

Position Paper
United Pentecostal Church International
Weldon Spring, Missouri
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CHURCH GOVERNMENT

Adopted by the General Board in 2019

The church is the body of believers who are born again, living by faith in Jesus Christ, and pursuing holiness. The term *church* refers both to the local congregation and to the universal body of believers. (See Matthew 16:18; I Corinthians 1:2.)

The United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI) does not claim to be equivalent to the body of Christ, but it is part of the universal church and it plants and nurtures local churches. We do not believe someone must belong to the UPCI to be saved or to have a valid ministry, but we have covenanted together to fulfill scriptural teachings of identity, unity, fellowship, worship, evangelism, and discipleship. As our name indicates, we are more than a ministerial fellowship; we are an organized part of the New Testament church. All faithful disciples in local churches, both “preachers” and “saints,” are members of the UPCI. (See General Constitution, Article II.) Credentialed ministers vote in district and general conferences, while all members vote in local church business meetings. This pattern is similar to the early church in that the members participated in the selection of seven administrators for church business in Acts 6:2–4, while the elders participated in the decision of the first general council in Acts 15:6.

Biblical Principles

The Bible does not give detailed instructions for church governance. Evidently this is because needs and methods can vary based on time, culture, and circumstances. Thus, there is considerable liberty in forms of local church government. Nevertheless, the New Testament reveals principles for church structure and organization. Ministers should meet qualifications, be approved by elders, and seek ordination. Believers should belong to local churches, and local churches should be led by pastors. Each local church should be connected in an international body that maintains the apostolic doctrine, promotes fellowship and missions, provides accountability and mutual submission, and recognizes spiritual authority. (See Acts 2:42–47; 14:23; 16:4–5.) When a church implements these principles in its own culture and circumstances, God honors its efforts. In the context of church discipline Jesus said, “Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 18:18). He further promised to honor the church’s united prayers and meetings (Matthew 18:19–20). The church and its leaders are not infallible, for no authority is absolute except God’s, but God instituted the principle of church government and uses it to accomplish His purposes.

The specific structures of any local church and general organization are constructed and administered by fallible humans. This does not mean we can simply disregard them, however. Both are part of God’s plan for His work in this world. Churches have different policies and procedures, and sometimes we change them, so we cannot say a particular one is essential. Nevertheless, they are our attempt to fulfill biblical principles, and thus God expects us

to cooperate with them and be accountable to them. We should respect the structure, delegated authority, and decisions of both the local and the general church. For instance, when God calls people to preach, they should first obtain approval from their local pastor and church and then from the general body.

The New Testament pattern is that once a local church grows to maturity, it governs its own affairs with its own pastor or pastors rather than being controlled by an external hierarchy. Although Paul was an apostle and the founding pastor of many churches, when he later dealt with problems in those churches he did not simply issue decrees but appealed to their leaders to address the problems. He asked a coworker in Philippi, probably the senior pastor, to mediate a dispute between two women ministers (Philippians 4:2–3). In a case of incest in the Corinthian church, Paul did not directly excommunicate the sinning member but advised the church on dealing with him (I Corinthians 5:1–5). In the case of a rebellious member who had repented, again he advised the local church, promising that if they forgave the man, he would also (II Corinthians 2:5–11).

At the same time, the local churches were not independent, or completely autonomous. They received guidance from external leaders such as Paul. They were connected to the general body and accepted its general decisions. In Acts 15, the apostles and elders met in Jerusalem to consider the acceptance of Gentiles into the church. The delegates debated, consulted Scripture, sought the leading of the Spirit, achieved consensus, and announced their decision by letter to all local churches. They did not expect any church or pastor to reject the decision or to leave the fellowship but to accept the conference's action.

In the New Testament we find much evidence of organization and operations beyond the local church. On the general or international level, we find the following examples:

- Ministerial business conferences (Acts 15:6, 22–29)
- Recognized leaders (Galatians 1:18–19; 2:9)
- Organized missions, including appointment, oversight, and support of missionaries (Acts 13:1–4; 14:26–17; Romans 15:24; Galatians 2:7–10; Philippians 4:14–19)
- Reports to, investigations by, and assistance from leaders (Acts 8:14; 11:1–4, 22; 15:1–4; 21:17–19)
- Special offerings (Romans 15:26; I Corinthians 16:1–4)
- Regional or district oversight (Titus 1:5)

On a regional or district level, we find the following examples:

- Implementation of ministerial qualifications (I Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9)
- Recommendation of ministers, or granting of ministerial credentials (II Corinthians 8:23; Colossians 4:10; I Thessalonians 5:12–13; III John 12)
- Withdrawal of recommendation, or placing ministers under question (II John 9–11; III John 9–10)
- Ministerial discipline (I Timothy 1:19–20; 5:19–20; II Timothy 2:16–18; Titus 3:10)

We find at least four levels of authority and responsibility in the general church, although the exact nature, relation, and operation of these levels are not described fully:

- Paul submitted to the general body and reported to its leadership in Jerusalem (Acts 15:1–35; 21:18–26).
- The leaders recognized Paul as apostle to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:6–10).
- With Paul's instruction, Titus had responsibility for the island of Crete (Titus 1:5).
- Pastors ordained by Titus led the local churches in Crete (Titus 1:5).

The Ministry

In the New Testament church everyone is a priest before God (I Peter 2:5–9; Revelation 1:6; 5:10). Through Jesus Christ, our high priest, we approach God directly and confidently in prayer, offering the sacrifices of praise, good works, and sharing (Hebrews 4:15–16; 13:15–16). As priests, we confess sins directly to God in the name of Jesus and by the blood of Jesus. We can intercede on our own behalf and on behalf of others (I John 1:9; James 5:13–16). Some have compared Old Testament priests to pastors and preachers, but the better comparison for Old Testament priests is to all believers today. Because of the priesthood of all believers, the UPCI is basically congregational in structure rather than hierarchical, with each member having a voice and expected to participate in the worship, life, ministry, and governance of the local church.

Ephesians 4 identifies five types of leaders whom God has called to preach, teach, and lead His church, and the UPCI grants ministerial credentials to these leaders. They are stewards of the gospel and of God's people (I Thessalonians 2). They are not dictators, but they lead by service and by example (Matthew 20:25–28; I Peter 5:1–5). Today we often call them the “fivefold ministry” or “ministers of the gospel” (Ephesians 3:7). Specifically, the Lord has given to the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers to equip the saints, so that all the believers can do the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:11–12). The word *ministry* here simply means “service,” and in this sense everyone should have a ministry. When every believer is trained for a place of service and functions accordingly, then the body of Christ will be built up.

The twelve apostles had unique qualifications and a unique foundational role in the early church and were not replaced upon their death (Acts 12; Revelation 21:14), but others also served as *apostles* in the sense of pioneer missionaries or key regional or ethnic leaders. (See Acts 14:14; Romans 16:7; Galatians 1:19.) *Prophets* had a special ministry as God's spokespersons in certain situations to give insight, encouragement, warning, and guidance. (See Acts 13:1.) Some have wrongly used these two titles to assert authority over everyone else, and thus the UPCI does not use these designations as official titles. (See II Corinthians 10:18; 11:13; Revelation 2:2, 20.) Moreover, the recipients of such a ministry must decide how to interpret and apply it. (See Acts 21:10–14.) Those who exercise this type of ministry may or may not serve as organizational leaders, but they are generally recognized as preachers to preachers and leaders of leaders. However, their ministries do not confer the right to bypass or supersede pastoral authority or church government (whether local or general). For example, Peter and Paul submitted to the leadership of the general body, recognized one another's roles, and respected local church government. (See Acts 11; 15; 21:17–26; Galatians 2; II Corinthians 2:10; 8:8–12; 9:5.)

An *evangelist* focuses on proclaiming the gospel to the lost. Today, we often use the term for an itinerant preacher, but the two are not necessarily equivalent. The word *pastor* literally means “shepherd.” The pastor is responsible to lead, feed, protect, care for, and grow the local assembly. Finally, we have the *teacher*, or instructor. While not every teacher is a senior pastor, every pastor must exercise or facilitate the ministry of teaching (Titus 1:9).

God has appointed these leaders to guide and protect us spiritually, and they are accountable to Him to fulfill this responsibility (Hebrews 13:17). We follow leaders as they follow God and teach God's Word. We should not follow anyone into unethical conduct, sin, or false doctrine. By having godly leaders, we fulfill a principle established by our unchanging Lord (Hebrews 13:7–8). We are to recognize our leaders and hold them in high regard (I Thessalonians 5:12–13). Their job is to govern, preach, and teach, and we are to give double honor to leaders who serve well, which includes financial support (I Timothy 5:17). This

principle of authority applies to all Christians, including leaders, and to the larger fellowship of believers as well as the local church. Even the highest leaders must be accountable to one another and submit to spiritual authority in the body of Christ.

The New Testament uses three Greek terms for those who lead the local church: *poimēn*, pastor or shepherd; *episkopos*, bishop or overseer; and *presbyteros*, presbyter or elder. Believers in a city met in multiple locations but were all described as part of the church of that city. Each church had multiple elders or bishops (e.g., Acts 20:17; Philippians 1:1). We can regard them as the pastoral team of a large church or pastors of individual house churches in a city (e.g., Romans 16:3–5; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 1). It appears that each house church had a senior elder or lead pastor (e.g., Philippians 4:3; Colossians 1:7; Revelation 2:1, 8, 12, 18). According to Paul, the elders (*presbyteros*) are to shepherd/pastor (*poimainō*) the church and to serve as overseers/bishops (*episkopos*) of the flock (Acts 20:17, 28). Similarly, according to Peter, the elders (*presbyteros*) are to both shepherd/pastor (*poimainō*) and oversee (*episkopeō*) the flock, under the Chief Pastor/Shepherd (*archi-poimēn*) (I Peter 5:1–4). Of the three biblical terms, the UPCI has chosen the title of *pastor* as its primary designation, because other denominations have historically used *bishop* for hierarchical (episcopal) church government and *elder* for presbyterian church government, whereas the UPCI is basically congregational.

In the second century, the term *bishop* came to be used for the senior pastor of the mother church of a city or region. Similarly, today we sometimes use this title unofficially for an organizational leader or a minister who leads other ministers. When a senior pastor retires from primary service in a church, we may call him a bishop, signifying advisory pastor or honorary pastor. Some pastors and churches refer to a founding pastor or another former long-term pastor as their bishop, meaning spiritual leader. These additional uses of the term *bishop* are accepted as these leaders have a type of oversight. At the same time, in New Testament congregations the elders were simultaneously pastors and bishops (e.g., Titus 1:5–9). The senior leader who has the foremost spiritual and operational authority in the local church can be considered both a pastor and a bishop. The first title speaks primarily of responsibility; the second title speaks primarily of authority. The minister who has the ultimate responsibility of shepherding (leading and feeding) the flock should have the corresponding authority as overseer. While pastors should be accountable to spiritual leaders beyond the local church (e.g., Acts 16:4–5), no one should seek to override the authority and responsibility of the senior pastor in the local church.

Because the term *bishop* has hierarchal connotations today, it could cause confusion if not explained properly. In the UPCI, local churches may use various titles for their leaders, including pastor, assistant pastor, and bishop. In official UPCI terminology the leader who exercises senior spiritual and administrative authority is designated as the pastor (senior pastor or lead pastor) and should be listed as such in the Church Directory. The UPCI also uses the term *presbyter* with the special meaning of sectional leaders (“district presbyters”) and district superintendents (“general presbyters”).

Some leaders who assist pastors are called *deacons*, from the Greek *diakonos*, meaning “servant, minister.” (See Romans 16:1–2; Philippians 1:1; I Timothy 3:8–13.) This office possibly originated in Acts 6, when the apostles asked the congregation to select seven men who could assist them in the business and practical affairs of the church, specifically the distribution of food to widows. This duty probably involved the collection of food and finances as well. In today’s terminology, church board members, department heads, and other lay leaders could fill the function of deacons.

Affiliation

The UPCI has an optional status for local churches called “affiliation,” which is a procedural safeguard for maintaining church identity. When church members vote to affiliate, they choose to have UPCI identity, a UPCI pastor, and a form of government compatible with the UPCI. For a church to disaffiliate, it must conduct a vote of the members and allow district officials to represent the UPCI in the meeting. Affiliation does not replace the need for incorporation or bylaws, although a church may use the UPCI Local Church Government as its bylaws. Affiliation does not place a church under UPCI ownership or control or make it liable for any UPCI obligations, as an affiliated church remains its own distinct, self-governing legal entity. A church that is not officially affiliated is still part of the UPCI as long as it has a UPCI pastor. When church members vote to disaffiliate, they delegate to the pastor the sole authority to determine the church’s future relationship with the UPCI; at any time he or she may terminate its fellowship with the UPCI without notice or vote.

Summary

- The UPCI seeks to implement biblical principles for the structure and operations of the church. In doing so it recognizes that there is considerable diversity, liberty, and flexibility in both local and general church government.
- Each local church is self-governing. Its form of government should provide for both pastoral leadership and membership participation. The UPCI does not advocate authoritarian control, control by an external hierarchy, governance by members without pastoral oversight, or a hierarchical network for established churches. (See General Constitution, Article XVIII, and see the Local Church Government in the UPCI Manual.)
- Each local church is connected to the general body for identity, fellowship, accountability, and cooperation. Based on New Testament examples, the UPCI is an international organization and fellowship of ministers, churches, and local members formed to promote world missions, coordinate efforts, and uphold ministerial qualifications. As stated by the General Constitution, Article I, “The purpose of the United Pentecostal Church International is to carry the whole gospel to the whole world by the whole church; to establish an effective organized effort; to encourage the opening and establishing of new works; to evangelize the world by every means possible; and to produce and maintain a clean ministry and fellowship.”