**Leadership Structure can Make or Break Vision**.

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.

1 Timothy 3:1.

Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.

1 Timothy 3:8.

Two guiding principles shape my thoughts here. First, the structure is not as critical as function. Second, there are better biblical grounds for some structures than others but, again, how they operate is more important than the organizational framework. Let me explain. The models below are the basic variations I run into, but there are others. The key is how decisions are being made and if vision is actually shaping how those decisions are being made.

**Church Body and Leadership framework**. There has always been a struggle understanding the role of the Body in the relationship with the leadership in the church. The Body has the responsibility to appoint or elect (however they do it) individuals to leadership roles in the church. Since the history of CBA (now Venture Church Network) was forged under the activity of theological liberalism there has always been a “worry” about a single person having too much unilateral control who could then lead the church into heretical beliefs. Some churches have tried to solve this by creating numerous Boards and Committees to keep each other accountable. The end result is often disastrous because few are committed to vision; they end up being more committed to holding others accountable. The hard part for many churches is truly entrusting the leaders they choose to discern the mind of Christ and present His vision for that Body. Too many churches have a political mindset of these leadership Boards or entities and the most important thing is to provide a great deal of balance to protect the church from one person having too much control. *Accountability* is the guiding principle of most churches. Often the “leadership” has to take (virtually) everything back to the church body for a vote. This problem has a “we the people” picture of authority in the church. I will appeal to you that this is not a biblical model. The church is not a democracy, because the church exists under the direct authority of Christ, who is the head of His Body.

**Pastor and Elder Board**: A senior or lead pastor and Elders. Pastors are often “first among equals” because they are full time and usually everyone else is part time and volunteer. The key is transparency and the ability to work towards the “mind of Christ” not personal preferences. The Bible clearly speaks about Elders, and they are the fiduciary (I know that is a trustee term, but I will address this below) first and foremost for serving Christ and His purpose of the church and secondly, to serve the Body of Christ. Practically, they shepherd the flock, protect sound doctrine, equip, and empower the Body of Christ. The problem is that if this is the only Board in the church, they can end up dealing with finances, building repairs, resources for programs and even running programs themselves and doing very little of what Elders ought to be doing. That leaves the Lead Pastor doing all that shepherding, vision casting, and discipling, with everything falling on his shoulders. Like Jethro instructed Moses, this is NOT good, and everything will wear out. What is needed here is at least deacons to whom the load of responsibility can be delegated.

**Pastor and Deacon Board**. Some churches have Senior/Lead Pastor who works with a deacon Board. They interpret the Scriptures that there *only* needs to be one pastor/Elder and the deacons help carry out the responsibility of the ministry. This can work but most often the “Deacon Board” handle finances, programs and ministry and look after the building (someone has to do it), and the Senior Pastor ends up doing all the shepherding, vision casting, discipling, and care for the Body. In unhealthy situations the deacons see themselves primarily as keeping the pastor accountable rather than helping him with shepherding and discipling the Body. This is not about city churches vs. rural churches, nor is it about big churches vs. little churches. This is always about *teamwork* and *church health* so the mission of Christ can be carried out without distractions, getting bogged down in people’s personal preferences, or overloaded with too few trying to do too much. The danger is often that the church board exists not for mission, but for managing the programs and ministries inside the church and keeping the pastor accountable for doing what the Board wants. The Board becomes a “decision-making” Board who tell the pastor what he needs to be doing, rather than a shepherding, disciple-making Board who are actively involved in ministry. If there is clear transparency and teamwork, a healthy board goes beyond these things to actually helping but “just keeping the pastor accountable” usually ends badly.

**Pastors, Deacons, and Trustee**. I had a leader in our church tell me once they could show me there was no such thing as paid staff in the Bible, particularly the New Testament. I responded by saying I could show him that was not true, but I also challenged him there was no such thing as Trustees in the N.T. He came back to me a couple of weeks later and concluded from his own Bible study that Elders were the primary authority when it came to leadership boards and committees.

We actually have three primary leadership groups in our church: Elders, Trustee and Deacons. I love our leadership structure because we have the right people in the right roles, there is tremendous transparency and discussion between them and we are really clear what the role (authority) each group has, or even more importantly, what authority they do not have.

We are really clear about who does what. We have an Elder led, congregational affirmed structure. **Elders** are chosen by the congregation to be under the authority of Christ to watch over the Body of Christ. They are responsible for vision, shepherding, caring for the flock, disciple-making, ministry development, sound doctrine and evangelism – in other words they make sure the church fulfills *Christ’s call on the church in the world*. **Deacons** are chosen to look after programs, lead different groups in the church and *their role is to help the Elders implement* those structures that serve the Body. **Trustee** are assigned to watch over finances, repair and replacement of our building, help administrate our budget, benefits and salaries for staffing, offerings, and *provide the resources through the budgeting process to help the ministries carry out the strategic vision the Elders believe God wants the church to implement*. These groups are very transparent with one another, and the Body. The Trustee are responsible for *informing* the Elders of what our resources can do but they do not have authority over the Elders to decide what ministries should be done or not. They do not have the authority to say they will not fund any ministry the Elders believe the church ought to implement. I have seen too many situations where one Board (e.g. the Trustee / Deacons) uses money as leverage to control the Elders because they do not like the ministries the Elders want to implement.

When a leadership group tries to do too much, or they are not delegating things properly, then everything gets bogged down. I know of churches where the “Elder Board” tries to handle finances, building repair, shepherding, running the programs. Unless you have some super talented (and humble) people in these roles there is a constant battle for setting priorities and who gets to decide what needs to be done. This is exactly how political battles bury the church under a mountain of infighting over who has the authority to decide what is going to get done IN the church. The other problem that I have already suggested above, is that the Elders never get around to doing what the Bible says they should do, because they are constantly over-managing things they should delegate to others.

Often when the church is not fulfilling the mission of Christ to *make disciples of all ethnic groups*, one of the primary reasons is that the leadership are in an unhealthy conflict with our leadership groups who are constantly fighting over what needs to get done and who has the final say about getting things done. That is how vision is decimated by an unhealthy church leadership.

In His grace,

Brad Little