FLEXIBILITY IN EMERGING LEADERSHIP PATTERNS

Rigid Western leadership patterns increasingly clash with more flexible, emerging leadership patterns where churches are growing and multiplying. Many have observed that God normally raises up shepherds and servants in new churches, as He promised in Ephesians 4:11-12. Missionaries and church planters should discern who those leaders are, and cooperate with the Holy Spirit in affirming and training those leaders, even if their new leadership patterns do not fit traditional ecclesiology.

Pastors and church planters who follow traditional, rigid patterns that overlook New Testament guidelines normally get noticeably poorer results. Such church planters often follow those outworn rules simply by default, not knowing anything else. The remedy, in general, is to follow the liberating New Testament guidelines for leadership that avoid common detrimental patterns. This list of common detrimental patterns also offers helpful remedies.

►**Guideline #1: Let anyone serve as a shepherd who meets biblical requirements (Titus 1:5-9).**
New believers who are family heads should start at once to shepherd their own families, doing what Scripture requires of any family head. Such family cells often grow quickly into simple churches, when permitted to do so by whatever form of governing structure exists. Paul had Titus appoint elders in towns in Crete (Titus 1:5). At that time those elders probably led house churches and mentored other new leaders in one or more house churches. The important thing was that Titus made sure that regional elders were guiding what needed to be developed in their area.

Delegate pastoral responsibilities to apprentice leaders. Past MentorNet articles have advocated for quickly appointing apprentice shepherds in new flocks and cells. Such shepherds might be rather recent believers who do not yet qualify to be ordained, so some call them "provisional elders" who might later become qualified to serve as ordained elders. That practice could clash with ecclesiology courses (the doctrine of the church) as taught in Western-type seminaries, for some schools base their teaching more on denominational traditions than on observing how flocks actually grow and reproduce in church planting movements that follow New Testament patterns more closely.

►**Guideline #2: Vary leadership patterns to fit local, current needs and field conditions.**
Follow what the Spirit of God has been doing, rather than strictly Western forms. Western Christian workers want to define the Biblical term 'church' in neat, distinct, consistent categories. However, church planting movements quickly make such definitions obsolete, for the church in an area simply is what it is. And elders in a church planting movement may serve one, or more than one, church; a simple, tiny house church may have more than one elder, or only one; and so on. In every case, elders are shepherding God's people!

Avoid dogmatic adherence to only one system of church leadership. Western systematic theology teaches three kinds of "governance": episcopal (Catholic and Anglican), presbyterian (Reformed and Methodist) and congregational (Baptist and Independent). In history, these three forms arose where civil governments practiced a corresponding form: episcopal in the Roman Empire, presbyterian in Scotland, and congregational among those who clamored for more democracy. There, theologians defined elders, overseers, pastors and deacons in rigid categories that fit the kind of governance that their denomination approved, classifying workers by Greek word definitions found in dictionaries rather than from New Testament practices. Unfortunately, such definitions created elite positions that power-hungry clergy sought after.

The New Testament offers a glimpse of all three of the classical forms of governance. Paul told Titus (1:5) to name elders in the cities of Crete, reflecting an episcopal form, for, as Paul clarified in the same verse, the churches were new, 'baby churches' that needed an experienced outside leader like Titus to establish and train their leaders. In Acts 15, elders from more mature churches gathered to deal with a common issue, reflecting presbyterian governance. In Acts 13:1-3, the Antioch believers commissioned leaders in a way that suggests congregational government in a mature church with

strong leaders, capable of self-government. These New Testament patterns all fit the conditions of the time and place, for "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Corinthians 3:17).

►**Guideline #3: Let all who have God-given gifts use them, without imposing man-made rules.**
Let believers test their gifting by serving in different ways in *new* churches or cells, in which there are always many openings for new workers. The New Testament allows new leaders to make mistakes; and all leaders do so. To demand 'excellence' in ministry quickly paralyzes God's work!

Be alert to recognize the God-given shepherding gift in new workers. Some Western traditions and categories let only professional clergymen lead churches, together with some kind of ruling board or council of elders, presbyters or deacons. Those leaders might be elected or appointed by another board, a bishop, or congregational vote; they seldom arise in congregations in the biblical way, by simply manifesting spiritual gifts and winning others to faith.

Many Western-style churches' by-laws stipulate the election of a certain number of church officers for a specified term of years. For example, a church constitution may decree a board of seven elders, elected to a term of three years. However, Scripture requires elders to serve as pastors (1 Peter 5:1-4), a gift-based ministry, and God may give the pastoral gift to only six people, or to eight! Furthermore, God might not take away the gift after the three years are over! Such man-made rules for leadership often displace Scriptural guidelines and eventually bring grief.

Guideline #4: Regional leaders adapt to local cultures or hostile authorities.
Let flexible, liberating leadership patterns develop on a regional level. Build local and regional church organization on whomever God has given as leaders. One of the best ways to do so is to develop interactive fellowship between churches and their members, avoiding elections, rules and documents that would turn such a regional body into a political entity. MentorNet #47 dealt with clusters of churches, pointing out how the New Testament used the word 'church' occasionally for several house churches. Western textbooks often limit the "church" to 1) a local congregation, house church or cell and 2) the universal body of Christ, which includes all believers, living and dead. However, in church planting movements, observations reveal that clusters of churches often work in close harmony, practicing the New Testament's interactive, 'one-another' commands not only within congregations, but also between them.

Much teaching about church leadership has arisen from the experience of Westerners in traditional denominations. Thus, Western missionaries, and non-western workers taught by Westerners, often discuss at length how to organize new churches. They typically set non-biblical standards for new leaders that might include Western-style education, fluency in an official language, budgets to ensure salaries, systematic doctrinal tests that reflect a unique view of their organization, and compliance with man-made requirements. Whilst none of those Western traditions may be "wrong" in all settings, making them requirements in church planting movements stifles the flow of the gospel and church planting where local believers do not, cannot or will not meet those Western standards.

Interactive clusters of cells or simple churches provide mutual accountability, encouragement and edification, proving consistently to be a powerful dynamic that keeps churches multiplying and leaders living holy lives. In contrast, observations show that congregations that work independently eventually become ingrown and legalistic about the rules that they set up for themselves.