The Community of God pt10 -- Leadership in the Community

1. For nearly 30yrs, I traveled across the US and Canada working with church leaderships. These took various forms but the vast majority were made up entirely of men and held their meetings in a closed room. Almost without exception, they were good men who wanted to do the right thing for Jesus and for their congregations…but they often didn't get the result they wanted. They wondered why…and what they might change in order to get better results, better buy-in from the congregation, etc.

2. Last week, we saw a gathering of the local church where a serious problem was presented to the apostles. We find that in Acts 6 and what happened next is rather shocking to a modern, Western people who are used to top down leadership and organizational flowcharts. The apostles told them to solve their problem with their people.

3. No direction on who to choose or how to solve it. Since they saw it and knew it was a problem, they were to fix it while the apostles did what apostles do. (my Acts 6 attitude kept me from having my email handed over to lawyers)

4. One of the first questions I was asked – and was asked frequently – when we started this network of house churches we call OSHC was if we would have elders. Before I answer that question, let's talk about elders.

5. If you are from a church that has an episcopal organization, this will be new to you. In presbyterian churches (those that have elders in each congregation as their leaders), people are chosen from the congregation to be leaders of that congregation, not as preachers or the lead minister, but as the ultimate deciders of what happens and what will not happen in that community. We go this idea from the Jews and similar cultures.

6. The Jews had community leaders who, by the way they lived their lives, had the respect of the community. There was no separation between personal life and church life. They lived together and interacted daily. Everyone knew who the elders were although there was no official ceremony, office, or announcement.

7. In the early church, most Christians were Jews and the pattern of listening to local leaders who were well respected by all continued. There are those who believe that it should still continue even though we live in a totally different world and cannot replicate the one that gave them local, community leaders. Many of us have seen what happens when you take a blueprint from another age and try to overlay it on our day and time, (many church problems are sourced in leadership and choosing leaders)

8. Those who claim that the Bible is a blueprint for the ages and that it gives us a pattern for all things seem to go silent when it comes to the only descriptions of leadership gatherings we have in the Bible.

9. In Acts 6, the people did not approach elders but, rather, the apostles. The Twelve were not going to be moved off of their calling so they directed the people to solve the problem themselves. Men and women were involved for that is what happens when you have an overwhelmingly Jewish congregation – they discuss.

10. The end result was that the community continued to grow. In Acts 6, men were chosen but we need to remember that the only person expressly named as a deacon in the NT was a woman, Phoebe.

11. The first and only elders' meeting we find in the NT is in Acts 15. What happened there might not be prescriptive for every age, but it is informative and looks to be a very healthy way forward for individual communities.

12. The meeting was called due to the universal question and struggle about how to integrate various Gentile people into what had been a closed Jewish system. The Jews seemed very happy to bring them in, but how Jewish did Gentiles need to be before they could be considered Christian? What is required of converts? Fair questions.

13. The call for more rules and laws is constant in human circles. For every event, there are those who wish to regulate it, tax it, control it, or proscribe it. As this is a universal temptation among human beings, we need to remember this and resist the temptation to

regulate everything, to dominate anyone, or rise to and use power for what we consider to be “right.”

14. How the elders in Jerusalem handled this is amazing. They avoided every pitfall modern organizations fall into when confronted with conflict, disorder, or disunity.

15. First, they gathered at a mother church…which would make most people in my old tribe and other churches cringe. No wonder I never heard a single sermon on this!

16. The apostles were there but the leaders seem to be elders, Jewish community leaders who were known and respected by all. They listened first. Acts 15:1-6.

17. They first invited all sides to tell of what God was doing in their area, in their community. They started by sharing good news.

18. Once the problem was named in verse 5, Peter was the first to respond and he spoke of grace and the need to refuse rule-making in the church. Acts 15:7-11.

19. Then…they shared good news, again, about what God was doing among the Gentiles (vv.12-18). Then James, the leading elder at the mother church of Jerusalem and the brother of Jesus, stood to speak and what he had to say was amazing. Acts 15:19-21. We shouldn’t make it difficult! Just don’t act like pagans and, if you want to be more Jewish, it is easy to learn how to do that.

20. Then, the elders and apostles…together with the whole church… wrote a letter to be sent out to all the churches warning them not to listen to men who want to make rule after rule after rule. Acts 15:24-29. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us!!!!

21. The reaction was joy, for the earliest leaders of the church had made it as plain as they could make it: this was not going to be a Jesus And movement. Focus on Jesus. Uniformity was not an issue and no foundation has been laid but that which has been laid, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

22. I have stood on the Royal Mile in Edinburgh and watched as the doors of St. Giles Cathedral opened and the elders of the kirk came out with their pronouncements. And I have witnessed the same thing happen in a different scale and with individual methods, but, honestly, the same attitude and purpose…

23. And, yet, nothing like that is found in scripture. No wonder that David Lipscomb spent his life insisting that “elder” was not an office or rank in the church, but a description of the kind of person people should seek out when they need advice, counsel, and direction.

24. We at OSHC follow the Acts 6 and Acts 15 examples. Our elders are men and women who have proven by their lives that they are reliable and worth listening to. They don’t have closed door meetings with each other and come out with pronouncements, No, following the example of our Jewish brothers and sisters, the elders – not an office, but a description – live where you live.

25. We listen to anyone who emails, texts or calls. We are guided by your comments, support, and response. We are not a top down church except in one sense: we have the same Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

26. And…that is enough.