

# CAN YOU RELATE TO THIS?

**W**hen my wife and I first began to serve in a church together, we had a passion for the Lord, but were very young, inexperienced, and ill-equipped. The first church where I served as a student pastor didn't even have running water, and my wife was still in her late teens.

After graduating from seminary, when we were called to our first full-time church position, the staff consisted of a volunteer music director in her 60s, a part-time secretary and me. That was it. I was young and idealistic. All I wanted to do was serve in a church where the truth of the Scriptures could be presented in a relevant way. I wanted to see lives affected for all of eternity by Jesus Christ. During our 11 years of service there, the church experienced uninterrupted growth, but about five years into that pastorate we ran into a vicious power struggle that I had never anticipated. The hostility that we experienced almost wrecked our lives.

About half way through that pastorate I was confronted by an extremely influential and self-appointed lay leader who felt that my time of service in that church was over. He met with me privately and let me know in no uncertain terms that it was time for my wife, young children and me to move on. Later, I discovered that he had done the very same thing to my three predecessors! When I didn't accommodate his demands, things got ugly, and I must admit that my courage wavered for about a week. We knew that the Lord did not redeem humanity for His church to function in such disarray.

It was during this time of insecurity that I called my elderly, widowed mother

and asked her if my wife, three children and I could move into her basement if I were fired. Unfortunately, many pastors are, and have been, faced with this type of humiliation—and for no good reason. My wife and I prayed through this ordeal and resolved that the Lord wanted us to remain faithful and strong. During this time of turmoil, we never attempted to move to another church by distributing my résumé to those within our circles of influence. We stayed where we were, faced the challenges head-on and led the church through that conflict. It was only then that that little church began to grow well.

Are you able to relate to this struggle? Did the Lord call you into His service and did you believe with all of your heart and mind and soul that He wanted you to make a real difference for Him, but the fruit of a poor church structure almost wrecked your future? Have you ever come to the end of your ministerial rope in a local church setting? Have you asked, “God, isn’t there a better way to accomplish Your mission in the church?”

It was out of this quandary that I began to search for answers. I couldn’t find them in books; there’s almost nothing in print that is relevant to this matter. So many denominational leaders claim that their brand of Christianity is based upon

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the total adequacy of the Scriptures, and yet so many churches seem to follow secular models in the area of church structure. I was also surprised to learn that very few other pastors have studied biblical church structure carefully. Yes, I know that a book on church structure may not be the attention-grabbing topic of the day, but if you can relate to what I’ve just described, then this may be one of the most pivotal books you’ll ever read.

Now, back to the story. Just as we were getting ready to make the transition to a biblical church structure, we sensed the Lord calling me to become the senior pastor of a church in Fort Smith, Arkansas. This church had a distinguished past but, unfortunately, it had been caught up in a series of conflicts. Their most recent crisis had made them very ready for a different church structure. I didn’t have all the answers, but I was well on the way to developing a model that was biblical and effective. Fortunately, this church was filled with many competent, godly, supportive, intelligent people who helped take something good and make it even better. Fifteen months after arriving there, they had a new constitution and bylaws under which the congregation operated very well and efficiently. With those

issues settled, we were able to focus on the real mission of the church.

After seven wonderful years in Fort Smith, a gentleman whom we had never met or even talked to on the phone got my résumé from a third party and gave it to the Pastor Search Committee of a church in suburban Atlanta, Georgia. After declining their overtures for almost a year, in April of 2005, we began our ministry in this new setting.

Reviewing their constitution and bylaws wasn't the first thing on my radar, but the church leadership told me they knew it needed revising. They were simply waiting for a new senior pastor before tackling such an important project. After looking at them, I learned that, on several levels, they truly did need to be redone.

The church elected a task force to draw up a biblical church structure. This group of men and women, with a wide range of backgrounds, interests and professional expertise worked tirelessly with our ministerial staff to make sure all the bases were covered in a God-honoring way. They produced superb documents, and the congregation approved them. If only their constitution and bylaws had always been that way!

There were huge challenges and a lot of personal pain during our early days there. But there were also many godly men and women who had vision and who worked tirelessly to move forward in building an even better church. It was good to know that the structure on which we were now building was more biblically sound than ever before.

Although we hate to admit it, many of our churches are in a mess relationally and organizationally. Examples are so varied, but these messes are typically caused by selfishness—some members want their pet project promoted and others want their own plans adopted. Still others have a personal agenda or are concerned with issues of authority.

We all see the reports. They come out almost every year. The firings of pastors are at or near record levels. Have you ever noticed that one of the top “reasons” for these dismissals has to do with who is in charge—the issue of authority? Both pastors and lay church leaders have seen the dysfunction, felt it, heard of it, experienced it, and even smelled it to the point of becoming sickened by it. The grief and pain from this dysfunction have caused many church leaders to just give up and walk away in search of something better. This tragic reality is especially embarrassing to admit to our detractors and to those who are far from God. At the same time, there's something about our churches that I love and can't stop loving, and that something is actually Someone, Jesus Christ, who gave His own life for the

church that He might present her one day as the perfectly adorned bride of Christ.

Pastors and church leaders, *one of the biggest heartaches you and I face is fighting a non-biblical church structure that hinders us from accomplishing what God has called us to do.* The fruit of improper church structure can drain your enthusiasm and kill your vision faster than almost anything else. These challenges lead to low morale

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and discouraged leadership among our ranks. You need hope that something can be done about the dysfunction around you; this book may be the tool you so desperately need to turn that dysfunction into health. If you're a missionary or church planter who has the privilege of building a church from scratch, then this book may be the tool you need to do it correctly right from the beginning.

I need to mention something very important, however: *A proper church structure does not ensure spiritual or numerical growth; all it does is facilitate healthy growth. It's only the Holy Spirit who can bring people into a relationship with Jesus Christ.* But when people experience that relationship with Jesus Christ and come together in local congregations for worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry and outreach, it can be magnetic if it's "done decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40).