

Organizing for Mission

Local Church Governance in the Evangelical Covenant Church

When you enter a new home, you do not see the plumbing and wiring hidden behind the freshly constructed walls. However, that which is unseen is the exact source of making that home comfortable, convenient and efficient. Likewise, the good organization and smooth operation of a church at its best is largely unseen behind more visible aspects such as worship, children's ministries, outreach efforts, and ministries of compassion. Good "behind the scene" organizational and governing processes are indispensable to sustained accomplishment in mission.

This document introduces local church governance in the Evangelical Covenant Church. It will review key purposes for good governance, articulate central principles of congregational polity (polity = governance), identify basic characteristics of congregational polity as practiced in the Evangelical Covenant Church, and introduce the process for new churches gaining approval of their constitution and by-laws.

Key Purposes of Good Governing Documents

A well-crafted Constitution and By-law document accomplishes four primary functions.

1. Identity. The document is able to instill an enduring sense of identity by articulating key principles and processes that transcend changing circumstances and leadership.
2. Operation and Decision-Making. The document is able to clearly articulate specific processes for decision-making and operation so there is no ambiguity about who is empowered to take what actions under what circumstances. This allows for good operation and protects relationships.
3. Conflict management. By identifying processes for resolution of differences, the document protects a congregation from charges of unfair treatment on the part of any particular individual or group. It creates appropriate forums for the airing of differences and coming together in the spirit of unity.
4. Transition. By identifying processes to be undertaken during times of leadership transition, good documents allow for direction, continuity, and stability.

Central Characteristics to Congregational Polity

The story of the early Church in the New Testament is the story of a rapidly expanding movement seeking to both catalyze its mission and stabilize its advances. It sought to lengthen its external impact to reach new populations while at the same time strengthening its internal ability to manage itself. As a young, dynamic, unfolding movement, there is no unarguable singular pattern discernable in the New Testament for either local church governance or for how local churches related to one another. Instead, it is a picture of fluid development with varying patterns at varying times and places.

However, out of the Biblical witness, three basic models have emerged, all of which have Biblical and theological underpinnings. Groups have made particular choices for a variety of theological, historical, and practical reasons for why one particular model or another is reflective of their own identity.

The first category is episcopal, taken from the Greek word episkopos, or bishop. This model favors an external positional model of authority, where an office external to the congregation has strong influence or control over the affairs of a local congregation. The Roman Catholic Church and the Episcopal Church are examples of movements from this stream.

The second category is presbyterian, taken from the Greek word presbuteros, or elder. This model favors a specific governing group from within the congregation empowered to make decisions on behalf of the total congregation. The United Presbyterian Church and the Reformed Church of America are two examples from this stream.

The third category is congregational, based on the Pauline teaching that the Church is the Body of Christ. Christ alone is the Head. Each part of the Body is valuable and has a contribution to make toward the functioning of the whole. Likewise, each part has a responsibility to discern the “leading” of the head and to coordinate its actions with the rest of the Body. It therefore looks to the congregation acting as a whole as the center for discerning direction. This is the stream of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

Particular Marks of Congregational Polity in the Evangelical Covenant Church

The Covenant has a strong and abiding tradition of congregational polity. It is as much a part of our approach to faith and practice as a presbyterian approach is to Presbyterians and an episcopal approach is to Episcopalians. Indeed, our choice of the word “covenant” is deeply rooted in how we relate to one another: we are covenanted, mutually committed, to a spirit of collaboration, unity, and mutual respect in living out faith and ministry.

Here are some of the central ways congregational polity works itself out as practiced by the Covenant:

1. The core principle to congregational operation is this: the congregation retains authority and delegates responsibility. This means that the congregation reserves for itself certain specific actions and always reserves for itself final voice on any matter of its choice. However, for effectiveness and efficiencies, it likewise delegates responsibility to appropriate leadership positions. One of the central purposes, then, of a congregation’s Constitution and Bylaws is to articulate just what is delegated under what circumstances to what leadership. In the Covenant models, you will notice that varying amounts are delegated in varying ways.
2. In practice, the congregation retains for itself the following areas: establishing the nominating committee for the call of a pastor; the calling and dismissal of the pastor; the selection of lay leadership for defined and limited terms, the incurring of capital indebtedness, the approval of the budget, the approval of the reception and dismissal of members, the amending of the Constitution and Bylaws, and the right to final voice in any area it chooses to act.
3. In practice, the congregation delegates significant particular responsibilities to various ministry staff and board or committee structures (although these are called by various names in varying models), who are empowered to work within those areas.

In addition, there are certain marks of Covenant identity and position that are required of Constitution and Bylaws seeking approval:

1. The preamble to the denominational Constitution and Bylaws is also the preamble to the Constitution and Bylaws of local Covenant churches as a way to articulate a consistency of historical and theological context across the diversity of the Covenant.
2. The Covenant has always held that Scripture alone stands above any creedal interpretation or statement of faith. Therefore, the Covenant Confession of Faith regarding Scripture is the sole doctrinal description in the main body.
3. The name “Covenant” or “Evangelical Covenant” shall be in the name of the church.
4. In the event of a schism where competing claims to the property and assets of the congregations are under challenge by competing factions within the church, the dispute is resolved by the executive board of the regional conference of which that congregation is a member.
5. In the event of dissolution, the assets of the church revert to the regional conference of that church and to the Covenant. These are most commonly used to help in the planting of new congregations in that region so that out of the conclusion of ministry, the birth of others may result.
6. Areas of ministerial credentialing, care and discipline must conform to the Covenant Rules for the Ordered Ministry.
7. The Covenant believes that any person of appropriate giftedness and character is eligible for any leadership position in the church regardless of gender. Therefore, the document shall be styled in a permissive neutral voice, without references to gender.

Introducing Three Model Constitutions

The Covenant has developed a range of models that all meet the criteria for congregational polity. In applying the key principle that congregations retain authority and delegate responsibility, the three models differ in how much is delegated and how many are involved. At one end is the Board model. This delegates the least, involves the most people to carry out, and is relatively fixed in its design. At the other end is the Leadership Team model, which delegates the most, involves the least number of people, and has the most flexibility. In the middle is the Council model, which experiences some of the strength and weaknesses of the other two models.

The Board Model - Think of the toy series “The Transformers”. Through ingenious engineering, these toys are really two toys in one. What looks and plays like a jeep can with a few twists and turns be transformed into an airplane. Which is it – a jeep or an airplane? It is both. The Board system is like that. On the one hand, there are actually three (sometimes four) different individual boards that carry out specific functions. These are the Diaconate Board (spiritual care), the Trustee Board (property and fiscal matters), and the Christian Education Board (age level discipleship). Each of these individual boards carries out ministries in their respective areas. However, these three boards then combine (along with the officers of the Church), and are collectively transformed into the Church Board, which acts as the chief governing point between congregational meetings in areas assigned to it. This is the model with the longest history.

The Leadership Team Model - Think of a set of Tinker Toys. The round tinker toy is the anchor element. From that center are added spokes to other elements. As circumstances warrant, spokes from that hub can be added, replaced, or connected to additional elements. The overall effect is a strong center with flexible configurations. The Leadership Team is like that. The Leadership Team is

the round piece, providing a strong center point of coordination. To it are added ministry teams to carry out and accomplish specific ministries. More can be added as needed. Those no longer necessary can be removed.

The Council Model - Think of a mobile. Its rings are constantly moving, but in a fixed and connected orbit around a center point. The Council model is like that. The council provides a center point for coordination and balance. It is comprised of the officers of the church and the chairs of the various commissions. The commissions orbit around the council and carry out specific ministry areas. The “thread” between each commission and the council is the chair of each commission, who is a full participating member of both the church council and that ministry commission. It is in many ways a midpoint between the Board and Leadership Team models. This is the most commonly used model.

Electronic versions of model constitutions can be found on the Covenant web-site at:
www.covchurch.org/resource/model-constitutions-for-local-churches

The Approval Process

A congregation must have an approved constitution and by-laws fully consistent with the entirety of this document in order to be accepted into membership in the regional conference and the Evangelical Covenant Church. The following outlines the process for that approval.

1. The congregation researches which of the three model constitutions best fits its circumstances. These may be obtained from Start & Strengthen Churches.
2. The congregation particularizes a draft of one of those models for review. Broad and substantial conformity and patterning to the model is required. All areas must be consistent with the entirety of items delineated in this document. It is very important for the pastor and key leaders to consult with regional conference personnel or the National Team Leader of Church Planting prior to completing the first draft of your constitution. The deadline for submitting the draft is January 15 of each year.
3. The draft is then reviewed by the Constitutional Review Committee of the Covenant, consisting of the President, the Executive Minister of Start & Strengthen Churches and the National Team Leader of Church Planting. It is either approved or returned for changes. Notification generally comes by February 28 of each year.
4. The window for changes and final approval, if needed, is March 1 – March 30.
5. Assuming all other requirements are met, the church then proceeds to join the regional conference and the Covenant as a full member congregation

For more information, contact John Teter, National Team Leader of Church Planting for the Evangelical Covenant Church, at john.teter@covchurch.org, or phone 773-844-9433.