Can churches be too independent

Too much independence is not a good thing.

Gord Martin

"The churches of the New Testament were independent, self-governing and autonomous." Is that true? What does the Bible say? In defense of this line of thinking, consider the following:

1. The apostles were like missionaries. They criss-crossed the known world proclaiming the Gospel, making disciples of all nations as they had been commanded. Over time, they gathered these disciples into congregations and appointed elders in each of the churches.

2. The goal of the apostles were to move congregations from apostalic dependency to independence. Each church would then be governed by its own overseers.

3. The elders were charged with the responsibilities of: leading and managing the church [Acts 20:28-35; 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:7], shepherding the flock; teaching, protecting, equipping, counselling, praying for, etc. [Ezekiel 34; Acts 20:29-30; Titus 1:9-10; Ephesians 4:11-14; Hebrews 13:17; James 5:14-15].

4. Since the apostles did not provide for others to take their places, they must have intended each of the churches to continue to be multiplying cells of believers; each growing to maturity and self-governing independence.

5. The role of the apostles was temporary. The self-governing independent model of the church is permanent.

But is this scenario the whole story? Is it true that the role and activity of the apostles was a temporary "mission field" arrangement? And is it true that in mature settings the activities carried forward by the apostles are not necessary? And is it a good thing for churches to be entirely independent, self-governing and autonomous? Can churches be too independent for their own good? I believe the answer is a resounding yes!

While it is true that the apostles did not provide for their own replacements, it is not true that the activities they carried forward became unnecessary. The New Testament church is well described as a loosely-knit, spreading and dynamic web of churches tied together relationally by the apostles and their delegates: Barnabus, Timothy, Silvanus, Titus, Andronicus, Junias, Epaphroditus, and perhaps others. Clearly there was a continuing level of important leadership beyond the sphere of the local church. In fact, it appears from Acts 11:30; 15:2,4,6,22; 21:18-26 that the elders in Jerusalem were responsible to assist in sorting inter-church difficulties.

Then, as now, such leadership is effective when it flows from a serving heart and has been faithful over time and during periods of hardship. Leadership is never effective when it relies on rank, organizational machinery, or on the controlling habits of domineering or insecure leaders. Interdependence of churches both in the days of the New Testament and ours, is essential and ought to flow through the lives of those God calls and gifts for ministry beyond the reach of individual congregations.

Such a view should not interfere with the self-governing aspect of church life. Rather it enhances it. For there are activities each church desires to fulfill which are impossible for it to achieve alone.

An effective network of churches can accomplish much through lively cooperation. It can help with:

- Joining together for evangelistic and church planting activities.

- Finding people from other congregations to help those churches which are presently lacking in some areas of giftedness.

- Passing on news of fruitfulness, resources and warnings to other congregations.

- Sharing in leadership development.

- Passing on to others lessons learned in dealing with government, Christian organizations, well-known figures in

the Christian community, etc.

- Calling for assistance in times of crisis.

Each of these benefits of interdependence is needed in our generation when the Canadian church finds itself to be a small minority in what we once assumed to be a Christian country. Too much independence is not a good thing.

It is our hope and prayer that Vision Ministries Canada will be able to facilitate the ministry of interdependence.