



How to Write

A

Church

Constitution

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Introduction

It seems to be a journey without end. Regardless of all of the advances in education and technology we make, in spite of all the tragic testimony of humanity through the centuries, we have yet to come to grips with the reality of Jeremiah 17:9 - that within each of us lies a heart that is not to be trusted because, in the words of the prophet, it is "deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked."

The human heart, even of born-again Bible believers, will lead you into believing something is good or true or right when it really isn't. Proverbs 28:26 puts it bluntly when it says, "he that trusteth in his own heart is a fool." Left to itself the heart of the staunchest Christian, be he a pastor, a missionary, a church planter or an ordinary believer, will seek dominance and control. Each of us inherently believes that our opinions are superior to those of others. We think we know which option, solution, action, program or decision is best. Rarely do we stop to contemplate the possibility that we might be wrong.

The resulting carnage is often witnessed in our churches. Rather than being places of sweet fellowship, peaceful unity, mutual care-giving, and spiritual growth, too many churches resemble battlefields in which we destroy our leaders, shoot our wounded, and take no prisoners. Ample abuse is found in both the pulpit and the pew.

Some pastors, ignoring Peter's admonition not to "lord it over God's heritage" (Peter 5:3), exercise dictatorial control over every aspect of the church's ministry. They appoint and remove deacons at will. They move funds around as they see fit. They make decisions about programs and properties without seeking counsel or permission from anyone. When they snap their fingers people jump. Everyone knows they are the "boss" who is in control. Nothing happens without their permission.

In some churches it is the deacons themselves who have usurped an unbiblical authority and now "run the church" as they see fit. The pastor is only a hireling who serves as a chaplain to fill both the pulpit and the pew, and to hatch (dedicate babies), match (marry) and dispatch (bury) members of the congregation.

Other times churches function with little rhyme or reason. As in the days of old, "every man does that which is right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). There are endless business meetings dealing with minutia, turf wars erupt, innovation and creativity are stifled, growth is undermined, and a suffocating inertia settles in like a wet blanket.

The cycle is repeated in church after church, generation after generation. We never seem to learn that the human heart, even when regenerated, is not to be trusted. It must be regulated.

The framers of the U.S. Constitution understood that simple fact. So, when they brought this nation to birth they devised a document designed to protect our land against the abuse of power that is so often generated by the human heart. They wrote a manuscript called "The Constitution" that set forth the principles by which this country was to be governed, and instituted a set of checks and balances to minimize potential misuse of authority.

What is true of civil government is also true of the local church. The heart is not trustworthy and must be checked. During the past forty plus years of ministry as a church planter, pastor, and missionary, this author has seen ample evidence of the depravity of the human heart in the local church. He has witnessed the anger, the power struggles, the raucous business meetings, and the efforts to seize control.

In contrast, God's Word admonishes us to "let all things be done DECENTLY and in ORDER" (I Corinthians 14:40). The only way for that to be done is for people to agree in advance on what is to be done, when it is to be done, and how it is to be done. When written down (that's the only way it will work), the resulting document is known as a "church constitution."

Over the past four decades this author has collected many, many church constitutions. Some are strong, some are weak. Some are good, others are lacking in basic essentials. As a member of the leadership team of Baptist Mid-Missions' North America Church-Planting Ministry Council for nearly fifteen years he has read multiple constitutions presented for review by church planters all across this country and has written the constitutions for each of his six church plants.

It is with this background and knowledge that the following guide on how to write a church constitution is presented with the prayer that stronger churches will be established on a firmer foundation, and that they will function more biblically with greater unity and harmony to the glory of God. Our desire is to see churches developed that will graduate sooner, finisher stronger, and be better equipped for successful and reproductive ministry.

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What is a Church Constitution?

Before you can write a constitution you must first understand what a constitution is, what it contains, and what it does. In its simplest form a church constitution contains the agreed-upon principles that outline how the church will function. It sets forth the rules, regulations and requirements for membership and leadership. It describes the administrative procedures by which the church is to be conducted.

Generally, a church constitution consists of two or three parts. First, is the *Church Covenant*. While technically not part of the constitution, many churches print and bind the Covenant as part of the constitutional packet they distribute to potential members. This document is actually a statement of desire and intent attested to by individual believers when they unite with the church.

Then there is the *Constitution* itself which contains the fundamental principles and guidelines that govern the church's affairs. Among other things, it sets forth the requirements for membership, establishes leadership standards, and describes the form of church government.

Last of all are the *Bylaws*. These spell out how the organization is structured. They amplify and describe how the principles outlined in the Constitution are to be implemented. They tend to be more specific and detailed, and can be altered more easily. Confusion, however, sometimes results from this arrangement. People have to read back and forth between the Constitution describing the general principle, and the implementation procedures relating to that principle in the Bylaws. Worse still, what is stated in the Bylaws may actually contradict what is stated in the Constitution.

As a result, many churches today are doing away with their Bylaws entirely by incorporating them into the body of their Constitutions (so all the information on a given matter is contained in one place) and then developing a *Policies and Procedures Manual* to describe how those principles are to be implemented.

The Constitution is the workhorse of a church's governing documents. It deals with the principles, offices, accountabilities, and procedures of congregational life. There are four realities that must be kept in mind as you develop this vital document:

A Church Constitution is a Polity Manual

"Polity" refers to a particular form or system of governance. It describes where the authority within the group resides and who makes the final decisions. Paul Jackson points out that "the form of church government is tremendously important for both the harmony and the permanency of the church and its testimony."¹ The landscape is littered with the remnants of lives and churches that have been ruined as a result of an unbiblical form of church governance. Basically, there are only four major styles of church polity.

- 1) **Authority resides in the hands of a single leader.** His word is absolute. His decisions are final. He controls every aspect of congregational life. He decides how the money is spent, who the leaders will be, and what the church will or will not do. Once elected to his position, he is accountable to no one but God. In ecclesiastical terms this is known as the *Papal* form of church government, but it is used in some fundamental Baptist circles today. When it works well the pastor functions as a benevolent despot, but all too often it results in an abusive dictatorship.
- 2) **Authority resides in the hands of an elite few outside the local church.** In this case, a hierarchy of religious leaders governs a number of churches that have been placed under their authority. The local congregation has only limited say in their own affairs. Its pastor is

frequently appointed and/or removed with little consultation with the membership. Major denominations often use this *Episcopalian* form of church governance, but it has found almost no receptivity among independent Baptists.

- 3) **Authority resides in the hands of elected representatives.** Here, each church sends its elected representative to a governing council (usually outside the local church) which then makes the decisions for the various churches. While the members have limited say in who their representatives will be, they have little say in the decisions that are made by the council on their behalf. This representative form of church governance is known as *Presbyterian* polity. A number of Baptist churches and Bible churches are using a variation of this polity. It is known as "multiple eldership rule."
- 4) **Authority resides in the hands of the members.** In this scenario, control and final authority rests with each local congregation. Each decides what it will believe, who its pastor will be, what its standards are, how it will function, and how its monies will be spent. Jackson again reminds us that although "individuals and committees may be designated to perform certain responsibilities as outlined in the constitution, but they are directly answerable to the congregation itself."² This is known as *Congregational* church rule and has been the standard polity among Baptist churches for centuries.

While *Congregational rule* has been the common practice among Baptist churches for generations, we must base our polity and practices on the New Testament Scriptures rather than on past tradition. The question is - Is congregational rule Scriptural? The book of Acts describes the birth and early development of the church. It is from this divine record that we must derive our form of church governance. How did the New Testament church function? What form of polity did it utilize?

We believe the church was born in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended from heaven to indwell the disciples in Jerusalem and filled them with his presence and power. The result was 3,000 people repented of their sins at the preaching of Peter, got baptized, and "were added unto them" (the local assembly of believers). This assembly of believers is referred to as "the church" in verse 47.

Even before the church was launched at Pentecost, traces of their governance polity can be seen in the workings of the pre-launch team in chapter 1. Here, following an extended time of group prayer, Peter advocated they needed to select someone to replace the man who betrayed Jesus and dropped off the launch team (15-22). He argued that the empty slot left by Judas' betrayal needed to be filled.

After discussing the pros and cons of Peter's claim, the assembled group (not Peter) decided he was right because "THEY appointed two" (24), and when "THEY had prayed" (24), "THEY gave for their lots" (ballots) (25) and chose Matthias as Judas' replacement. This was a congregational decision made by the members of the group. The authority resided within the whole group rather than with the group leader or another group outside of their assembly. The pre-launch team followed a congregational form of polity from the very early planning stages of the church.

There is no doubt the early church had strong leaders in the apostles. Pastors and church planters need to be strong leaders capable of influencing the opinions of others. They don't arbitrarily make decisions for the congregation, but they do seek to educate and channel the decision-making process of the church family into biblical patterns.

An example of this is seen in Acts 6 where a problem arose from the rapid growth of the early church. Literally thousands of people from all kinds of backgrounds and cultures had come to know Christ as Savior, and had joined the church in Jerusalem. The church grew in complexity as it grew in size. The

larger the church, the more structure was needed to enable it to function effectively, efficiently, and biblically.

Faced with a problem, the Jerusalem church did what churches today do. They dumped it in the lap of the pastor(s) and said, "You solve it. It's your problem." It seems there were some inequities in the "daily ministrations" of the relief to the widow ladies of the church. Perhaps some were getting more than others or it may have been some were not getting anything at all. The benevolence program which had been instituted to care for these dear women was malfunctioning and the people wanted it fixed.

To make matters worse, there were racial and cultural tones to the accusations that were being made. The women who felt they were being neglected were Grecian Jews while those who were having their needs met regularly were Hebraic Jews. The one had adopted Greek culture and language while the other remained faithful to Hebrew values and speech. This was an explosive situation that had the potential for destroying the church. The pot was already simmering. "Murmuring" and suspicion were on the rise.

It would have been easy for the apostles (who were serving as the pastoral staff) to have solved the problem either by taking control of the benevolence program themselves or by arbitrarily appointing a committee to deal with the issue. They did neither. Instead, they gathered the people together in a congregational meeting and explained why it was neither logical nor appropriate ("not reason") for them to take control of that needy program. To do so would have forced them to take time away from their primary responsibilities of prayer (staying spiritually fit) and preaching ("the ministry of the Word").

Instead of accumulating more power, control, and authority to themselves, they instructed the congregation to "look YE out (from) AMONG YOU . . . whom we may appoint over this business" (3). Yes, the apostles/pastors recognized they had the ultimate responsibility to see that the problem was resolved, but they did so within a congregational format. They instructed the people to accept responsibility for solving the problem. They provided them with guidance in how to do it, but then left it to the people themselves to do.

"THEY" (the members of the congregation) were to decide who among them was spiritually qualified to be in leadership and to exercise control over the benevolence program. It was to be a congregational decision rather than a pastoral or eldership decision. Yes, the pastors did teach the biblical qualifications for leadership ("of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom"), but the decisions and choices were left up to the congregation.

Verse 5 tells us this pastoral counsel ("saying") PLEASED the whole multitude. Rather than losing influence, they gained greater credibility with the people when they followed a congregational form of governance. Real leaders are not afraid to relinquish control. They willingly delegate authority and responsibility to others. They trust their people to do what is best while trusting God to guide those people in the decisions they make. Men who seek to concentrate as much control and power as possible in their own hands do not trust either God or the people, and are not functioning biblically.

Verse 5 goes on to tell us that "THEY" (the members of the congregation) chose seven men who met the spiritual qualifications outlined by the apostles/pastors. Their names were Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas. (In Baptist circles these seven men are known as "deacons.") Having chosen the men they believed to be most qualified, the congregation presented them to the spiritual (and administrative) leaders of the church (the apostles/pastors) in verse 6.

Neither the congregation nor the seven men sought to act independently of their leaders. They recognized they were part of a team, and the apostles/pastors were the leaders of the team. The pastoral team then prayed and laid their hands on the seven men chosen by the congregation and "appointed them over this business" (6:3,6). Notice the seven were "appointed" (delegated, given the authority and

responsibility) by the pastoral leaders. They functioned under pastoral supervision. Both pastors and deacons have roles to fulfill with the church, but from a Scriptural and organizational standpoint, the deacons always function under the supervision of the pastor rather than the other way around. The point here, however, is that BOTH subscribed to a congregational form of church governance.

The outcome of this congregational procedure was that "the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly" (7). God's work done in God's way will experience God's blessing.

Another example of congregational polity in Scripture is found in Acts 13:1-3. Here we have Paul and Barnabas being called, separated, and set apart as missionary representatives of the local church in Antioch. This was a dynamic church that had experienced dynamic growth under the direction of its dynamic leaders. Among those leaders were men such as Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen, and Saul (Paul). Barnabas and Saul were prominent teachers in the church and undoubtedly had much to do with the rapid growth of the church.

But one day, while the church met together for "ministry and fasting," the Spirit of God communicated that they should separate Barnabas and Saul "for the work whereunto I have called them" (2). We're not told how the Holy Spirit communicated this message, only that he did. The Spirit's directive in verse 2 is addressed to the congregation collectively rather than to Barnabas and Saul individually. He was instructing the church concerning what he wanted them to do with two of their lay leaders. The congregation was to "separate them" or set them apart (release them from their responsibilities within that particular local church) so they could engage in another ministry to which God was going to direct them.

The church in Antioch obviously didn't want to lose such effective workers as Barnabas and Saul, and so they engaged in a time of individual and collective prayer and fasting in verse 3 to ascertain if they had correctly understood God's directive. Barnabas and Saul undoubtedly did the same since this was going to result in a major shift in their ministry. After all, this was not a situation in which the individuals went to the church and said, "We believe God is calling us to this particular ministry." Rather, it was a case of the congregation coming to them and saying, "We believe God has uniquely equipped you for cross-cultural ministry throughout the Roman Empire, and that you should pursue this course of action as soon as possible."

The congregation was asking them to give up a fruitful ministry, leave their homes, friends, and families, and become itinerate evangelists and church-planting missionaries in a foreign land. That was asking a lot. But as the congregation, along with Barnabas and Saul, sought God's confirmation through prayer they each became convinced that this was indeed what God wanted them to do. Barnabas and Saul realized that God was using the congregation of their church to direct them into a new course of ministry, and willingly submitted themselves to them.

The church congregation then hosted the first missionary commissioning service as they "laid their hands on them" and sent Barnabas and Saul forth as their representatives to a lost and dying world. This passage teaches us that the decision to appoint or support someone for missionary service (or any type of ministry) is a congregational decision rather than a pastoral or board decision. Collective decisions, made by godly congregations, often result in multiplied blessings for the church, for the individuals involved, and for a host of people as yet unknown and unreached.

Based upon these and other Scriptures, Baptists have long held that congregational rule (with strong pastoral leadership) is the only biblical form of polity taught in the New Testament. Few terms, however, are more misunderstood. When we speak of "congregational rule" we are not referring to mob rule in which the majority runs roughshod over the opinions of others to impose its will upon the minority while

ignoring pastoral leadership. Neither are we referring to a "Town-hall" democracy in which every decision, no matter how small, must be made by the congregation. Such an approach leads to endless business meetings, where anyone, regardless of his or her fidelity to Christ or his church, is allowed to speak with equal authority.³

Churches are not democracies patterned after Western-style civics. They are congregational in nature with the ultimate authority for decision making residing in the people themselves. Based upon the example found in Acts 6, they follow a democratic-representative approach to get things done.

To ensure that things are "done decently and in order," churches develop written documents called "constitutions" which prescribe a congregational form of governance, the requirements and rules for membership, the standards and responsibilities of leadership, and the procedures for conducting the church's affairs. These documents supply the agreed-upon ground rules for everyone involved in that local church. They often prescribe the parliamentary procedures that secure the right of the majority to decide while allowing the minority to be heard. We must be careful, however, never to elevate these procedures, or the constitution itself, above the dictates of God's Holy Word, the Bible. The Word of God is the supreme authority by which all decisions and actions must be evaluated. The church constitution, however, is the polity manual that sets forth the church's understanding of the biblical form of church governance. But that is not all . . .

A Church Constitution is a Governing Document

The constitution is the workhorse of the church's governing documents. It is in this document that procedures are outlined, standards and requirements are set forth, administrative processes are described, financial guidelines are given, and membership and voting rights are protected.

Above all else, the church's constitution is a governing document. It tells what can and cannot be done. It explains how the affairs of the church are to be conducted and how the church is to function. It brings civility to business meetings, reigns in unbiblical behavior, curbs the lust for power and control, and protects the rights of both pastor and people.

Without a written document regulating its conduct, a church will soon dissolve into a seething cauldron of competing interests and abusive behavior. The heart of even the most saintly person is still filled with hidden deceit and the potential for untold wickedness. It cannot be trusted. It must be regulated if we are to relate to one another in a biblical fashion. A church constitution helps to do that.

The church constitution specifies when meetings can and must be held, who can speak, who is eligible to vote, who is qualified to serve in leadership, and what pastors, deacons, and layman can and cannot do. It contains rules, regulations, and guidelines that both limit and mandate certain behaviors. Church constitutions are both restrictive and freeing. They limit our ability to acquire power or to take advantage of our position. They reduce our options to misuse our authority. They prevent us from (or at least restrict the opportunity to be) engaging in unethical behavior.

We define a local church as an organized group of believers who have been immersed upon a credible confession of faith in Jesus Christ, having two offices (pastor and deacon), sovereign in polity, and banded together for work, worship, the observance of the ordinances and the worldwide proclamation of the gospel.⁴

It is both an *organism* and an *organization*. In each case, structure is necessary in order to survive, function, and thrive. No organism, regardless of how simple or complex, can live without a built-in structure to govern its functions. No mechanism, whether it be a simple lock and key or a complex space

shuttle, can fulfill its purpose without design and structure. No organization (including the church), regardless of how small or large, can succeed without a set of principles to govern its affairs. In his wisdom God built structure and organization into everything including the church.

A church constitution simply provides the structure that governs how that particular church will function in fulfilling its purpose and carrying out its mission here on earth. Do we like them? No, because they limit our unbridled freedom to do as we please. Do we need them? Yes, because they protect us and we cannot live without them. Human nature soon self-destructs without something to regulate its conduct. The church constitution is a mutually-agreed-upon means for governing the local Body of Christ to which we belong.

A Church Constitution is a Binding Document

Membership in a local church is strictly a voluntary relationship, both for the individual and the church. No one can coerce a person to unite with a particular church nor can they compel the church to accept that individual into membership. On the other hand, an individual cannot be forced to remain as a member nor can the church be constrained to retain a person in membership. Membership is a voluntary relationship on both ends of the equation, both for the church and the individual. People are free to apply for membership whenever they want (that doesn't mean they will be accepted), and they are free to leave whenever they want.

Having said that, however, it should be noted that once a person is accepted into membership he comes under the governing authority of the church, namely its constitution. As a member he is no longer free to do as he wishes. He is now responsible to abide by the principles and policies outlined in this document. Having joined the church, and having committed himself to abide by its covenant, doctrinal statement, and constitution, he is bound to do so.

We would strongly advocate that every church have a multi-session exploratory class for perspective members in which the church's doctrines and distinctives, philosophy of ministry, covenants and constitutions, standards and policies, purpose, mission and core values, financial procedures, and membership expectations are taught and discussed in detail. People cannot make an intelligent decision unless they understand fully what kind of church they are joining and what will be expected of them if they do join.

They need to understand from the beginning that membership carries not only certain privileges, but responsibilities as well. One of those responsibilities is to abide by governing documents of the church as outlined in the church's constitution. We would also recommend that people be required to sign a membership agreement when they unite with the church in which they consent to abide by the church's governing documents (see the sample at the end of this paper). This should be required of both the pastor and the people.

In joining the church they have voluntarily bound themselves to abide by that church's constitution. It is binding upon them as long as they are members. They are obligated to follow its procedures and policies. They cannot, like one pastor we know of, simply tear up the constitution and throw it away because he found it obligated him to do something he didn't want to do. Church constitutions are binding on both pastor and people. They must either abide by its tenets, go through the process outlined in the constitution to change it, or remove themselves from under its authority by withdrawing from the membership.

A Church Constitution is a Legal Document

It may come as a surprise to some, but one reason a church constitution is binding upon its pastor and people is because it is a legal document, especially if the church is incorporated under the laws of the state in which it is found. Documents do not need to be drawn up by lawyers and signed by a court judge to be legal documents. Any time an individual or group of individuals reach a contractual agreement (a church constitution is a contractual agreement concerning how the church will function) and commit themselves to abide by its terms, it becomes legally binding upon them.

Numerous court cases have demonstrated the legal nature of church constitutions. Churches are sued for violating provisions of their own constitutions. Pastors and deacons cannot be removed from office except in keeping with the terms of the church constitution. Members cannot be disciplined except in strict compliance with the procedures outlined in the church's governing documents. Monies cannot be transferred from designated funds except in the manner prescribed in the constitution. Accounting procedures disclosed in the church's policy manual must be adhered to. Otherwise, someone may be held accountable in a court of law.

The purpose of a church constitution is to protect the rights of the membership and its leaders. If it weren't for the fact that men's hearts (including those of believers) are deceitful and untrustworthy we wouldn't need constitutions. But the reality is that we do have hearts that cannot be trusted, and therefore must be regulated if we are to function in a biblical manner.

Why does a Church need a Constitution?

The New Testament says nothing about church constitutions. So, why do we need one? After all, we have God's Word, the Bible, which tells us how we ought to live and function. Isn't that sufficient? If New Testament churches didn't have constitutions, why should we? If the Bible was good enough for Paul to run his churches with, then why isn't it good enough for us to use?

Those are valid questions that deserve an answer. We would point out that first of all, that New Testament churches (and especially the Jerusalem church) were living, growing, evolving ministries. They were in their infancy and were still in the process of developing. As the churches grew larger and more complex, they devised more and more structure to guide and regulate their ministries.

The book of Acts and the Pauline epistles record this on-going development of the church. Many of Paul's writings were sent to correct abuses that had arisen in the churches. As already pointed out in the previous section, men's hearts (including the hearts of the redeemed) are depraved and deceitful. Christians do sin and take advantage of one another. Leaders (such as Diotrephes) do usurp and misuse their authority. Unqualified men do seek leadership positions. Believers do mistreat each other. As problems and new situations arose, new standards were introduced and greater detail was given.

To argue that we should not have written constitutions to guide churches because they are not found in neither Scripture or in the New Testament church is not a valid argument. It is an argument from silence that ignores the fact that they did have a wide variety of rules and regulations governing everything from leadership and membership qualifications, to the handling of finances, and disciplinary procedures.

A church constitution is simply a compilation of principles, rules, regulations and standards that have been extracted from Scripture and recorded in logical, systematic fashion. These may be modified in

some cases to fit the cultural context in which the church is found while retaining the biblical content. Rather than being unbiblical, church constitutions are the very embodiment of New Testament principles.

The fact that church constitutions are not specifically mentioned in Scripture does not preclude their use in our churches today. We have multiple institutions in our churches that are not mentioned directly in Scripture. Sunday Schools, trustees, bus ministries, youth programs, Bible camps, public address systems, bathrooms, and church buildings are but a few of the many examples of things not found in New Testament churches, but which play a prominent role in our churches today. Few would argue that these are unscriptural simply because they are not found in the Bible. The same is true of church constitutions.

No, church constitutions are both Scriptural and necessary. We have already pointed out the fact that even though a man may be a godly Christian, his deceitful heart and propensity to take advantage of others requires some means of regulating his conduct and that of the group of which he is a part. But there are some other reasons why a church needs a written constitution to guide it. Among them are these:

- 1) **A written constitution complies with the biblical injunction to do all thing decently and in order** (I Corinthians 14:40). To do things "decently and in order" is to function in a fair, honest, biblical fashion, and in a civilized, respectful manner. But who is to say what is "decent and orderly"? Is it the pastor, the deacons, the ruling board, the congregation or all the above? A written constitution establishes a set of ground rules, which have been mutually agreed to by both the leadership and the membership of the church, that define what "decently and in order" means. It prevents people from reinterpreting the ground rules to suit themselves.
- 2) **A written constitution ensures the rights of both the majority and the minority.** Consensus and majority rule are two hallmarks of congregational polity. No one person or group of persons is allowed to impose their will upon the church without all sides being heard and the will of the majority being expressed. In a congregational system dissenting viewpoints have the right to be heard. They cannot and ought not to be silenced without ample opportunity to be made known in a duly constituted assembly of members. Another tenet of congregational polity is that the majority have the right to decide. Voting is not a matter of "winning" or "losing", but rather the collective expression of the will of God. Both the majority and the minority have spoken, but the decision of the majority is decisive. The minority is to abide by the will of the majority while the majority is to respect the views of the minority.
- 3) **A written constitution protects the church from abuse and harm.** We have already alluded to the abuse which may arise within the church whenever a pastor, deacon, lay person or group engages in unbiblical behavior and seeks to impose its will upon the church. Abuse and harm, however, can also come from without in the form of persecution and legal rulings against the church and/or its leaders. Because the church's constitution is a legal document it affords the church some legal protections. This is especially true in the area of the church's stand on marriage, the family, and human sexuality. The homosexual community and gay rights activists have the church squarely in their sights and intend to undermine, if not destroy it because of its stand against the practices of these groups. It is vital that churches include statements in their founding documents (the constitution) that clearly articulate their position on these issues. Doing so allows the church to legally "discriminate" against these groups in declining to accept them into membership or refusing to hire them to work in our schools and children's ministries. Without those statements in the church's founding documents the church can and will be held liable for violating the federal "rights" of these individuals. (See the section on "What to Include" for samples of statements on marriage, the family, and human sexuality).

- 4) **A written constitution insures that proper procedures are followed.** Because of man's tendency to cut corners, take advantage of his position, and impose his own will on others (of course none of my readers would ever do this), it is necessary to have prescribed procedures in place to insure fairness, honesty, and propriety in our dealings with others. A written constitution outlines the parliamentary procedures that are to be followed in conducting the affairs of the church and thus helps us "abstain from (avoid) all appearance of evil" (I Thessalonians 5:22). We want to be above board and open as we conduct ministry. We never want to create doubt, hesitancy or the misconception that something may have been handled in an inappropriate, unethical, immoral or illegal manner. A written constitution helps us minimize that possibility.
- 5) **A written constitution clarifies the lines of authority, responsibility, and accountability.** Who is in charge? To whom are we accountable? Whose responsibility is it to see that certain things get done? Who are the leaders? How is permission to do something obtained? If no one is in charge nothing will get done. Likewise, if everyone is in charge nothing will get done. It is only when someone is in charge that anything gets done. Democracies (in which everyone has an equal say about everything) are self-crippling and self-defeating because they cannot agree on what is to be done, how it is to be done, and by whom it is to be done. The church constitution sets forth the roles, responsibilities, and authority of both the leaders and the lay people. It specifies the qualifications of the pastor, his term of service, how he is to be called and/or dismissed, and what his responsibilities are. It does the same for the other spiritual leaders of the church including deacons, trustees, treasurer, church clerk, associate pastors, and staff personnel. A well-written document will clearly announce the lines of authority, responsibility, and accountability within the church.
- 6) **A written constitution instills confidence in the public and members alike.** Churches, unfortunately, are not held in very high esteem either by the public or, in some cases, by church members themselves. They have seen the misappropriation of funds, they have witnessed the tyrannical leadership of a few pastors, they have observed the unjustified dismissal of beloved pastors by jealous boards, they have glimpsed the power struggles that go on within business meetings, and as a result they have become cynical and suspicious. Fortunately, not every church is like that, but enough are that the confidence of millions has been at least shaken, if not shattered. In almost every case, the church's constitution was violated or no provision was in place to prevent the problem. A well-written, well-thought-out constitution that is consistently and graciously followed by all will go a long ways in restoring confidence in local churches.
- 7) **A written constitution sets the standard of practice for decades to come.** Precedence is important. In most cases, the way things are done in the beginning, and the rules, regulations, standards, and guidelines that are established at the start, will be in place for decades to come, and will influence the life of that church for generations. If a church is not specific in the beginning of its ministry about what it believes, what the requirements, privileges, rights, and expectations for membership are, who is in charge and what the chain of command is, how funds are to be handled, and what procedures are to be followed, it will not be able to clarify or strengthen those issues in the future without serious conflict and injury to the Body of Christ. Too often new churches "dumb down" their theology, standards, and practices in an effort to attract more people. Once they have done that, however, they cannot shore up the leaky vessel they have created because the very people they have attracted agree with the "dumbed down" standards rather than the new, more restrictive policies. It is intellectually, morally, and biblically dishonest to pretend to be one thing while secretly claiming to be something else. Once set in place, it is exceedingly difficult to raise the bar to higher heights. More often than not, the way you start out is the way you will end up.

Who should Write the Church Constitution?

This paper is being prepared primarily for church planters who are starting new congregations. Thus, the guidelines are different than they would be when revising the constitution of an established church. There are only three possible authors for the new church's constitution: the sending church, the core group or the church planter himself.

Mother church writes the Constitution

In some mother-daughter church plants the sponsoring (mother) church will seek to clone a new church rather than establish one with a separate identity. "Cloning" involves reproducing an exact replica of the mother church, only in miniature. The daughter church looks and functions just like the mother church. The only difference is that it is smaller and meets in a different location. It has the same standards, the same music, the same worship style, the same procedures, and the same constitution with only the name and address changed.

The mother/daughter church planting model is a very effective mode for starting healthy, new churches. Cloning, however, often results in small, struggling, anemic churches that rarely succeed because of the constraints placed upon them by the mother church. The daughter church is NOT the mother church. It doesn't have the same members, the same pastor or the same setting as the mother church. To survive and grow it must have the freedom to be itself, to develop its own philosophy of ministry, and to write its own procedures and standards within reasonable boundaries. To have somebody else's constitution imposed on them doesn't always work.

Core Group writes the Constitution

The wise church planter will spend months doing pre-planning and gathering a core group of interested individuals before launching public services. This core group is usually a compilation of mature and immature believers, some of whom have been saved for many years while others are recent converts. They frequently come from a spectrum of religious, racial, and cultural backgrounds. Their church backgrounds vary from totally secular to Baptist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Methodist, Catholic, Mormon, and everything in between. Each has his own views of what the Bible teaches, what a church is, and how it should function.

Many a church planter will take this divergent collage of spiritual entities and say, "O.K., let's write a constitution that describes what kind of church we are going to be and how it will function." Hopefully he has done some biblical teaching on what a New Testament church is and the principles that ought to guide it. That often isn't the case, however. When the core group participates in the constitution-writing process you often end up with a hodge-podge of ideas that do not reflect Baptist values, much less biblical concepts. The author is familiar with a mother/daughter church plant in which the mother church (a staunch Baptist church) allowed the core group to write their own constitution. The result was that the non-Baptists in the core group persuaded the rest of the group members to establish a non-Baptist church, much to the chagrin of the mother church.

Because of the many varied viewpoints and background involved, one of two things will happen when the core group is involved in the writing of the constitution: 1) Arguing, disharmony, and the loss of people may result as each one lobbies to include his/her viewpoint in the governing document; or 2) the group waters the document down to the lowest common denominator in order to achieve agreement. In either case, you are likely to end up with a less than satisfactory document. Allowing the core group to write the constitution is not the best way to go.

It is only when the core group is relatively small, and has mostly mature believers who share the church planter's view of Scriptures, the church, and philosophy of ministry, that they should be involved in writing one of the most critical documents relating to the church's very existence.

Church Planter writes the Constitution

Acts 14:21-23 describes the Pauline method of church planting. First, he "preached the gospel . . . and taught (discipled) many" (21). We call this *evangelism*. Then he "confirmed (grounded) the souls of the disciples and exhorting them to continue in the faith" (22). We call this *edification*. Finally, he "ordained them elders in every church" (23). Here he *established* the local church and trained spiritual leaders to guide it. It is inconceivable that Paul would walk into Corinth or Athens and say to the new converts, "O.K., what kind of church do you want to be and how do you want to run it?" Those people had no more idea of what a church was or how it should function than the man in the moon.

Paul didn't leave it up to them to decide what the church was to be like or how it should be conducted. HE told them and taught them what a church was and how it should work. His instructions to his church-planting partner (Titus) were to "set in order the things that are wanting" (Titus 1:5). It is the responsibility of the church planter to provide the foundational documents upon which the church will be built. He is more knowledgeable, better equipped, and more experienced than anyone else in the core group to do this.

As a church planter, he is a good student of the Word, he has been to Bible college, he has read numerous books on church planting, and has taken "how-to-do-it" seminars on church planting. He knows what a church is and how it ought to be run. He knows what kind of polity is needed and what protections need to be built into the governing system. He understands parliamentary procedures and is familiar with disciplinary processes. He is acutely aware of fellowship and separation issues. He understands the importance of building safeguards into the church financial structure. He is able to articulate the church's purpose, mission, vision, and values. God has uniquely prepared him to write this important document that will guide the church for decades to come.

It is our position that the church planter is the most qualified individual to write the constitution for the church he is planting. The constitution is one of several documents he should prepare during the pre-planning phase of the church plant. He wants to complete as much of the paperwork as possible BEFORE moving into the area to begin gathering the core group.

He should make it a habit while still in Bible college to begin collecting church constitutions wherever he goes. Some will be good while others won't, but they will all help him understand what should and should not be included. The more examples he has to consider, the greater the number of ideas he will garner with the result that he will be better equipped to avoid some of the pitfalls other pastors and church planters have experienced.

It is recommended that church planters read six to ten church constitutions before attempting to write their own. Weigh each provision carefully in the light of God's Word to see if it coincides with Scripture. Are the procedures fair and equitable? How are roles of various offices described? What checks and balances are built in so as to avoid inappropriate behavior? Are clear lines of command and control established? How is business to be transacted? Where does the final authority rest, with the pastor, the board or the people? As you read and research other constitutions, begin to glean out ideas, concepts, and phrases you can use in your own document.

Mistakes to Avoid

There are several mistakes you want to avoid when writing a church constitution:

- 1) **Don't spend too much time researching, writing, and rewriting your constitution.** No matter how hard you try you will not be able to produce the "perfect" church constitution. In the course of ministry you will discover areas that you did not address adequately in the constitution. Other times you will find some provisions too limiting or restrictive (such as one constitution that required the presence of 90% of the members for a quorum at business meetings). These can be addressed through the normal procedures outlined in the your constitution.
- 2) **Don't simply copy another church's constitution.** The temptation is when you find a good constitution that works well for another church, simply to adopt it as your own. Young men beginning in ministry are especially tempted to copy their home church's constitution. All you have to do is to change the name and address, and you're ready to go. Not only is this the lazy man's way of doing things, but it often proves disastrous as well. Your church is not the same as your home church or any other church. Your new church is or will be unique in its own right. Write a constitution that fits you and the ministry to which God has called you. Yes, it will be similar to that of other churches, but it should also reflect the standards, values, and unique philosophy of ministry that are yours alone.
- 3) **Don't be too vague.** Some church planters make the mistake of wording their constitution and doctrinal statements in such general terms that they can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Either they think the wording doesn't really matter as long as THEY are there to interpret what is meant by the statement or in their desire to attract as many new people as possible, they fail to understand they are sowing the seeds of their own destruction. First of all, THEY will not always be there to interpret what a particular phrase or statement means. They may be gone in a year, five years or twenty years. THEN, how will the next pastor or the pastor after him interpret that phrase or statement? If it is not clear and specific, they may interpret it to mean something entirely different than was intended originally. If there is fog in the pulpit, there will be fog in the pew.

The greatest danger with vagueness is that you will attract people who hold views that may be diametrically opposed to those of the church, mission agency and/or church planter. For example, if in the qualifications for membership you use the word "baptism" without clarifying it with the word's "believer's" and "immersion," don't be surprised if people who were sprinkled rather than immersed or who were baptized as infants or prior to being saved apply for membership. As long as they were baptized in some fashion they would meet the required qualifications for membership. Or if you refer only to the fact that the church believes in the "Second Coming of Christ" without qualifying the phrase with words such as "literal," "premillennial" and "pretribulational" you may well attract people who hold distinctively different views of Christ's return. Words do matter.

It is vital that you use terminology that is clear, precise, and unambiguous in your constitution. People should not be left wondering what is meant by a word or phrase. Be specific and concise. Use plain words that a normal working person with a general education can understand. Specificity will result in not attracting some people on the fringes who hold variant views, but it will also result in your attracting those who agree with you and who are looking for a church that knows what it believes and isn't afraid to say so.

- 4) **Don't build bottlenecks into the constitution.**

In their desire to build healthy, vibrant churches many church planters and pastors unwittingly stifle future growth. They do this by writing a constitution which allows them to control most aspects of the church's ministry. Everything has to flow through them. Little or nothing can be done without their approval. Instead of establishing clear lines of communication and well

organized chains of command, they become the bottleneck through which everything must move. In reality, this is a lack of trust both in the Lord and the people, and may be a reflection on the pastor's failure to adequately disciple and equip their people for ministry. A strong discipleship training program with clearly defined roles, job descriptions, and accountability systems coupled with a clearly defined philosophy of ministry would eliminate the need to "control everything" while liberating the people for the work of the ministry as outlined in Ephesians 4:12.

5) **Don't think you can avoid future change.**

Understand that change is inevitable. You cannot stop it from happening, although church planters attempt to do so by putting restrictive terminology into their constitutions. It is not unusual for constitutions to be written so as to require certain standards, doctrinal positions, modes of ministry, worship styles, and translations. We want our doctrinal standards and positions on separation to remain consistent. After working so hard to build a ministry honoring the Lord we don't want it to be tainted by liberalism and other harmful philosophies and practices that so often seep into churches and degrade their ministries. While this is understandable, it is nevertheless futile. Your influence is significantly degraded once you step down as pastor. You can try to insure that the church will go on in like fashion and manner by codifying everything in the church's constitution. Having done so, however, one of two things will happen. Either growth will be stifled by the restrictions and the church will gradually die over a period of time or new growth will force changes to occur.

Anything you write into the constitution can be changed. Restrictions and standards can be removed. Even if you include a statement to the effect that "no part of this constitution may be altered, changed, deleted or added to at any time in the future," someone will figure out a way to bypass your prohibitions.

It is far better to write a good, solid constitution with flexibility built into it that allows for appropriate change as the church grows, and then work hard to instill those values, standards and beliefs into the hearts and minds of the people. You have a far greater likelihood of propagating those things you hold dear in this manner than by embedding them in constitutional cement.

What should be Included in a Church Constitution?

Before attempting to write a church constitution, it is vital you do a thorough study of the local church, its polity, and its practices. What do the Scriptures teach about its purpose and mission in the world? Are you able to articulate the roles and requirements for pastors, deacons, and other spiritual leaders? Have you clarified in your own mind what you and the church will believe? Have you developed a doctrinal statement? Can you articulate the core values of the church and its philosophy of ministry? You're not ready to write the constitution until you can visualize this church in your mind's eye and see it by faith functioning the way you envision it.

It is recommended you prepare a "constitutional package." Include, along with the constitution, a copy of the church's purpose and mission statements, its core values and distinctives, and a copy of the church covenant. These are not actually part of the constitution, but they are important items to give to anyone wanting more information about your church. A "constitutional package" might include the following items:

Purpose Statement
 Mission Statement
 Core Values
 Baptist Distinctives
 Covenant
 Constitution
 Preamble
 Name
 Purpose
 Mission
 Association
 Articles of Faith
 Membership
 Officers and Staff
 Meetings and Administration
 Finances
 Committees
 Church Organizations
 Licensing, Ordination and Commissioning
 Indemnification
 Binding Arbitration
 Property
 Amendments
 Exemption and Dissolution

Each of these twenty-four items is vitally important in protecting the church's ministry from harm (from within as well as without), and ensuring a smooth, well-functioning church. Examples of all of them can be found in the sample constitution at the end of this manual. Let's look a little closer at each one:

- 1) **Purpose Statement** - A purpose statements explains in a clear, concise sentence or two *why* this particular local church exists. It gives the biblical rationale for the church's being. That purpose is found in Scripture alone and is the same for all churches, although it may be worded differently. The only biblical purpose for planting churches is to bring glory to God.
- 2) **Mission Statement** - Mission statements explain *what* the church is supposed to be doing as it seeks to glorify God. A careful study of Scripture may reveal that it is actually doing something other than what it should be doing. The church's five-fold mission is outlined in the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-39) and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19,20).
- 3) **Core Values** - Core values are those fundamental, underlying standards that guide and direct everything you do. They are the passionate, biblical beliefs that drive your ministry.⁵ They are the things that are important to this ministry over which people would fight, give their last dime for, or leave the church if they were changed or abandoned. Core values will differ from church to church.
- 4) **Baptist Distinctives** - The "Baptist Distinctives" are a set of unique beliefs that identify and separate Baptist churches from most other churches. While some churches hold some of these same beliefs, few adhere to all of them. It is important to include these distinctives in your constitutional packet so the congregation will know who they are and why their church is different from other churches.

- 5) **Covenant** - A covenant is a voluntary commitment between individuals and the church in which they pledge to abide by the terms of the pact to which they are agreeing. In essence, a person is saying, "I promise, as a member of this church, that I will do this, and this, and this." Be realistic when writing the church covenant. While you want it to be a restatement of biblical principles, don't make it so idealistic that few, if any, can abide by it. You want it to be practical and attainable, a summary of the "one another" ministries outlined in Scripture. In reality, covenants are statements of intent and purpose. They are targets toward which we are moving rather than hard and fast rules by which we bind our souls.

Technically, none of the above items are part of the governing document known as a "constitution." They are of such importance, however, that we recommend they be part of the constitution package you give to perspective members. Each is critical to understanding why your church exists, what it represents, what motivates it, and where it is headed.

- 6) **Constitution** - The constitution is the primary governing document of the church. It is here that the guidelines, rules, regulations, standards, line of command, rights and requirements of the church are found. These may be supplemented with a "Policies and Procedures" manual that details how various aspects of the constitution are implemented. For purposes of clarity, we would recommend that you NOT have a separate section known as "bylaws" since these are often confusing and contradictory. Simply enfold everything into one undivided document.
- 7) **Preamble** - A preamble is simply an introductory statement explaining the reasons for and intent of what follows. It sets the stage for unveiling the various aspects of your constitution. It explains why you have a constitution and what you hope to accomplish by having one.
- 8) **Name** - A constitution is divided into a series of major sections known as "Articles." The first article should always state the official name of the church. Sometimes a church will be known to the public by a shorter version of its name rather than by its full title. For example, people may refer to "First Baptist Church" whereas the church's real name is "First Baptist Church of Jamestown, New York." The name listed in Article One of your constitution will be the legal name of your church. Be sure you use the full name of the church on any deeds, government records, incorporation papers, bank accounts, loans, and application forms. It is especially important that you use this name when seeking official status as a non-profit or charitable organization.
- 9) **Purpose** - This is a restatement of your purpose statement, but with the added note that the church is a non-profit, charitable institution functioning within the parameters of the government's guidelines as found in Section 501 (c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 (or the corresponding provision of any future United States Revenue Law) It should clearly state that no member of the church will profit financially from the church's assets. (This does not preclude the church paying salaries and benefits to employees.)
- 10) **Mission** - This is a reiteration and expansion of your mission statement explaining how you are going to achieve your mission. It outlines the implementation plan/priorities you will follow. Be sure to include a statement to the effect that all ministries of the church will be initiated, supported, and evaluated in light of these priorities.
- 11) **Associations** - This Article is a declaration of the church's autonomy and independence from ecclesiastical control of any outside group or body. It is here the church would state its plans to unite with a particular fellowship or association of like minded churches while retaining the right to withdraw at any time it deems appropriate to do so. Also included here would be the church's relationship with any mission agency or sponsoring church, and its separation from

liberalism, neo-evangelicalism, secret societies, the charismatic movement, and other unbiblical groups.

- 12) **Statement of Faith** - It is strongly recommend that you include a clear, concise, thorough statement of the church's beliefs as part of your church constitution. It defines the church's doctrinal views based upon the Word of God. Including it in the constitution will help safeguard the church from drifting toward liberalism, and strengthens it against encroachment from false teaching. Your statement of faith should touch on all the major teachings of the Bible and should set forth the church's position relating to each one.

Include statements on such things as: the Scriptures, God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, creation, Satan, the fall of man, the way and blessings of salvation, the security of the believers, the local church, ecclesiastical separation, civil government and religious liberty, baptism and the Lord's Supper, progressive sanctification and Christian living, marriage, divorce, and remarriage, human sexuality, lawsuits between believers, the righteous and the wicked, the resurrection, ascension, and related future events, and Israel and the church. Be sure to include the biblical references for each item covered. You will want to prepare your doctrinal statement early so you can share it with people when you start building your core group.

In light of recent court rulings involving the homosexual movement it is especially critical that you include statements on marriage, the family, and human sexuality in your foundational documents.

A sample statement concerning marriage and the family might include a statement similar to this:

"We believe God ordained marriage and the family as the foundational institution of human society, and that the only legitimate marriage is a sacred and permanent covenant relationship between one man and one woman, symbolizing the union of Christ and his Church. The husband is to be the servant leader in the home and is to love his wife as Christ loves the church, and the wife is to submit herself to the Scriptural leadership of her husband as the church submits to the headship of Christ (Genesis 2:18-25; Matthew 19:4-6; Ephesians 5:22-25)."

Your statement on human sexuality might read something like this:

"We believe God has commanded that no intimate sexual activity is to be engaged in outside of the marriage of a man and a woman. Any form of child molestation, fornication, adultery, homosexuality, lesbianism, bestiality, bisexuality, incest, pedophilia, or pornography is a sinful perversion of God's gift of sex. We believe God disapproves of and forbids any attempt to alter one's gender by surgery or appearance. (Genesis 2:22-24; 19:5,13; Leviticus 18:1-30; Matthew 19:4-6; Romans 1:26-29; 7:2; First Corinthians 5:1; 6:9; Gal. 3:28; Ephesians 5:22-23; First Thessalonians 4:1-8; Hebrews 13:4)"

See the sample constitution at the end of this manual for a fuller sample text relating to these vital areas of biblical teaching.

- 13) **Membership** - Membership in a local church is a privilege rather than a right, but once granted it carries certain rights, privileges, and responsibilities that can only be revoked by majority vote of the membership. It is vital that the constitution contain clear statements concerning the qualifications for membership, the procedure for admission, the expectations, responsibilities,

and privileges of membership, the causes for and processes involved in discipline of members, how members may be terminated and/or restored to fellowship with the church. You need to be specific and clear in each of these areas, and then meticulously follow what you have written.

You will also want to include a section here about "associate membership." This usually relates to people such as students, military personnel, and others temporarily residing in the community, and who desire to fellowship with the church and serve in some capacity. This is sometimes referred to as "watch care membership." Such people have no vote in the church's affairs and are not eligible to hold any elected office.

- 14) **Officers and Staff** - This will be a rather lengthy section dealing with the qualifications and duties of those in spiritual and administrative leadership. It should be detailed and specific, clearly outlining the church's hierarchy. Begin with a statement on the congregational nature of the church, and then define how leadership positions will be filled (congregational call, election or appointment), who the designated corporate officers will be, the qualifications, duties and terms for each office, and how officers may be removed from leadership if they do not fulfill their responsibilities. Clearly delineate the lines of authority and accountability so as to minimize misunderstandings that might hinder the ministry.

You should have separate sections for the pastoral staff, deacons, church clerk, treasurer, financial secretary, trustees, and other leadership positions. View the sample constitution at the end of this manual for ideas of what to include in each section.

- 15) **Meetings and Administration** - This constitutional article focuses on the all-important areas of public worship, business meetings, and how the church's facilities may be used. Begin with a declaration of the church's purpose to conduct a regular schedule of meetings for the glory of God, the proclamation of the gospel, and the functioning of the church body.

Specify the parameters of the church calendar year, the frequency of business meetings, procedures to be followed in business sessions, voting requirements and guidelines, and the use of a Policies and Procedures manual. You might also want to note special occasions when the church facilities may be utilized such as weddings, baptisms, funerals, child dedications, etc.

- 16) **Finances** - Financial credibility is crucial to the success of your ministry. People will not give to a ministry in which they have no confidence. Sound, biblical, and open financial procedures are major contributors to building trust in your ministry. Much of this will be outlined in the Policies and Procedures manual and in the article relating to the duties of the treasurer and financial secretary.

In this article you want to designate the fiscal year (January 1st through December 31st), specify how the ministries of the church will be financed (tithes and offerings), make provision for salaries to be paid from church funds, require the church to function on a published budget approved by the congregation, establish a building fund, and require a congregational vote before the acquisition/sale of lands, buildings or indebtedness. It is vital that you build in a set of checks and balances in this important area that has known so much mismanagement over the years.

- 17) **Committees** - Committees can be both a blain and a blessing. They can be a source of consternations, conflict and inertia, but if properly structured with clear lines of communication they can be a great asset in carrying out the ministry of the church. Committees can consist of one or many persons. They should be composed of just enough people to get the job done

efficiently and effectively. Ad hoc committees have a limited life expectancy and automatically dissolve when they complete their purpose or after a specified period of time.

Begin this section with a general statement concerning committees, how they may be created, their composition, purpose, duties, and accountability. Make provision for a budget and financial committee, a separate financial review committee, a nominating committee, a missions committee, a hospitality committee, a music committee, a building and grounds committee, and the authority to create other committees as may be deemed appropriate.

- 18) **Church Organizations** - This section will deal primarily with recognized groups within the church whose primary purpose is to foster various phases of the church's life and activity such as the Sunday School, youth groups, men and ladies' groups, a Christian school, etc. The article brings all the church's ministries under the same umbrella and makes them accountable to the appropriate leaders within the church.
- 19) **Licensing, Ordination and Commissioning** - This provision authorizes the church to set apart and to put its stamp of approval upon those it believes are qualified for the public ministry of preaching the gospel message. *Licensing* generally involves laymen who will engage in pulpit ministry in the absence of the pastor. *Ordination* is reserved for men who plan to become pastors and full-time Christian workers. *Commissioning* focuses primarily on missionaries (both men and women). It releases them from their local church responsibilities while authorizing them to carry on ministry on their chosen field of service. They continue to function under the authority of their home church and are accountable to it.
- 20) **Indemnification** - Indemnification involves compensating persons for the loss or damages they may incur in the course of their duties. We live in a litigious society in which church leaders are not immune from lawsuits instigated by disgruntled members and opportunists. Because the leaders are representatives of the church, the congregation has the responsibility to shield them from financial loss by providing adequate protection for them. This is usually done through the purchase of an approved insurance policy.

Include at the beginning of this section a statement to the effect that members of the church agree not to pursue litigation against the church, its members, its officers, its paid staff, its deacons or its pastor(s). This is simply a restatement of the principle found in First Corinthians 6:1-8. Be sure to point out this provision in your pre-membership classes. When a person becomes a member of the church they are agreeing not to enter into litigation against the church. This provision will not prevent a member from pursuing a claim for personal injury against an insurance company. See the sample constitution at the end of this manual for examples of what to include in this clause.

- 21) **Binding Arbitration** - This article builds on the previous one by providing a Scriptural means for people to resolve disagreements and disputes between themselves and the church, its leaders or members. By accepting membership in the church and agreeing to abide by the constitution of the church, people are surrendering their right to sue and are agreeing to abide by the decision of a third party arbitrator.

Wording is important here, so pay close attention to the sample constitution as you outline the process to be followed. Once adopted, you **MUST** meticulously follow the procedures you have outlined.

- 22) **Property** - It is strongly recommended the church seek incorporation under the laws of the state in which it is located so it can own, buy and sell property in its own name rather than in

the name of the pastor or member of the church. Whoever's name is on the deed owns the property regardless of who pays for it. This article specifies the church's right to own property, and prevents individuals from profiting from the sale or distribution of any of its assets. In some cases, an additional clause may need to be added to comply with the property holding policy of the mission agency or mother church which is sponsoring the new church.

- 23) **Amendments** - Constitutions are living documents that need periodic review and updating. New situations arise which need to be addressed through a constitutional change or amendment. Sometimes, older provisions need to be altered to comply with current law or a change of ministry focus. Changes should be made only after thorough consideration has been given to the need and implication of doing so, and only by vote of the congregation. Usually such changes require a higher than normal percentage (such as 75% of the quorum required) for adoption. Spell out the procedures in detail that are to be followed when making constitutional changes.
- 24) **Dissolution** - All churches have a life cycle at the end of which their ministry will cease to function. This final article of your constitution specifies how the assets of the church will be distributed. All bills should be paid in full, the assets liquidated, and distributed to other organizations of like faith. No funds should accrue to the members of the church or any other person associated with them.

The Adoption of a Church Constitution

Once you have completed the process of writing the church's constitution, have two or three people review it in detail. This may be your home pastor, a fellow church planter or the mission agency with whom you serve. Some agencies, such as Baptist Mid-Missions, require proposed constitutions to be submitted for evaluation. It is not unusual for important items to be overlooked or inadvertently left out. Wording that seems clear to you may be confusing to others. The inclusion or omission of a single word or letter can change the intended meaning. Younger men sometimes overlook details that will hurt their ministry down the road or subject the church to unnecessary harm and injury.

A wise church planter recognizes there is safety in a multitude of counselors (Proverbs 11:14). He willingly listens to the mature advice of older, more experienced men who have traveled the same road he is now on. As he consults with others, he will find it prudent to revise a number of aspects in the constitution before presenting it to the core group or church for adoption.

In some cases, he will not have built in sufficient checks and balances to protect either the church or those in leadership. He may not have given sufficient emphasis to the congregational aspect of the church's polity or may have invested too much authority in the deacons, pastor or board. Writing constitutions is a learning experience, both for you and the church you will plant. Let God expand your horizons, increase your understanding, and hone your skills through the advice of others.

This entire process of writing, reviewing, and revising the proposed constitution should be completed during the pre-planning phase of your church plant. You will not have adequate time to devote to this project once you move into your target community and begin gathering the core group without sacrificing other important activities. So, write the constitution BEFORE you start.

Review the Constitution with your Core Group

Unless you are involved in a mother/daughter church plant or are joining a pre-existing group, it most likely will take several months to gather a core group of sufficient size to insure a healthy launch when you go public. During the intervening months you will need to do considerable teaching to mold the emerging core group into a viable force moving toward the goal of starting a new church. Among other things, you will need to teach them what a church is, how it ought to function (polity), and how they fit into it. This will take several weeks to accomplish.

Distribute copies of the constitution to the core group members and go over its various provisions. By doing so, you will be able to teach them the church's purpose, mission, core values, and distinctives as well as reviewing its doctrinal position and internal structure. The purpose for this is not to give core group members the opportunity to change the constitution, but rather to familiarize them with this foundational document and to create greater understanding and cohesiveness within the group.

Understand at the start that not everyone will agree with every provision of the constitution. Your core group will most likely be drawn from a broad spectrum of religious and ecclesiastical backgrounds in which churches were run in a variety of ways. Everyone will have their own idea of how the church should be conducted. That is all right. Lovingly remind them that THAT was how those churches were conducted and THIS is how this church will function. This church is not the church they came from and will not function in the same way.

Encourage questions. What do they not understand? With what provisions do they struggle? Now, during the prenatal phase, is the time to clarify issues, remove doubts, and win consensus. Some folks will agree with the constitution whole heartedly. Others will come along hesitantly, not quite sure they agree with every provision, but willing to abide by the terms outlined in it. It is not unusual, however, for a few to be opposed sufficiently to some aspects of the constitution that they will either introduce a divisive note into the group or drop out all together.

While this unfortunate, it is often a blessing in disguise. It is far better for people who are not in agreement with the church's policies and positions to drop out BEFORE uniting with the church than to become disruptive AFTER they join. You should meet personally with those who have strong objections to some aspect of the constitution and seek to resolve the issues they have (if possible). If that cannot be done without jeopardizing the ministry, then it is best to let them move on to another church with which they can agree. Only those who are in agreement with the church's purpose, mission, core values, doctrinal statement, and constitution should be allowed to sign the charter and become members of the church.

Adopt the Constitution when you Organize the Church

It is important that the church take ownership of the constitution. In a church plant, this is normally done on the day the church is formally organized. In some cases (when there is a large, strong core group), the church may actually be organized on the same day it goes public. In most cases, however, the organizational service will be held several months after the public launch of the church. This gives it time to attract additional people, get settled into ministry, and to find out who is going to "stay with the stuff" now that the church is up and running. The church will be functioning under the terms of the constitution even though neither technically exists until the church is formally organized.

You should have at least four target dates in mind before starting your church plant: one for moving into the focus area, one for starting the core group, one for beginning public services, and one for organizing the church. Some adjustments may be needed along the way depending on how the ministry develops. Some things take longer than expected.

In the weeks leading up to the organizational meeting, host a Saturday morning seminar (8:00 - 12:00 or 10:00 to 2:00) in which you review each of the foundational documents of the church. This includes the charter, covenant, doctrinal statement, constitution and membership agreement form. Once again explain each provision and answer any questions people may ask. This meeting should be open to anyone who is interested in the church or who is planning to become a member.

Here again, not everyone may be in agreement with every provision, and some may decide not to join the church just yet. Again, that's o.k. You are looking for people whose hearts the Lord has prepared and who are willing to cooperate with and support this new church. All potential candidates for membership should be pre-examined just as they would be after the church is formed and the constitution is adopted.

A church charter should be developed during the preplanning phase of the church plant. This is the declaration that actually gives birth to the new church when it is adopted. It will contain the words: *"We do hereby constitute ourselves to be an independent Baptist church . . ."* (see the sample charter at the end of this manual). Also included in the charter is a paragraph stating that those signing the charter are thereby adopting the church's covenant, constitution and articles of faith. It might read something like this:

"Furthermore, this church shall be governed by the will of God as revealed in the Holy Scriptures and in accordance with the covenant, constitution and articles of faith which we do hereby adopt by the affixing of our signatures to this document."

By signing the charter they are both birthing the church AND adopting all the foundational documents of the church including the constitution. You want to make this a big day. After all, you are creating a new entity known as a "local church."

Prior to your organizational service, have the church's charter professionally printed on marble or parchment card stock to give it an antique look. These should be eighteen by twenty-four or twenty-four by thirty-six inches in size so they are suitable for framing. Be sure to include enough signature lines to allow all the "charter members" to sign their names.

Publicize your organizational service well in advance so everyone connected with the ministry can plan to be present. Advertise it in the newspapers, radio, and through flyers. Invite the public to witness the birth of a new church in their community. Most people have probably never seen anything like it.

On the appointed day, select someone in advance to serve as a temporary church clerk to keep a written record of the day's proceedings. Have joyful, majestic music playing during the pre-service time. This is a time of celebration and expectancy. Something wonderful is going to happen on this day - a baby church is going to be born!

Conduct an enthusiastic song service with prayer, Scripture reading, special music, and brief (1-2 minutes) testimonies from people who have been saved through this ministry since it first began. Give a brief history of the church, how it began, evidence of God's blessing upon it, and your vision for the future. You might invite your home pastor or mission administrator to bring the keynote address on the nature and importance of the local church. Encourage him to challenge the people concerning believer's baptism, church membership, corporate worship, and to keep outreach as a major focus of the church's ministry.

Following the message explain the process involved in birthing a church. Read the charter to the assembled audience and then invite each person who has been pre-screened to come forward to sign the charter as their name is read. You actually want to have three or four large copies of the charter spread

out on a long table with a good quality black ink pen ready for use with each copy. Have each person sign all the copies of the charter so you will have duplicate copies available in case of fire or for replacement when the light fades the original copy. As one person signs the first copy, call the name of the next person and so on. It might be a good idea to have someone standing behind the table to show people where to sign. Otherwise, they may leave some signature spaces empty.

Make this part of the service a solemn time. Sacred history is taking place right before your eyes. This is a major milestone in the history of the church's development. You want the people to have hearts full of gratitude to God for what he has done, and filled with expectation of what he is going to do in the future.

When all the perspective members who have been screened have finished signing the charter, explain to the congregation that the charter is going to be left "open" for the next four to six weeks for other qualified individuals who want to become charter members to sign. These may be people who have been won to Christ during the formative stage, but who have not yet been baptized yet, or even some other Christians who are visiting the chartering ceremony. Each one will need to complete the pre-membership class and be screened before doing so.

There are a number of other things that need to be done during this organizational meeting (such as calling a pastor, choosing a treasurer, clerk, and possibly deacons, adopting financial records, deciding on membership in a like-minded fellowship, etc.). Once those items have been cared for, conclude the meeting with a time of praise, testimonies, and prayer. One nice touch is to conclude with a banquet celebrating the birth of the church. Another nice touch is to conduct a baptismal service either immediately following the service or later in the day for those who have been saved during the formative stage of the church. These newly baptized believers could then sign the charter the following week.

There is no formal motion to adopt the church's constitution. Rather, the charter is written in such a way that the act of signing the charter constitutes the church's ratification of the constitution and other foundational documents. There is no hard and fast rule about this. It can be done differently. A simple motion to adopt each of the founding documents would certainly be in order, but it loses the personal touch of having each member publicly commit himself/herself to abiding by this vital document.

Review the Constitution in your Pre-membership Class

Once the charter is signed and the church is founded, thereafter you should require each perspective member to complete a pre-membership class during which, among other things, you will want to review the entire constitutional package and explain the provisions of each. The goal is to have informed, knowledgeable candidates for membership who understand and agree with the church's beliefs, standards, values, purpose, mission, expectations, and ministry philosophy. People who come into membership with their eyes wide open tend to be more supportive, more generous, and more involved than those who only have a vague idea of what your church is all about.

Pre-membership classes are a wonderful screening, teaching, and evangelistic tool. They present a wonderful opportunity to share the gospel with people who may be religious, but unsaved. They filter out people who disagree with the church's policies and practices before they can damage the church. And they afford you with an ideal setting for teaching the unique qualities of your church to people who really want to know.

Reviewing and Changing the Church Constitution

Culture, society, congregations, and ministry philosophies are in a constant state of flux. They ebb and flow. Some of the resultant changes are good while others are not. Whether we like it or not, change is inevitable and from time to time changes will be needed in your constitution to adjust to your new environment. New protections will need to be built into existent documents, archaic wording will need updating, and circumstances will mandate revision of existing provisions.

Many churches, pastors, and church planters attempt to set their foundational documents in stone so that they can never be altered or changed. While their motivation is understood (they don't want the church to slip toward liberalism), doing so is neither wise nor feasible. Anything you create can be uncreated. Even if you fill the document with statements indicating that no part of the constitution shall ever be altered or changed in any way, a new generation can simply annul it, ignore it or vote it out of existence. A constitution works only so long as people agree to abide by it.

Most constitutions will contain a provision that allows for changes and amendments to be made in a prescribed manner. These changes usually require the approval of a larger than normal percentage of voting members. Notification of any proposed changes are required to be provided to the members well in advance of the meeting in which the changes will be voted upon. Such a procedure allows the church to remain viable in an ever changing environment while at the same time retaining its beliefs and standards.

Constitutional review and revision normally takes place in one of three venues: in an established church setting, in the merger of two existing churches, or in the case of a church that has declined to the point where it needs to be reconstituted or restarted.

Revising an Established Church's Constitution

Normally, well-established, growing churches will not need a great deal of constitutional revision. They will make minor adjustments as they go along. Problems can arise, however, whenever the leadership allows a number of years to pass without evaluating the constitution. If for no other reason, constant changes in the legal field necessitate a review of church constitutions at least every two years. New anti-discrimination laws, hiring mandates, and financial requirements such as those contained in the 2002 Sarbanes-Oxley Act help accentuate the need for constant vigilance and updating of the church's constitution.

Usually the pastor and deacons (or trustees) will review the various constitutional provisions and make recommendations to the congregation in keeping with the procedures outlined in the constitution. The proposed changes are published at least two weeks in advance. Ample time is given for discussion and questions in a business meeting called for that purpose. The congregation then votes on the proposed changes and either approves or disapproves the recommended changes.

In rare cases when wholesale changes are being proposed, a constitutional revision committee may be appointed consisting of the pastor, two deacons, and at least two representatives of the congregation. This committee would then study the constitution, possibly research several samples from other churches, and work to reach agreement on the wording of the revised document. This will probably take several weeks or months to complete. The finished product would then be presented in printed form to the members of the church for discussion, explanation, and adoption. People will want to know why certain provisions or wording was dropped, changed or added. They need to see the benefit of the new provisions.

Several meetings will most likely be needed to satisfactorily answer all the questions and objections. Understand that change is painful, and many people will oppose it on the grounds that it is different than what they had before. People fear change (even good change) whereas they are comfortable with the status quo because it is familiar. Almost assuredly, some folks will not agree with every alternation that is made. Unless there is wholesale opposition to some wording or provision, this is not a time for congregational revision of the committee's work. Present the revised constitution as a whole and do not allow it to be voted on piece-meal (item by item). If you give people line-item veto over individual provisions of any document (budget, constitution, policies, etc.) they will frequently weaken it and undermine the ministry of the church. Everyone should have the opportunity to voice their opinion, but you don't want to give dissents an unfair advantage. The constitution, like most other proposals, should be voted up or down on the basis of its own merits. If a document is sufficiently unacceptable, then the people should vote it down and send it back to the revision committee for further work. If it is basically sound, but has one or two objectionable clauses, then work within the framework provided by the constitution to alter those provisions.

A word of warning is in order here. Never threaten nor try to force adoption of any provision just because you want it. The author knows of one pastor who tried to bluff his people into accepting an unwelcome change by putting his resignation on the table and threatening to leave unless they adopted provision he was recommending. Much to his surprise, they accepted his resignation.

New pastors (new to the church) sometimes accept a call to a church with the intention of altering the constitution or introducing a new one once they are installed as pastor. These men are often very strong (sometimes dictatorial) leaders. It is intellectually and spiritually dishonest to accept a pastorate with the intention of revising or replacing the church's constitution without notifying the congregation in advance of your plan. To do so, is divisive and will surely result in conflict, division, and possible destruction of the church. Any disagreement with the church's constitution should be voiced and resolved BEFORE accepting the call to the church.

Revising Merging Churches Constitutions

In the ebb and flow of ministry, churches go through various stages of growth and decline. Communities change, industries close, key families move away or die, disagreements split the church, or St. John's Syndrome (nominalism) sets in with the result that attendance declines to the point where it is no longer feasible to keep the church open. In some cases, two struggling churches can combine their congregations and assets to form a new, vibrant church.

In most cases, it is wise to start anew with a new name, a new location, new leadership, and a new constitution. The church may be assisted in this process by a church planter, a new pastor or other Christian leader.

When blending two churches it is best to form a committee, composed of an equal number of people (2-3) from each church, under the leadership of their new pastor or a church planter. If it has not already been done, there should be a wide ranging discussion and agreement on the type of church they want to be, the polity, standards, values, ministry philosophy, and practices they will follow. They are not ready to write a new constitution until they know who they are and where they are going. Once that is decided the committee should review several sample constitutions and select the best provisions from each for possible inclusion in the new document. They should not simply copy another constitution and make it their own. The constitution should be a reflection of THEIR church rather than someone else's church.

Once the new constitution is written, the committee should submit it to a reliable pastor, state fellowship representative or mission administrator for review. People who are not standing in the woods often have a better view of the forest than those who have a tree blocking their vision. An outside advisor

will be able to give valuable counsel concerning possible changes that should be made before presenting the finished document to the two congregations for discussion and adoption.

Having completed the revision process, the combined committee will then present printed copies of the new constitution to the assembled members of the two congregations. It is best not to distribute the constitution in advance because some provisions may be misunderstood. You don't want to encounter a contingent of angry people at the start of the adoption process.

A better method is to distribute the constitution at a meeting called for that purpose, and then verbally read through the entire document, explaining key provisions as you go along. This keeps everyone together on the same page and allows you to explain issues that might be misunderstood. It also limits the spread of gossip and division. Once the entire document has been read together, divide the members of the congregation into Q&A discussion groups with at least two members of the revision committee in each group. During this time people should be allowed to ask any questions they may have of the committee members who will do their best to explain the reason for the provision or the wording involved. Dismiss the groups after about an hour with prayer and the promise that you will reassemble the following week for further discussion, questions, and deliberation. Encourage the people to write down their questions and bring them to the next meeting rather than getting on the phone to discuss the issues they don't understand or with which they disagree.

If possible, the committee members should meet later that same day (while things are still fresh in their minds) to discuss the questions that were raised, the reactions that was observed, and how best to clarify each issue that was brought up. The goal is not to hide anything, nor to manipulate the process so as to ensure adoption. Rather, the goal is to clarify and educate the people so that they can bond around mutually agreeable standards, beliefs, and procedures. The process must be open and fair for this to happen.

The two congregations should meet again the following week to continue the review and discussion process. Thank the people for their interest, cooperation, and the good questions they have posed. Assure them the committee is listening and wants to address their concerns. Some of the questions that were asked in the Q&A sessions were duplicates while others were not. No one present heard all the issues that were raised. Thus, much of this session will be devoted to answering the main points that were brought into question. The committee should have already discussed each of these items and decided how best to answer the concerns expressed. Read one question at a time and ask various committee members to respond. Other committee members can supplement that respondent's answer.

After all the questions from the previous week have been addressed, open the meeting for more questions from the congregation. Some of these may be similar to those already asked (people have a great capacity for not listening). Be patient and accommodating. Don't try to hurry the process or people will think you are trying to impose something on them. Conclude the session with a season of prayer and invite the people to return a third time with any additional questions prior to adoption of the new constitution.

At this third and final discussion session, review the history that has brought these two churches together, and the process you have gone through in developing foundational documents for the church. Open the session for any additional questions the congregation may have and answer them as fully as possible. There will undoubtedly be some redundancy in the questions presented. Be patient and answer them as fully as possible.

Take ten to fifteen minutes to review the purpose and mission of the new church with a special emphasis on its vision for the future. Seek to answer the question: "Where is this church going and what will it look like when it gets there?" Vision energizes people and motivates them to get involved. You

want the people to rally around the new church, support its constitution, and participate in its ministry, so, like Moses, paint a verbal image in their mind's eye of a "land flowing with milk and honey" that they can carry away from this meeting.

At this point, there are two ways you can adopt the constitution of this blended church. One involves a series of motions and votes that effectively merges the two churches and adopts each of the previously prepared foundational documents. The other is to have the members sign a new charter birthing the new church and adopting its paperwork. Either is acceptable, although the author prefers the latter approach.

Revising a Reconstituted Church's Constitution

In Matthew 5:29 Jesus taught the principle of "radical amputation." If a man's eye offends him (causes him to stumble into sin), he is to pluck it out. He reiterated the same principle in verse 30 when he said a man should cut off his hand if it caused him to offend or sin. Jesus was not teaching self-mutilation here. Rather, he was instructing us to take whatever steps are necessary to change the circumstances that lead us into sinful and destructive behaviors.

As noted in the previous section, churches sometimes decline to the point where they are no longer viable. In some cases it is unavoidable due to changing neighborhoods, economic downturns, and natural disasters. But in most cases, churches decline because of the things they do (or don't do). Their policies and practices are destructive and self-defeating. It may be something as simple as a lack of faith, failure to deal with sin in the membership or one family usurping control of the church. Regardless of the reasons for the decline, the church may be on the verge of closure unless something radical is done to resuscitate it. In some instances two struggling works can merge their resources and people to form a new, reinvigorated ministry, but in many cases there is no other church willing to partner with a church in radical decline.

Dying churches are often so crippled by their past that the only way for them to survive is to reconstitute them and start over new. This means the church will actually vote to go out of business and then be rebirthed as a new church plant with a new name, new constitution, and new pastor.

Many times churches in this condition will seek the help of a church planter or experienced pastor to shepherd them through the process of developing new foundational documents including the writing of a new constitution. Generally, although not always, a committee composed of the church planter (or pastor), one or two deacons, and at least one representative from the congregation will be appointed to write the new constitution. The committee and the church family are usually very open to the suggestions of their new leader. They know that what they did in the past no longer works, and so they are open to new ideas and new approaches to ministry.

The process from this point on is very similar to that used when two churches are merging. The main difference is that there are fewer committee members, and the church planter has greater input. Rather than repeating similar information here, the reader is encouraged to refer to the section above and follow the steps outlined there.

Implementing and Abiding by the Church's Constitution

A church constitution is merely a blueprint outlining how a church is supposed to function. Like an architect, the church planter draws up the diagram, and then presents it to the people for their approval and adoption. Having adopted the constitution, the church must now begin to implement its provisions.

Implementing the Constitution

Time is required for a constitution to take hold and to begin functioning as planned. A church may not be able to implement all of its provisions immediately. Qualified people may not be available to fill all the positions outlined in the constitution. There may not be any godly men who meet the biblical requirements for being deacons. Key leadership position may have to be left empty. The temptation will be to fill those positions with people who are not spiritually qualified. **DO NOT DO IT!** No matter how great the temptation to do so, don't make the mistake of filling ministry slots with unqualified individuals. If you ignore this advice and go down that road you will find it extremely difficult to reverse course later on. It is better to leave positions unfilled than to place someone in a leadership position who should not be there.

The constitution takes effect immediately upon approval, even though you may not be able to fill all the positions outlined therein. Financial procedures will need to be brought into conformity with the requirements of the constitution. You may need to apply for admittance to a particular fellowship or association of churches (if mandated in the constitution). Pre-membership classes may need to be instituted. Regular business meetings may need to be scheduled. Training classes may need to be started. Read through the constitution and note the things it requires which are not now being done, and then take steps to start doing those things.

One of the most important things you will need to do is to review the church's mission statement, and evaluate your current ministry in light of your mission statement. Which aspects of your mission are you currently fulfilling? Which ones are missing? What changes in the current program need to be made? What needs to be implemented? Do have a good balance between the various aspects of your mission? What training needs to be offered? Have you developed a calendar schedule for implementing various aspects of your mission? Remember, "mission" is what your church is supposed to be doing, not necessarily what it is doing. You may need to discontinue some of the things you are doing in order to start doing some of the things you should be doing.

Policy and Procedures Manual

Consider developing a Policies and Procedures manual. This is a living, evolving document that describes how the various principles and requirements found in the constitution are implemented in the daily life of the church. It should also include various practices, standards, positions, and procedures not specifically mentioned in the constitution such as music standards, vacation policies, child-safety procedures, benevolence policies, how a person goes about getting baptized or the procedure for joining the church. It outlines disciplinary procedures, hiring and termination guidelines, job descriptions, performance evaluations, travel policies, mission policies, training provisions, auditing practices, building and equipment usage, etc.

Rather than waiting until a problem arises, the P&P manual determines in advance how a matter is to be handled. This avoids a great deal of heartache, pain, and anguish for all concerned. It builds confidence because people know what to do and what is expected. People will have greater confidence in the leaders of the church because they know they are well organized and have carefully thought through policy and procedural issues. It helps people focus in the same direction while avoiding conflict and enables you to say "no" to suggestions and ideas that would hinder or undermine the effectiveness of the church.⁶

The P&P manual is a growing document. Each time a new policy or procedure is implemented, it is added to the manual. The manual should always be kept in the church office and should be available to the public upon request. It should be clearly understood that no individual (including a pastor or deacon) can change the policy manual to suit himself. Policies and procedures must be adopted either by the

congregation itself or approved by the pastor and deacons together. Because the policy manual is mandated in the constitution, its provisions have the same authority and weight as any other provision of the constitution, and must be followed by everyone in the church.

Abiding by the Provisions of the Constitution

A good constitution is no good if its provisions are ignored or held in contempt. It has value and force only when its constituents honor and abide by it. Many churches have good constitutions, but they don't follow them. Membership requirements are ignored, financial guidelines are nullified, leadership qualifications are disregarded, and as a result abuse is often perpetrated.

Sometimes church constitutions suffer from benign neglect. Other times, they are blatantly torn asunder by dictatorial leaders who refuse to be "hampered" by a piece of paper. The author knows of a pastor who ripped the church constitution in pieces in front of the flabbergasted congregation and declared, "This paper is no longer in effect as of now. If you don't like it, get out." Several did, but most stayed, not daring to incur the pastor's power and wrath.

If you are going to be a biblical church that functions under the authority of the New Testament, then you must follow the principles outlined in the New Testament. That means you will follow a congregational form of church polity. It is the congregation, and not the pastor, who ultimately decides how the biblical principles outlined in Scripture are going to be implemented in that particular church. Those decisions take form most often in the church's constitution. The pastor is the leader, but ultimate authority resides with the congregation.

When an individual, staff member or pastor unites with a church, he is agreeing to abide by that church's constitution. He is placing himself under the authority of that constitution and commits himself to function within the parameters contained therein. He has no right, be he a member, a deacon or a pastor, to ignore or violate any of its provisions simply because he doesn't like or agree with them. Christians, and Christian leaders, need to be people of their word. If they say they are in agreement with the constitution when they join the church, then they should follow through and abide by its terms. If they find some tenet is unpalatable, unworkable, unscriptural or unfair, then they should bring it to the attention of the church leadership and work within the framework of the constitution to amend the offensive provision. If the situation cannot be rectified to their satisfaction, then they should quietly resign their positions, withdraw from the church, and seek membership with another church with which they can agree. But to become disruptive, divisive or dictatorial is unbiblical and unacceptable.

A church constitution is a legal document and as such it is binding upon all its constituents. Thus, it is both legally and morally expedient for both parishioners and pastor to abide by its edicts. Elections have been nullified, decisions have been reversed, monies have had to be refunded, and fines have been imposed by the courts because constitutional guidelines were not followed. Thus, it is of utmost importance that everyone involved that they honor God, promote peace and harmony, minimize dissension, enhance leadership, and facilitate growth by willingly complying with their church's constitution.

Conclusion

Because of the human heart church constitutions are essential in order for "all thing to be done decently and in order." Many of the heartaches and misunderstandings, much of the abuse and strife, a good deal of the disunity and discord, and a lot of the bad "press" and poor testimony associated with local churches could be eliminated if churches, church planters, pastors, and lay people would take the time to develop Scripturally-sound constitutions to guide their ministries, and then comply with their provisions.

Every church exists for one reason, and one reason only - to glorify God. Much of what goes on in churches today fails to meet that standard. So, take the time now to develop a document that is fair, balanced, biblical, and doable. Then be a man of integrity as you implement and follow its principles explicitly.

Membership Agreement

Having received Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, and having been immersed upon my confession of faith, and being in agreement with _____ (name) _____ Baptist Church's statement of faith, constitution, and philosophy of ministry, I now choose to unite with this body of believers. In so doing, I commit myself to God and to the other members of this fellowship to do the following:

1. I will protect the unity of my church
 - ... By acting in love toward the other members (Romans 14:19)
 - ... By refusing to gossip (Ephesians 4:29)
 - ... By abiding by the terms of the church's Covenant, Constitution, and Doctrinal Statement
 - ... By cooperating with my pastor and the spiritual leaders of this church
(Hebrews 13:17)

2. I will share the responsibility of my church
 - ... By praying for its spiritual and numerical growth (I Thessalonians 1:2)
 - ... By inviting the unchurched and others to attend it's worship (Luke 14:23)
 - ... By warmly welcoming those who visit our services (Romans 15:7)

3. I will serve in the ministry of my church
 - ... By discovering my spiritual gifts and talents (I Peter 4:10)
 - ... By accepting training and equipping for ministry from my pastor (Ephesians 4:11,12)
 - ... By developing a servant's heart and a teachable spirit (Philippians 2:2,4,7)

4. I will support the testimony of my church
 - ... By attending its services faithfully (Hebrews 10:25)
 - ... By living a godly life (Philippians 1:27)
 - ... By contributing financially on a regular basis (I Corinthians 16:2)

Signature

Date

“And the Lord added to the church daily such as were being saved.”
(Acts 2:47)

Church Charter

On this _____ day of ____ (month & year) ____, we the undersigned, having received Jesus Christ as our personal Savior and being baptized by immersion in obedience to His command, **do hereby constitute ourselves to be an independent Baptist church** patterned after the New Testament example.

Moreover, this church through the authority invested in it by Jesus Christ shall have the right to administer the ordinances of believer's baptism by immersion and the Lord's Supper and shall seek the salvation of the lost through the proclamation of the Gospel while encouraging one another in Christian love.

Furthermore, this church shall be governed by the will of God as revealed in the Holy Scriptures and in accordance with the covenant, constitution and articles of faith which we do hereby adopt by the affixing of our signatures to this document.

¹ Paul Jackson, *Doctrine of the Local Church* (Chicago, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1960), 25.

² *Ibid.*, 26.

³ Alan Branch, *Common Mistakes in Congregational Church Government* (Internet article posted on www.bpnews.net, February 8, 2006).

⁴ Paul R. Jackson, *The Doctrine and Administration of the Church*, (Des Plaines, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1968), p. 27.

⁵ Aubrey Malphurs, *Ministry Nuts and Bolts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1997), 20.

⁶ Roger McNamara and Ken Davis, *The Y-B-H Handbook of Church Planting* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2005), 362,363.