

# Faithful and Clear

A Pastor's Guide to Church Governance: Constitutions, Bylaws,  
Policies, and Procedures

Brad Gwartney

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF CHURCH GOVERNANCE IN REVITALIZATION**

Church revitalization conversations usually focus on vision, preaching, discipleship, and culture. These priorities are essential. Yet many churches that pursue revitalization overlook a quieter factor that often determines whether change will take root or fall apart: governance.

At first glance, governance may seem an unlikely place to begin a conversation about revitalization. Governance rarely excites people. It feels administrative and procedural, disconnected from spiritual vitality. For many church leaders, revitalization feels like a spiritual and cultural challenge, while governance feels like paperwork. Yet throughout Scripture, the ordering of God's people is never separate from their spiritual health. In both the Old and New Testaments, God provides instructions for leadership, accountability, and the care of the flock, showing that how we organize life together reflects our understanding of His authority and our calling to serve with integrity. When we recognize governance as a matter of faithful stewardship, its significance becomes clearly spiritual, not merely administrative.

Yet experience consistently shows that the two are closely connected. Mark Clifton, senior director of replanting at the North American Mission Board, observes, “Many older, dying churches have complex and detailed organizational structures that make the decision-making process slow and unresponsive.”<sup>1</sup> When leadership structures become unclear or overly complicated, even healthy ideas struggle to move forward. Vision stalls, decision-making becomes difficult, and leaders often find themselves managing confusion rather than leading change.

As a result, governance issues are often delayed until conflict demands attention. When that occurs, governance shifts from aiding revitalization to becoming a distraction from it.

Looking closely at a church's governing structures often reveals how a church actually functions. The way authority is defined, disagreements are resolved, and decisions are made reflects deeper patterns of trust, leadership, and accountability. In many cases, examining governance becomes one of the clearest ways to understand the true health of a congregation.

Healthy governance is not about control. It is about care. It creates the conditions for leaders to lead well, for congregations to trust the process, and for meaningful change to occur without unnecessary conflict.

For churches seeking revitalization, addressing governance early is not a distraction from revitalization. It is often one of the first steps that allows revitalization to move forward with clarity, trust, and unity.

## **Framing Governance as Pastoral Care**

There are many ways a pastor provides pastoral care for a congregation. Counseling, prayer, hospital visits, encouragement, and faithful presence are all essential expressions of love and shepherding. A church will struggle to thrive without a pastor who makes this kind of care a priority. Most pastors recognize this kind of care instinctively.

Pastoral care, however, also includes concern for the structures that shape a congregation's life together. How authority is exercised, how decisions are made, and how accountability is practiced can either support a church's health or quietly undermine it. When these structures are unclear or unhealthy, they create confusion, anxiety, and conflict that affect the whole body.

In this way, governance itself becomes a pastoral concern. Pastoral care is expressed not only through emotional and spiritual support but also through the responsible stewardship of the organizational systems and decision-making structures that shape the daily life of the church community. By attending to these systems, pastors actively foster an environment where spiritual growth, trust, and communal well-being are more likely to flourish. Thus, effective governance becomes an extension of pastoral responsibility, upholding the congregation's health and unity.

When governance is unclear, people often carry emotional weight tied to church systems rather than spiritual growth. Staff wonder who truly has authority. Committees struggle to know how decisions should be made. Members grow anxious when outcomes feel unpredictable. Over time, this confusion erodes trust, informal power structures emerge, and ministry momentum suffers.

Clear governance is a form of pastoral care because it reduces anxiety. It allows people to serve with confidence rather than fear. It protects leaders from impossible expectations and congregations from unnecessary turmoil.

Good governance does not remove the need for grace. It creates space for it.

In revitalization efforts, churches are often already navigating grief, hope, nostalgia, and uncertainty. Governance clarity helps stabilize those emotions. It encourages the congregation that change is intentional, not impulsive. In this sense, good governance helps sustain revitalization efforts by reducing confusion and strengthening trust.

## **Why Churches Drift Without "Good" Documents**

Churches rarely wake up one day and decide to drift. Drift happens slowly, often unnoticed, when practice replaces principle and memory replaces clarity.

In the absence of clear, current, and consistently followed governing documents, churches rely on informal systems to function. Decisions are guided by phrases such as:

- "This is how we've always done it."
- "So-and-so usually handles that."
- "I think the bylaws say..."

These systems work until they do not, or until someone tries to change something.

As churches grow, decline, or experience leadership transitions, informal practices are strained. New leaders interpret traditions differently. Long-time members remember authority one way, while newer members assume another. Over time, the church's identity and decision-making processes become unclear.

Drift also occurs when churches pursue good goals without defined boundaries. Vision initiatives multiply. Ministries expand. But without governance guardrails, priorities shift quietly. The church may still be busy, but it becomes less aligned.

Good governance documents are clear, current, aligned with actual church practice, and grounded in biblical conviction. Clarity helps leaders and members understand roles, authority, and processes. Alignment ensures that what is written matches how decisions are made day to day. A biblical foundation keeps the church's core documents connected to its faith commitments and mission. While these documents do not automatically prevent drift, they help guard against it. Without them, drift becomes nearly unavoidable.

## **Can Your Governance Support Revitalization?**

Revitalization requires significant change. It may involve renewed prayer, adjusting ministry priorities, reallocating resources, updating staffing structures, revising long-standing practices, reviewing bylaws, or creating new policies. Often, it includes long conversations, difficult decisions, and more prayer than anyone originally expected.

Each of these steps requires authority, trust, and a clear process. When governance systems are outdated, incomplete, or inconsistently followed, even well-intended change becomes difficult to sustain. Momentum slows. Anxiety rises. Leaders hesitate not because they lack vision, but because they lack clarity.

A helpful diagnostic question is simple. If our church needed to make a difficult decision tomorrow, would our governance systems support it?

When the answer is uncertain, governance work becomes part of revitalization rather than a distraction from it.

Churches with healthy governance are better equipped to manage disagreement without division, empower leaders without alienating members, and sustain momentum beyond a single season or a single personality. Governance does not create vision. It protects it.

One reason churches resist formal governance is fear of losing flexibility. Leaders worry that written documents will slow momentum or restrict ministry. In practice, the opposite is often true. A lack of governance usually results in less, not more, flexibility.

When authority is unclear, every decision requires negotiation. When processes are undefined, leaders hesitate. When expectations vary, conflict increases. Over time, fear of backlash replaces confidence, and change becomes harder to pursue.

Healthy governance creates predictable flexibility. It defines who can act, when consultation is needed, and how decisions are reviewed. This clarity allows leaders to move quickly when needed because the boundaries are understood and trusted.

Flexibility without clarity may feel freeing at first, but it often leads to unnecessary mistrust. Clarity, by contrast, creates confidence, and confidence is essential for revitalization to take root. Research professor and author Brené Brown is credited with the simple insight that clarity is kindness. When it comes to the church's foundational systems, this insight rings especially true.

## **When Governance Is Ignored, Authority Goes Underground**

Ignoring governance does not eliminate its influence. It simply pushes it below the surface. Most churches do not intentionally choose this path.

When formal systems are weak or unclear, informal authority naturally fills the gap. Trusted individuals begin to carry influence that is never clearly defined. Decisions are shaped more by relationships than by agreed processes. These patterns usually develop with good intentions and a genuine desire to help the church function.

This dynamic is especially common in churches that have experienced leadership instability. When pastors serve for only a short time, or when a church goes through extended periods without pastoral leadership, informal systems often emerge to provide continuity. In the absence of clear structures, people simply do what seems necessary to keep the church moving forward.

For a time, this arrangement can appear to work. The church continues to function because trusted individuals quietly make decisions behind the scenes. But revitalization exposes the limits of these informal systems.

Revitalization introduces change. New leaders bring fresh direction. Ministries are evaluated. Decisions that were once handled quietly now require broader agreement and clear communication. When authority has been operating informally for years, these moments often create tension. People are unsure who should decide. Long-

standing influencers feel displaced. New leaders struggle to lead within systems that were never clearly defined. Instead of supporting revitalization, the absence of clear governance begins to slow it down.

Revitalization requires more than vision and energy. It requires structures that allow leaders to lead, members to trust the process, and decisions to move forward without unnecessary confusion. When governance remains unclear, the weight of leadership increases while trust gradually erodes.

What once served as a temporary workaround can eventually become a barrier to the very revitalization the church is seeking.

## **Governance as a Ministry of Preparation**

Scripture reminds us that preparation matters. In 1 Corinthians 14:40, Paul wrote that “all things should be done decently and in order.” Throughout the life of God’s people, thoughtful preparation has often preceded seasons of growth and faithfulness. When rightly ordered, structures support good stewardship. Order creates space for growth.

Governance prepares a church for change by clarifying expectations, defining authority, protecting unity, and reducing unnecessary conflict. These are not abstract ideals. They are practical expressions of care that help a congregation move forward together.

This kind of preparation is not unspiritual. It is an act of faithfulness. It reflects trust that God works not only in moments of necessity but also in seasons of careful planning and shared responsibility.

Churches that invest in governance before a crisis are not pessimistic. They are wise.

## **Conclusion**

Governance may be under discussed, but it is not insignificant. It quietly shapes how churches operate and navigate change, how leaders exercise authority, and how people learn to trust over time. Whether recognized or not, governance systems are always at work within the life of a church.

Revitalization that overlooks governance is fragile. Governance without a gospel-shaped vision for the church is empty. When a church intentionally brings these together, it creates an environment where leaders can lead with confidence, members can trust the process driven by the systems in place, and the church's mission can endure beyond a single season of pastoral leadership.

As you read this book, the question is not whether your church has a governance structure. The deeper question is whether that structure serves the mission God has entrusted to you to steward.

That work begins here.

## **Reflection Questions**

1. When you think about your church's current governance, what emotions surface most often: confidence, anxiety, uncertainty, or trust? What might those emotions be revealing?
2. If your church needed to make a difficult decision tomorrow, would your current governance provide clarity or create confusion? Why?
3. Where does informal authority currently operate in your church, and how has it helped or hindered trust and ministry?
4. In what ways could clearer governance function as an act of pastoral care in your current context?

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Clifton, *Reclaiming Glory: Revitalizing Dying Churches* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2016), 68.