



On June 7, 2010, the Deacons of Mount Vernon Baptist Church agreed to recommend a new Constitution to the Church body. This recommendation comes after months of discussion and prayer. Now this discussion comes to the Church body as a whole. Please join us in prayer as we seek to discern God's will for His Church.

PROPOSED CONSTITUTION FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. What is a Church Constitution?

It is a document that addresses how we are organized as a Church. Sometimes this document is called By-Laws. The Bible, ultimately, is our governing document. However, we are helped by having a Statement of Faith (what we believe), a Church Covenant (how we agree to live), and a Church Constitution (how we are organized).

2. What's the difference between this Constitution and our current one?

There are two main differences. First, the proposed Constitution says that we will be led by elders—a group of men, most *not* in the paid employ of the Church. Second, we will have a group of Deacons whose service is tied to a particular task or duty.

3. What is our present leadership structure?

We currently have a Leadership Team (which consists of the Senior Pastor, some pastoral staff, the Deacon Officers, and the chairmen of the Finance and Personnel Committees); a body of Deacons (who meet each month, serve in many ways, and function as the Church's governing board); Standing Committees (Finance, Personnel, Nominating, and Missions); and several Ministry Teams.

4. What about the Congregation?

The Congregation is and will remain the ultimate authority (under Christ) for MVBC. Matters of church leadership, doctrine, membership, finances, and other major matters will continue to come before the Church as a whole for our corporate consideration.

5. Why the change?

As we read the New Testament, it seems clear that congregations had more than one elder serving as the overseers and shepherds of the church—and we have no reason to think they were all full-time or paid! One of the best places to see this is in Acts 20. When Paul says goodbye to the elders of the Church in Ephesus, they are referred to as “elders” (v. 17), “overseers,” (v. 28), and “shepherds” (v. 28). The current Deacons believe that we should adopt the biblical model of Elders and Deacons – Elders having ministry oversight and Deacons taking responsibility for specific needs.

6. If local churches are supposed to have *elders*, why do we have *pastors*?

“Pastor” is really just another word for elder. Technically, pastor is an English word derived from the Greek word for “shepherd.” But in the New Testament, “elder,” “overseer” and

“shepherd” are all used interchangeably—as the Acts passage demonstrates. So, the Bible gives us several titles to describe one biblical office.

7. Will all of our pastors serve as Elders?

Not necessarily. The Constitution only requires that the Senior Pastor serve on the Council of Elders. However, the Congregation may ultimately decide that other pastoral staff members should serve as Elders, too.

8. What, exactly, will the Elders do?

Under the authority of Christ and the Congregation, Elders will oversee and shepherd the flock. They ensure, with God’s help, that the teaching of the church is pure, that the members of the church are spiritually cared for, and that the mission of the church is accomplished. Much of this work is presently being accomplished by a combination of pastoral staff, Leadership Team, and Deacons. Now that work of overseeing the ministry will be accomplished by the Elders.

9. What qualifies a man to be an Elder?

Most of the qualifications have to do with his integrity, and they are listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. However, the two qualifications that are unique to the office of Elder are that he *not* be a new believer (1 Tim. 3:6) and that he be able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2). “Able to teach” does not necessarily mean he has to be gifted to preach on a Sunday morning, it means that he is a man that others regularly come to in order to understand and apply the Bible better.

10. How many Elders would we have and how long would they serve?

The proposed Constitution requires that we have a minimum of seven elders—and the majority cannot be paid staff. Any elder who is also a pastor on staff would not have a term limit. Because of the heavy responsibility, and in order to continually raise up men to serve in this office, non-paid elders would start with a term of three-years. After that term they would be eligible for a vote of reaffirmation by the Congregation and allowed to serve another three-year term, if so desired. After two, three-year terms, an elder must take a one year sabbatical before he is eligible to serve again in that office.

11. How would a Council of Elders differ from the current Leadership Team?

The Elders would be devoted to oversight and shepherding whereas the present Leadership Team is, according to our present By-Laws, purely devoted to administration. Also, the Leadership Team makes recommendations directly to the Deacons whereas the Elders would make recommendations directly to the Congregation.

12. If we have Elders and Deacons, what happens to the Leadership Team?

Upon the election of at least seven Elders, the Leadership Team would be dissolved.

13. Under the proposed Constitution, how would Elders be selected?

Every year, the Council of Elders would solicit nominations for Elders from the Congregation. When appropriate the Elders would recommend to the Congregation men they suggest be added to the Elder body. These men must meet the biblical qualifications of an elder laid out in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

14. How do our Deacons function today?

Our Deacons set the priorities of the Church by being the final stop for the Church Budget before it reaches the Congregation. Our Deacons think through matters of membership and church

discipline. Many of these are elder-type activities. But our Deacons are also servants. They visit the sick and the homebound. They meet the physical needs of struggling members. They collect the offering, and generally make themselves available to meet the practical needs of the church body.

15. What would Deacons under the proposed Constitution do?

Instead of having the responsibility of a board of governors, Deacons would be responsible for a specific task. So, for example, we would have a Deacon who devotes himself to making sure guests and members are greeted on Sunday morning—a Deacon of Greeting. We would have a Deacon who devotes himself to tracking our expenses and preparing a church budget—a Deacon of Finance. We would have a Deacon who devotes himself to meeting the needs of members in crisis—A Deacon of Member Care, and so on.

16. What would happen to the present Deacon body?

Some of the men may serve as Deacons under the new Constitution, with responsibility for a particular ministry. Other men may serve as Elders. The present Deacon body, which meets monthly and has general oversight over the Congregation, would be replaced by Deacons with responsibility for specific tasks—though those Deacons would still meet together at least once a quarter for prayer and encouragement.

17. How would Deacons be selected?

The Elders would solicit from the Congregation the names of men qualified to serve as Deacons. Then the Elders would think through the ministries a Deacon would need to administer. Finally, the Elders would recommend to the Congregation a particular Deacon to meet a particular ministry need. The Congregation would then have the opportunity to reflect not only on that Deacon's suitability for the office of Deacon in general, but his suitability for that ministry in particular.

18. How many Deacons would we have?

There is no limit on the number of Deacons we could recognize. It simply depends on the needs and opportunities that present themselves. However, the proposed Constitution does require that we recognize Deacons to meet the objectives of our current standing committees as well as several other ministries necessary to our daily functions.

19. What happens to our existing, Standing Committees?

The duties of the Standing Committees would be distributed among the Elders and Deacons.

20. Does that mean we won't have Committees?

Not exactly. Take the Deacon of Finance, for example. He would be encouraged to bring together a team of people to work with him, the Treasurer, and the staff. They would share the burden of tracking expenses, preparing a budget, and presenting it to the Congregation. But under the oversight of the Elders (and ultimately the Congregation) it would be that Deacon's responsibility to make it happen. This is much like what happens with the chairmen of committees today. The Chairman takes responsibility for the overall task but leans on others to share the work.

21. What happens to our existing Ministry Teams?

Some of them would become the ministry of a Deacon who could gather members to help him serve. For example, we currently have a Baptism Ministry Team. The Elders would recommend a Deacon to take charge of that ministry and he could involve others to serve as well. It is more than likely that whomever is presently serving in that capacity would be called upon to continue that service.

22. Does every Ministry Team have to be led by a Deacon?

No. Ministry Teams may currently be led by men and women, who are not Deacons. This will still be the case under the proposed Constitution. We are simply suggesting that instead of Deacons being responsible for the ministry in general, they be responsible for a ministry in particular.

23. Can women be Elders?

The Bible explicitly prohibits a woman from serving in the Church as an Elder. This is clear from 1 Timothy 2:12.

24. Can women be Deacons?

A biblical case can be made for Deaconesses. However, the current Deacons discussed whether it is biblical for a woman to serve as a Deaconess and decided that now is not the time to pursue this question. That does not mean that they won't serve! Ministry Teams will still often be led by women—just as they are now.

25. I've not heard of Baptist churches having elders, is this a new thing?

It was not at all uncommon for Baptist churches of the nineteenth-century to have elders. Perhaps in keeping with the model of an increasingly corporate America, it became more common for local churches to have one lead pastor—a CEO of sorts, and a board of directors—the Deacons. However, many churches are rediscovering their Baptist roots and now have Elders—but under the guidance of the Congregation.

26. How do we move forward?

For now, we enter into a period of prayer, teaching, and conversation. The Deacons and pastors at MVBC have been working through this for months—some for years. However, we want there to be plenty of time for the Congregation as a whole to be not only familiar with the proposed change, but supportive. For that reason, the next several months will present opportunities for presentations and discussion in Shepherding Group classes, at Churches in Conference, at specially-called Constitution Conversations and, where appropriate, from the pulpit. We are striving for unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3).

RECENTLY ADDED QUESTIONS & ANSWERS (7/29/10)

27. Why do so many Southern Baptist churches seem to be moving in the direction of plural elder leadership?

In a sense, SBC churches are actually behind the curve. Conservative Baptists, located predominately in the NW, have had elders for year. It is important to remember, though, that elders are not foreign to SBC churches. William B. Johnson, the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention, advocated plural eldership in the early part of the 19th century. John L. Dagg, a well-respected Southern Baptist theologian of the 19th century, wrote a book on church government advocating plural eldership and deacon service. (It was published by the Southern Baptist Publication Society – LifeWay of its time – in 1858.)

As the century progressed, two alarming trends developed. First, a trend away from Scripture. Many American Bible students adopted a critical approach to Scripture that did not take divine inspiration seriously. As a result, what the Bible said became less and less important. Second, there was a trend toward efficiency within the Southern Baptist Convention as a whole

and its churches. “Efficiency” was the buzzword of the first 25 years of the 20th century. (Commission groups were appointed to determine the means for “securing the highest efficiency” in the SBC. One commissioned group called for “more business in religion.”) This same business efficiency was adopted in churches with the pastor as the CEO and the deacons as the board of directors. That model stuck throughout the 20th century.

Toward the end of the 20th century there was a recovery of the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture. It had been lost in too many churches and SBC institutions. When it was found, there was a recommitment to Scripture. (SBC pastors like Charles Stanley and Adrian Rogers led this recovery.) Southern Baptists began paying more and more attention to what the Bible said, and what did they find? New Testament churches were overseen by more than one elder. Pastors began to write about it, preach on it, and advocate it. So a decade later (mid-1990s) many Southern Baptist churches began appointing elders to oversee the church. Even today, many newly planted Southern Baptist churches constitute themselves with plural eldership.

28. Is elder leadership consistent with the doctrine of the priesthood of believers?

The question is rooted in the right appreciation for congregationalism. Congregationalism is a model of church leadership where the congregation, under Christ, is its own authority. The congregation is made of believers. Those believers have real authority since they make up the congregation.

The best answer to this question comes from the Apostle Peter. He lays out the priesthood of believers in 1 Peter 1:5, “You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood.” So a local church is, in a sense, full of priests with a priestly ministry to God and one another! But then Peter goes on to explain how even these “priests” have leaders in a local church. 1 Peter 5:1-3, “To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ’s sufferings and one who will also share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.” So there in one book of the Bible we have the doctrine of the priesthood of believers and the doctrine of the plurality of elders. Both are present in the local church. Both are part of the Word of God and shouldn’t be separated.