contacts with other like-minded churches for their mutual edification and as an effective witness to the world. (John 17:21-23; Ephesians 4:1-6)

Christ cares for His church through the office-bearers whom He chooses. (Acts 6:2-3; Timothy 3:1,8; 5:17)

Since the church is the pillar and ground of the truth, it is called through the teaching ministry, to build up the people of God in faith. (Deuteronomy 11:19; Ephesians 4:11-16; I Timothy 4:6; II Timothy 2:2; 3:1-17)

Government is a necessary element in the church; which, serves to establish and maintain order. Two main functions of church government are (1) organization (order and direction of ministry) and (2) authority for leadership.

Jesus is the head of the church (Col. 1:8), and has delegated His authority to be exercised through the government of the church.

The New Testament provides the grounds for government but is silent in the specific methods of implementation. There are three prominent forms of church polity or government in use in churches:

(1) Episcopal — This system of church government considers the bishop as the principal officer. Decisions are made at levels higher than the local church, usually with prayerful contemplation toward God's will and nominal consideration of the member's opinions.

(2) Presbyterian — This form of government acknowledges that Christ alone is head of the church, and that He rules His church by His Word and Spirit. Church officials have ministerial and declarative authority but not legislative. They declare, explain, and apply Christ's will as the Spirit clarifies the scripture to their understanding. They do not seek to make new laws for the church.

(3) Congregational — This is an autonomous form of government by the church, generally by a democratic philosophy; which, allows a local congregation the freedom to determine what it considers the will of Christ. The congregation governs its own affairs; however, this does not suggest that it is self-governing apart from Christ's lordship. Simply stated, the members of the congregation are given the right to determine what they consider to be Christ's will.

*What are the truths about each?*

*What are the problems with each?*

*Can there be a balance of the good elements?*

***Gulfhaven seeks a balance between the Presbyterian and Congregational form of church government.***

Ultimately and primarily the church is a theocracy, meaning it is God-governed rather than man-governed. Church operation and function is not based on the will of the people, but theoretically based on God's will being revealed and the people's response to that revelation. Therefore, Christ himself is the ultimate authority of the church (Colossians 1:18, Ephesians 1:22-23, 5:23, Hebrews 1:1-3).

The leadership team of elders at Gulfhaven has the awesome responsibility of knowing and doing the will of God for the body; however, the democratic process and the local church has an important part, also. For example:

- The church is the final 'court' in the discipline process in Matthew 18:15-17. Verse 17 says, "tell it to the church."
- In Acts 6:1-7 emerging leadership needs were recognized in the early church and the church was involved in the selection process. Verse 2, "so the twelve gathered all the disciples together..."

The biblical pattern seems to be that the church invests the leadership with real governing authority. Believers are called on to obey the leaders of the body: "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you (Heb 13:7)."

The leaders are held to a high standard of moral and ethical excellence. The overseer is to be "above reproach (1 Tim 3:2)," and "blameless (Tit 1:6)."

Leaders function as servants. This is the model presented by Jesus himself in Luke 22:24. The New Testament views godly leaders as a gift to the church, given to aid it in governance. Paul also stresses this in Ephesians 4:7-13. Leaders are uniquely placed in the body to help it function in the most efficient and healthy way possible. Godly leaders fully recognize that they are not the head of the church. That place is filled only by Jesus Christ himself (Eph 1:10, 22; 4:15; Col 1:18; 2:10, 19). The shepherd of the church realizes that he is ultimately accountable to the Chief Shepherd, as I Peter 5:2-4 makes clear.

### **Leadership in the church**

#### ***How does this biblical pattern function at Gulfhaven today?***

The church should be expected to consider and deliberate major decisions in the life of the church. These would include: the calling of pastors, the selection of leadership; the adoption of an annual budget and major financial decisions.

In matters that the church has already reached agreement, those vested with leadership should have the freedom to serve with both authority and integrity. The church body delegates certain responsibilities and duties to the leadership team of elders in matters of leading the congregation.

#### ***Where do leaders come from?***

#### ***How do we recognize them?***

#### ***How is authority and responsibility given to them?***

There were only two designated leaders in the early churches – pastors and elders. These two have several similarities. There are also some distinctions.

There are three words for elders in the New Testament:

- Elders (presbuteros) = character of life, maturity which is not necessarily related to age \*
- Overseers (episkopos) = lead by example, superintend, guardians, manage \*\*
- Shepherds (poimaino) = to feed, to tend a flock, loving care \*\*

Acts 20:17, 28 "Paul sent to Ephesus for the *elders\** of the church..."  
"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers\*\**. Be *shepherds\*\*\** of the church..."

These words are synonymous with each other and they all refer to elders or leaders of a local church. Roles of elders are reflected in the meanings of the different words. The verse below gives additional instruction with five insights to church leadership.

I Thessalonians 5:12-13 “Now we ask you, to respect those\* who work hard\*\* among you\*\*\*, who are over you\*\*\*\* in the Lord and who admonish you\*\*\*\*\*. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.”

\* = plurality (church leadership is by a team)

\*\* = it's work

\*\*\* = we rub shoulders and work together (leadership is more bottom up than top down)

\*\*\*\* = care for, take the lead

\*\*\*\*\* = straighten things out when necessary

### **The leadership team of elders is made of the Pastor(s), and elders.**

The leadership team at Gulfhaven Mennonite Church is responsible for the care and for the direction and future of the flock. The leadership team is made up of men. These men are individuals qualified by the Word and Holy Spirit, chosen by the body to have the spiritual care of and to exercise oversight in the local church. The leadership team functions in plurality, and recognizes the principle of first among equals. Elders, as individuals, have no special authority. No elder can be the "boss" in a church. The leadership team functions corporately and together seeks the mind of the Lord.

### **The pastor(s)**

In Ephesians 4:11, individuals gifted in different ways are seen given as gifts to local bodies for the maturing of the members of the body. One of these gifts is the pastor/teacher. Their function is to be a teaching shepherd. Their roles are to feed, lead, and protect. The pastor(s) of a local church is also an elder and serves on the leadership team. In I Peter 5:1, Peter says, “To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder...”

They are not primarily administrators, money collectors, callers, public relations men, program organizers, custodians, or counselors.

They are primarily teachers of the Word of God, the Bible. They are to teach and exhort by precept and example. They have charge of the pulpit ministry of the church. Their goal is to mature the saints through insightful and accurate presentation and proclamation of the Word, stressing both the understanding and application of divine truths and principles. Pastors carry out the work Christ began -- to feed and oversee His sheep, (I Timothy 4:11-13, II Timothy 4:2-4).

It is needful for the local church to have the input from all the giftings listed in Ephesians 4:11. This happens as the pastor or pastors flow in different anointings, special guests are invited by leadership to minister, or the other elders minister in their gifts and anointings.

## **Elders**

Why does Gulfhaven have a plurality of elders sharing equal authority and responsibility? Doesn't having more than one elder make for confusion? Doesn't a church need someone like a CEO who has the final "clout" in any matter?

We believe that the plurality of elders with equal authority is the scriptural norm for the local church for these reasons:

1. It is logically necessary for there to be one head of the local church. If the local church needs one head, and the Bible clearly teaches that the one head is Christ (Hebrews 13:20 and I Peter 2:25) why do we assume the necessity for another head? Doesn't the very concept of proper management with an organizational chart imply that the head (Christ) would have a plurality of leaders under him?
2. The scriptures frequently mention the plurality concept of elders in the New Testament. Every passage in the New Testament relating to the organization of the local church shows a plurality of elders with no mention of one of the elders being superior over the others.

Elders are not selected on the basis of their executive abilities, financial success, public relations, skills, etc.

Elders are chosen because of their spiritual qualifications. Since it is a very high calling, and since God holds them more responsible than others, He has laid down explicit qualifications. Elders are to seek constantly to glorify Christ by making decisions based upon sound Biblical principles. (Philippians 2:2-3, Romans 12:16, James 2:1)

Their qualifications are found in these passages (Titus 1:6-9, I Timothy 3:1-7, I Peter 5:2).

Elders are not a dictatorial body whose objective is to bring a group of people to a position of blind servitude and obedience by their position of authority.

Elders are to rule by precept (command from a superior) and example. They are to serve and care for the flock and give themselves for it. Eldership is a position of servitude, not dictatorship. The key to real leadership is example. Example is what makes precept believable. It can be safely assumed that a church's growth, viability (development capability), and veracity (devotion to truth) are dependent upon its elders. (Hebrews 13:7, 17)

Elders are not to operate by majority rule or vote.

Elders are to be unanimous in all decisions. If each and every elder is being guided by the Spirit, then there must be unanimity in decision, a 100% concurrence, yea or nay. If not, they should pray, study, gain more knowledge, and deliberate until such time as consensus is achieved. The Holy Spirit is undivided and in total agreement with Himself and with the Son at all times.

When godly men make godly decisions, the church body will not only agree with them but will follow in harmony and unity will reign. With unanimity of the Elders, the church body's trust in their leadership is assured.

What does the leadership team of elders do?

- An elder loves the sheep and has a desire to care for those entrusted to him (Acts 20:28). An elder develops relationships with and loves the flock (John 10:11, 14).
- An elder studies the Word personally for increasing character, skills, knowledge, faith, love, and a closer walk with the Lord (Acts 20:20, 27; 1 Timothy 4:16; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 4:1-2 Titus 3:1-2, 8).
- An elder is able to offer objective biblical direction when there are important decisions, difficult questions or conflicts for those under his care (2 Timothy 3:16-17).
- An elder gives spiritual comfort during trials (2 Corinthians 1:3-7; Thessalonians 5:14).
- An elder watches out for the enemy's assaults on the sheep. He must warn the sheep of danger and discipline them when they become wayward (Acts 20:28-31; 1 Thessalonians 5:14; 1 Timothy 6:20; 2 Timothy 4:1-5; Hebrews 13:17).
- An elder prays with and for those entrusted to him (1 Samuel 12:23; Romans 1:9; Ephesians 1:15-21; Philippians 1:9-11; Colossians 1:9-12).

### ***Deacons***

A word about deacons. The Greek word “diakonos” which is translated “deacon” and is the same word that is more often translated “minister” or “servant”. We believe that all Christians are ministers and are to serve. Acts 6:1-6 tells of a special time when the local church in Jerusalem had a special ministry need. At that time some men were picked to perform this ministry of taking food to needy widows in the church. This would serve as an example of ministry at Gulfhaven today. Ministry Leaders and ministers team up to perform significant roles in church ministry.

*How are the leaders selected?*

*What are their qualifications?*

### **The leadership team of elders:**

We'll look at Gulfhaven's selection process that includes nominations from the body and an election in a moment. First let's consider the biblical qualifications of an elder.

Paul gives us certain character qualities by which one can recognize the men that the Holy Spirit is selecting. Though the congregation votes, the congregation does not select its elders; the Holy Spirit does. He chooses men in the congregation and develops within them the character qualities needed, leading them through various experiences to train them. The job of the congregation is to keep alert and see who it is the Holy Spirit is putting his hand on.

The biblical qualifications are: (I Timothy 3:2-7)

- Must be above reproach (reputation)

This does not mean that he has never had anything go wrong. If that were so, none of us would make it. It means that when something did go wrong, he handled it correctly, he dealt with it openly, giving every indication of desiring to be a godly, righteous man, above reproach.

- The husband of one wife

The word basically means that an elder is to be a one-woman man, i.e., that he is faithful to one woman, his wife, whom he loves. This focuses more on moral purity than marital status

- Temperate (calm, not flighty)
- Sensible (self-control, inner peace, steady)
- Dignified (orderly)
- Hospitable (has an open home)
- Apt to teach (able to teach by his life and words, and is teachable)
- No drunkard

In Bible times, drinking wine was common, to do so to the point of intoxication is of course a problem. Not over-indulged in drinking or in anything, there is to be no reproach in this area.

- Not violent but gentle (contentious, angry)
- Not quarrelsome (stubborn, insisting his own point)
- No lover of money (keeping up with Joneses, but maintaining a balanced lifestyle)
- Manage his own household well

This does not mean that his family will never have problems. Nobody can be totally free of problems. What this urges us to observe is how he handles those problems. Does he evade them by busying himself in his business, or does he tackle those problems? The text says that this is excellent practice for being an elder in a church. An elder must not run from problems or refuse to face them. He must learn how to deal with them and how to work things out in love and grace.

- Must not be a recent convert (possible pride and arrogance)
- Must be well thought of by outsiders (good reputation in the eyes of others)

*How are the leaders selected?*

*What are the practical service oriented committees and positions?*

### **Nominations and Elections**

The body at Gulfhaven has the opportunity to make nominations for open positions prior to the Annual Church Business Meeting that is held each year in September. That nomination period is for two weeks covering a three Sunday period. Following nominations, the current leadership contacts each person nominated asking them to pray, consider God's will, and answer if they want to be on the ballot. Elections are held during the Annual Church Business Meeting. Terms, except for delegate, are three years. A leader whose term expires can serve consecutive terms.

*What are the practical service oriented committees and positions?*

Besides the leadership team there are the trustees, a finance committee, and delegates to the Gulf States Conference.

### **Trustees**

The biblical qualifications of the elders discussed above are held as the standard to strive for in those who serve as trustees. Both men and women can serve on this service oriented committee. The trustees are directly responsible to the leadership team.

The trustees shall consist of five members selected by the congregation for a term of three years.

Brief descriptions of duties: The trustees' primary function is to keep up the grounds and the building. This position requires a person who is willing to be involved and also who is able to get others involved.

#### Duties:

1. Manage all property of the congregation.
2. Repair and maintain the church buildings, grounds, and cemetery.
3. Appoint and supervise a cemetery committee.
4. Report activities to and secure approval for major capital expenditures.
5. Supervise janitorial services.

### **Finance Committee**

The biblical qualifications of the elders discussed above are held as the standard to strive for in those who serve as finance committee members. Both men and women can serve on this service oriented committee. The finance committee is directly responsible to the leadership team.

The finance committee shall consist of a treasurer appointed by the elders and (2) two members selected by the congregation for a term of (3) three years.

Particular qualifications – financial ability

Duties:

1. Prepare a church budget annually to be presented at our Annual Meeting in September.
2. To see that the members of the church are adequately informed on the church's financial programs, procedures, expenditures, and needs.
3. Actively working to find ways to encourage good stewardship.
4. Manage all church funds.

### **Gulf States Mennonite Conference Delegates (2 Year Term)**

The biblical qualifications of the elders discussed above are held as the standard to strive for in those who serve as conference delegates. Both men and women can serve on this service oriented committee. The conference delegates are directly responsible to the leadership team.

Delegates are the church's pastor(s), several elders and others elected from the body. The number of delegates is based on the membership total of the church. At this time Gulfhaven can send its pastors, two elders, and four elected delegates to the annual conference in November.

Duties of the delegates:

To represent the Gulfhaven membership at the annual delegates body meeting of Gulf States Mennonite Conference. To keep informed on issues relating to conference by reading the minutes of the GSMC Executive Committee quarterly meetings. To consult with the Gulfhaven leadership team of elders prior the annual meeting to discuss important issues and votes.