

# What Influences Bylaw Provisions?

"BYLAWS BITS" — MAY 2014

Bylaws are a document that helps define an organization. It is a legal document that describes structure, authority, and responsibility in conformity with requirements of local, state, and federal law. What else do we need to consider?

The single biggest factor is the type of organization. Churches are not organized the same way as businesses, because their objectives are different. Not all churches are organized the same way, either. Congregational churches give the congregation final control and authority. Other church types give it to a bishop or an outside organization. Since we are a congregational church, we will focus on things that affect that kind of church.

The next biggest influence on bylaws is the size of the organization. A small church of under 50 members looks and functions differently than one with a few thousand members, so the bylaws would also be different.

A small congregational church can have frequent meetings to discuss and decide issues. Its bylaws can state the permanent positions that are to be filled by members but have few provisions regarding authority and responsibility, because the congregation decides most things collectively. For example, someone needs to be responsible for paying bills and financial reporting, so a treasurer is needed, with basic duties mentioned in the bylaws. Ultimately, though, the congregation can discuss and agree on most financial matters beyond paying bills.

As a church grows, it becomes impractical to have weekly or even monthly meetings with the entire congregation to discuss everything that needs to be decided. Again, someone needs to pay the bills, but additional positions become necessary. Perhaps trustees are needed to make sure that God's generous abundance is managed appropriately. Often, at this point, a finance chair is created to provide oversight for those handling the church's financial affairs. Similarly, as the church complex grows from a house church to a commercial building to a church campus (as we have), a property manager is needed.



The congregation will gather and elect qualified leaders of good character to be responsible for various aspects of church activity and management, thereby giving them authority and responsibility for the successful completion of their assigned tasks. These people are church members, volunteering their time for the sake of Christ's church. The congregation is still finally responsible and usually receives reports from leaders about their stewardship, but the congregation is not involved in day-to-day decisions.

As the church continues to grow, permanent staff positions are added. For example, the required financial work for a small church

can be handled by a part-time treasurer, but a church of several thousand, with a budget in excess of a million dollars, needs a qualified full-time staff. Thus, the bylaws need to allow for paid staff positions. Once the number of paid professional staff positions grows beyond a few, paid managerial positions may be advisable.

Generally, church leaders (church board and pastoral staff) provide vision, direction, supervision, spiritual guidance, and conflict resolution. Paid staff members handle many of the day-to-day administrative and operational matters. The congregation still has final authority and elects lay leaders to the board and other church leadership groups.

At this stage, church bylaws begin looking more like the U.S. Constitution, with most of the text providing checks and balances by describing specific positions, their duties, the limitations on their authority, and how they are accountable. Details about their day-to-day operations generally are not included.

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It's important to keep in mind that the objective of bylaws is to establish structure, authority, and responsibility so the church can live out its mission. Bylaws should facilitate—but not limit or hinder—the church from functioning well and making a difference in the world for Christ.

The Committee—**Tina Balmer, Amber Bird, John Davis, Anton Hertle** and **Steve Soderberg**—encourages any First Church member to share his or her views regarding updating the bylaws. This can be done by mail, email, or notes to the Committee delivered to any Committee member, the Board chairperson, the chairperson of the Research and Long-Range Planning Committee (R&LRP), or the senior minister. Notes to the Committee may also be dropped off with the church receptionist, for the R&LRP mailbox. For your convenience, the current First Church Bylaws are posted on the Church website and are also available in the Church Library.