

ACTS 6 PROJECT

The Well-Organized Church

Helping churches build strong legal foundations for effective ministry

About the Acts 6 Project

The *Acts 6 Project* is a nonprofit ministry that focuses on serving churches and church leaders. We guide churches through a process of developing Biblically and legally sound organizational documents (articles of incorporation, corporate charters, bylaws, etc.) as well as operating policies. Our approach is to use carefully drafted legal documents to establish organizational structures that reflect Biblical truth and sound legal principles. We come to this task as people who love deeply the institution of the Church as the Body of Christ and desire to honor and protect her.

This resource introduces you to the *Acts 6 Project* and explains how we use legal documents as a tool to promote 1) sound doctrine; 2) effective operation; and 3) congregational unity. It is divided into four parts:

- I. The Guiding Principles of the Acts 6 Project
- II. Observations Concerning the Dysfunctions of Certain Types of Governance Structures
- III. An Examination of the Biblical Principles of Church Governance and Leadership
- IV. A Description of the Acts 6 Project Process

Section 1: Guiding Principles

Guiding Principle #1: The Priority of the Gospel.

The first guiding principle of the Acts 6 Project is the priority of the Gospel. By this, we mean that there is nothing more important than proclaiming to all people the good news of Jesus. In the simplest terms, the Gospel is the good news that a Holy God has made a way for sinful humanity to be in a peaceful relationship with Him. Jesus (and Jesus alone) is that way. He suffered the wrath of God in our place so that we might be presented to God as holy and righteous. Those who believe in Jesus are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, as revealed in Scripture alone, for the glory of God alone. This a mystery that was hidden in the past but revealed in Christ to all who obey the Gospel. It is and must remain the priority of every faithful local church to proclaim the Good News of Jesus.

For as long as there has been a Gospel, there have been efforts to undermine it. Sometimes, the challenge to the Gospel as a direct contradiction. But more often, attacks on the Gospel come in the form of corrupting influences that seek to alter the message. For example, when someone begins to recast the Gospel as the good news of Jesus plus another issue, the Gospel has been corrupted and becomes “another Gospel.” Examples of this phenomenon include promoting a particular political ideology, overemphasizing good works through social action, advancing a social justice agenda grounded in Critical Theory or some other worldly ideology.

Section 1: Guiding Principles

Guiding Principle #1: The Priority of the Gospel. (cont.)

Regardless of the form in which the corruption of the Gospel appears, it is still damaging to the Great Commission. For this reason, the Acts 6 Project has set as its first priority the proclamation of the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ. Only when a church gets this issue right can it provide effective teaching and practical guidance concerning secondary issues.

Section 1: Guiding Principles

Guiding Principle #2: The Authority of the Bible.

The second guiding principle of the Acts 6 Project is the authority of the Bible. We affirm in all respects the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*. We believe that the Bible is understandable and sufficient to guide us to the truth. When read with care and diligence, the Bible is an infallible guide. Whenever it speaks to an issue, it does so with final and unequivocal authority. By the same token, when the Bible does not directly address an issue, we recognize the liberty of faithful Believers to apply Biblical principles in accordance with their individual convictions. See Romans 14.

Beyond being a resource for living the Christian life, the Bible is Word of God. It is not words about God written by men. Rather, it is words from God delivered through men. As the familiar passage in Hebrews proclaims, “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Hebrews 4:12 NASB1995.

Another familiar passage speaks to the practical application of Scripture: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” 2 Timothy 3:16 NASB1995.

Section 1: Guiding Principles

Guiding Principle #2: The Authority of the Bible.(cont.)

Too often, those with a low view of Scripture argue that it is too difficult to understand or that it is subject to a variety of subjective interpretations. These arguments are nothing more than disingenuous ways of rebelling against the authority of Christ by rejecting His word.

We know that a subjective approach to the Bible is simply wrong, as explained by the Apostle Peter: “So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” 2 Peter 1:19-21 NASB1995.

For these reasons, we diligently seek to ground everything we do at the Acts 6 Project in Scripture, something that we refer to as “Biblically-informed legal advice.”

Section 1: Guiding Principles

Guiding Principle #3: The New Testament Principles of Church Governance.

The third guiding principle of the Acts 6 Project is that the New Testament speaks with clarity regarding the principles of church governance. When we first undertook to serve churches in a focused way, we started with a completely blank slate and then carefully reviewed the New Testament from Matthew to Revelation to identify passages on church governance and leadership. We then analyzed those passages from a legal perspective, with a view toward developing a Biblically-sound set of legal recommendations.

It has been encouraging to see churches implement our recommendations in ways that promote unity and stability. One pastor told us that his decision to accept a call to the church that he now serves was strongly influenced by the way the church's bylaws (which we drafted) allocated organizational authority to the pastors, elders, deacons and members in accordance with the spiritual responsibility of each group. He also appreciated the fact that each person's organizational influence was tempered by appropriate accountability.

We are aware of instances in which our legal documents have been used as a tool to resolve serious conflict. Unsurprisingly, faithfully applying the Biblical principles of church governance and leadership to organizational documents is a worthwhile endeavor.

Observations Concerning the Dysfunctions of Certain Types of Governance Structures

Where two or more are gathered, there is always the potential for conflict. It is an unavoidable reality of life in a fallen world. Whether the issue is an external threat or internal division, a church's organizational structure plays a significant role in the outcome. Unsurprisingly, well-organized churches are better equipped to respond to challenges than those that aren't. Being "well-organized" means structuring your church around two sets principles: 1) the Biblical principles of church governance and leadership that are clearly laid out in the New Testament and 2) state and federal legal principles concerning religious liberty and the operation of nonprofit organizations.

In contrast to churches that are deliberate about applying Biblical principles of church governance, there are many that favor denominational tradition or individual preference. Those grounded in preference tend not to navigate conflict as well. As a result, too many churches fail to achieve their divine calling of proclaiming the Gospel and making disciples. In our experience, the problem is often related to governance and leadership.

In the next section, we identify some of the dysfunctions of what we call the "Hyper-Congregational Church Model." After that, we offer a very effective solution to this problem.

Dysfunctions of the Hyper-Congregational Church

Over the years of serving churches through the Acts 6 Project, we have observed many models of dysfunction. Most often, the dysfunction exists in the setting of a church that functions according to a purely democratic model in which all decisions are made by congregational vote. Usually, these votes takes place at either regular or specially-called business meetings of the members. We call this form of governance “Hyper-Congregational.” It is not a flattering term, nor is it intended to be. “Democracy” is a good model for civil government that has its place in institutions of the state, but it is not a Biblical concept for church governance. In fact, it is a model that is fraught with problems in a local church setting.

We have identified what we call “Dysfunctions of the Hyper-Congregational Church,” examples of which include:

- The Organizational Instability Problem. The Hyper-Congregational church is inherently unstable from an organizational perspective.
- The Insecure Pastor Problem. Pastors of Hyper-Congregational churches are often insecure about their ministry positions because they are only one off-the-rails meeting or one congregational vote from being terminated (even in the absence of misconduct).

Dysfunctions of the Hyper-Congregational Church

- The Discouraged Shepherd Problem. The Hyper-Congregational model undermines the shepherding role of pastors and other senior leaders.
- The Inversion of Spiritual Responsibility and Organizational Authority. The Hyper-Congregational church embodies an inversion of authority because those with the greatest spiritual responsibility (pastors, elders, deacons) usually have the least organizational authority, while those with least responsibility (members) have ultimate organizational authority.
- The Docile Leader Problem. The Hyper-Congregational model rewards docile leadership while punishing leaders who address difficult issues in a direct manner.
- The Denominational Tradition Problem. The Hyper-Congregational model elevates denominational tradition over application of clear Biblical principles of church governance and leadership.
- The Bully's Veto Problem. The Hyper-Congregational model empowers those who are willing to stir up dissension in order to advance their agendas.

Dysfunctions of the Hyper-Congregational Church (cont.)

- The Factionalism Problem. The Hyper-Congregational model promotes the development of factions who become voting blocs at business meetings over controversial issues.
- The Involuntary Church-Planting Problem. The Hyper-Congregational model leads to church splits, which we call “Involuntary Church Planting,” because the inability to manage conflict effectively leads people to separate themselves from the dysfunction.

Simply put, the Hyper-Congregational Church model just doesn't work very well. It's not hard to figure out why. The reason is that this model fails to apply clearly stated Biblical principles of church governance and leadership.

The Acts 6 Project helps churches move beyond structural dysfunction that flows out of unhelpful traditions. We have seen pastors, church leaders and church members benefit from applying New Testament principles for church governance in a practical way, reducing dysfunction as much as one can in a sin-cursed world. Given the eternal impact of what the Church has been called to do, church governance and leadership are matters worthy of careful attention, whether you are a pastor, a church leader or simply a faithful member who wants to see your church flourish.

Churches That Benefit Most From The Acts 6 Project

The *Acts 6 Project* is specifically designed to meet the needs of:

- Local churches that are self-governed and nonhierarchical.
- Churches with a desire to build the Kingdom of God through proclamation of the Gospel and the discipleship of believers.
- Churches that hold to a high view of the authority of Scripture.
- Churches with strong leaders who have earned the love and respect of the people they lead (or who are preparing to call such a leader).

In the next section, we will examine the key New Testament principles of church governance.

Part III: New Testament Principles of Church Governance

Acts 6:1-7 (ESV)

[1] Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. [2] And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. [3] Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. [4] But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." [5] And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. [6] These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. [7] And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Part III: New Testament Principles of Church Governance

#1 The Necessity of Godly Leadership

Acts 6:1: “And Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution...”

Anyone who has been around church for any length of time knows that conflict is simply a part of the dynamic. As we like to say, “Where two or more are gathered, there will be disagreement.”

Too many Christians attempt to deal with conflict by trying to avoid it or by acting as though it does not exist. This is obviously an unrealistic and ineffective strategy because conflict avoidance only magnifies the underlying issues.

In this passage from Acts 6, we see that conflict was present from the earliest days of the Jerusalem Church. We can also see some useful principles for dealing with conflict in the context of a local church. The first such principle is that in order to successfully navigate conflict, godly leadership is an absolute necessity. Without it, a church is almost certainly doomed to fail.

Part III: New Testament Principles of Church Governance

#1 The Necessity of Godly Leadership (cont.)

This passage also reveals that conflict doesn't just arise in the churches that aren't doing well. In fact, a growing church that is making a difference for the Kingdom is more likely to experience conflict than one that is stagnant or even dying a slow death.

This principle of the necessity of godly leadership underscores the importance of selecting leaders who possess the right spiritual qualities. We have a resource, available upon request, that helps churches identify the qualities that leaders should possess. It is a synthesis of I Timothy 3, Titus 1 and 1 Peter 5.

Beyond selecting the right people, it is important to implement an organizational structure that empowers leaders to act. Helping churches through the process of selecting and empowering godly leaders is a critical aspect of what the Acts 6 Project is all about.

Part III: New Testament Principles of Church Governance

#2 Characteristics of Godly Leadership

Acts 6:2: “And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.”

The second principle that we see in this passage is that godly leaders have certain characteristics that make them successful, including:

- A willingness to respond to conflict decisively
- The discipline to remain focused on the mission.
- An approach that is characterized by openness, directness and discretion.

Godly leaders demonstrate wisdom that avoids the pitfalls of conflict avoidance or conflict denial. They understand the importance of their mission and are unwilling for anything to thwart that mission.

Part III: New Testament Principles of Church Governance

#3 Benefits of Broad Participation

Acts 6:3-4: “Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

The third principle in this passage is that godly leaders encourage the participation of those whom they are leading in major matters (See 1 Peter 5:1-5). The ideal approach has the following elements:

- Major decisions in a church should be made under the direction of the leadership.
- Major decisions in a church should also include broad participation from the membership.
- How a church approaches major decisions is a good indication of its organizational health.

Part III: New Testament Principles of Church Governance

#4 Synergy of Leadership and Participation

Acts 6:5-6: “And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.”

The fourth principle in this passage is that there is synergy between godly leadership and appropriately-managed broad participation.

- The usual result of decisive, focused and open leadership accompanied by broad participation is peaceful resolution of conflict.
- Good leadership respects the role of members and godly members submit to godly leaders.
- This illustrates how different parts of the body work together to achieve optimal functionality.

Part III: New Testament Principles of Church Governance

#5 The Healthy Church in Action

Acts 6:7: “And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

The fifth and final principle that we discern from this passage is that the peaceful resolution of conflict based on the actions of godly leaders and the cooperation of members shows the healthy church in action.

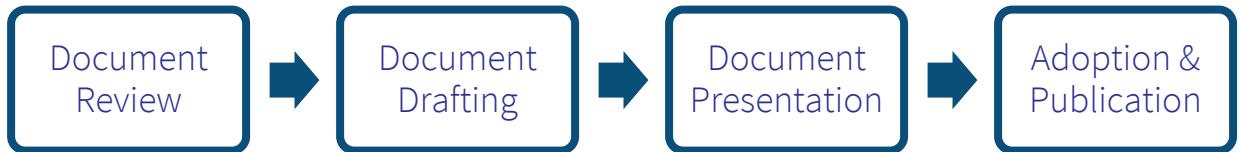
- The ideal is a well-balanced allocation of authority and responsibility.
- Effective, godly leadership accompanied by broad participation achieves balance and leads to successful execution of the mission.
- The mission is to obey the Great Commandment and to carry out the Great Commission.

The healthy church in action is what the Acts 6 Project strives to bring about.

Part IV: A Description of the Acts 6 Project Process

4-Steps to the Acts 6 Project Process

The Acts 6 Project is ultimately a process through which we help churches develop and maintain Biblically and legally sound organizational structures. There are four major steps in the process:



For a more detailed description of the process, or to request a free evaluation of your existing organizational documents, go to the Acts 6 Project website.

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