

## MentorNet #58

### **Don't Let Government Laws Over-ride God's Guidelines**

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Patterson recalls, “A Roman Catholic priest once scolded me for starting ‘unauthorized’ churches in his Honduran parish. He argued that our churches lacked legitimacy because no government had ever officially endorsed them.” Many Protestants make similar assumptions without realizing it. Western Christians often thank God for their freedom, rejoicing that their churches are not abused by a hostile government like in many eastern countries. But have well-intentioned governments in Western democracies also caused churches to be organized inadvertently in a harmful way? Lord, grant us wisdom and courage to answer this thorny question honestly!

### **The Situation**

We must admit some painful facts before we can think wisely about state control:

In the East, illegal, non-registered churches in countries such as China, North Korea, Bangladesh, Northern India, Myanmar, and others, are usually more energetic and win more people to Christ than do registered churches that have submitted to state control.

In the West, to get tax-free status and tax exemption for donors, governments require churches to incorporate or to register legally, to form a board of trustees that represents a church before the state, and to write bylaws that embody policies that assure adherence to state requirements. (Even professional scholars of ecclesiology often fail to discern how state-dictated policies often clash with Scriptural guidelines for church organization.)

The naming of officers for a specified term opens the door to an institutional mentality and structure. For example:

- Although Scripture affirms that gifts from God are permanent (Rom. 11:29), churches often elect shepherding elders for a specific term of months or years.
- Many congregations assume that their legal status and church constitution gives them the right to settle spiritual matters by majority vote in business meetings. Thus, uninformed believers often make decisions of a pastoral nature that should have been decided by godly, experienced elders. How many churches have suffered seriously because of petty squabbling during such business meetings!
- Church history mentions no church building for almost three centuries after Christ. The Book of Acts and Paul’s letters reveal that churches normally met in homes. The word ‘church’ (*ekklésia*) often meant a regional cluster of tiny house churches, which was neither a specific congregation nor the universal church. State requirements for incorporation or registration invariably move believers toward a ‘big church’ mentality. They need the trustees, a treasurer and statutes associated with a body larger than a house church. Instead, a ‘simple’ church should try to stay small enough for its members to practice the New Testament’s many ‘one another’ commands, such as “teach one another” (Col. 3:16).
- Samuel Wang speaks from his ample experience in China: “Whereas the (registered, ‘official’) TSPM churches take the government as their head, and apply its religious policy as their guideline for church management, the house churches have Jesus Christ as their Head and manage the church according to the principles set out in the Bible.”

## Remedial Action

*Large churches can operate on two levels*, one level that meets government requirements, and another level that provides shepherding according to the New Testament. To implement these two levels will require prayerful and perhaps painful adjustments; it is not easy to correct long-standing traditions and procedures.

*Small churches can unite as a regional body* that is big enough to meet state requirements, while still practicing New Testament guidelines. To do so requires courageous leaders who strongly confirm and thoroughly apply organizational principles from the New Testament.

## New Testament Organizational Guidelines

*Conscientious shepherds must lead*, or enable others to lead, small groups of some kind, as mentor Jethro advised his son-in-law Moses (Exodus 18). Such groups need to be small enough that all who are present can speak, exhorting, building up and consoling one another (1 Cor. 14:3, 24-26).

*Shepherding elders must share pastoral responsibilities between them*. For every professional, full-time, highly-trained pastor, there should also be dozens of lay, self-supported shepherds who care for their interactive small groups. A large church should develop some kind of cell groups which are tiny churches within the big church.

*Interactive church body life* as described in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 requires that believers having different spiritual gifts serve one another in a tightly-knit body. The institutional model of church often cancels out such service by creating specialized programs and departments, clustering those having the same gift. You must correct this problem by forming cell groups that include believers who have different gifts, and by fostering intensive interaction between groups.

*Church elders have at least five responsibilities* to their Lord Jesus Christ: 1) to teach pure doctrine, 2) to safe-guard unity, 3) to maintain order, 4) to keep finances honest, and 5) to protect from wolves. The tempter appeals to human flesh and distorts those five responsibilities into five fears, fears that sharing authority would 1) lead to false doctrine, 2) cause divisions, 3) compromise quality, 4) cost too much and 5) bring on criticism or persecution. Many churches' bylaws stipulate legal duties of church officers without even mentioning their biblical responsibilities. Even the "leaders" themselves often become trapped and severely impaired by the structures they build. A remedy is to give much more attention and authority to the historically-proven, biblical guidelines for overseeing God's flock that consistently bring about healthier churches.

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