

THE DEAREST PLACE ON EARTH (1)

What is an independent church?

A. Introduction

1. Why are you an independent?

Because you believe that's what the Bible teaches.

Because you've always gone to independent churches.

Because you like the preaching or worship or Sunday School provided by this particular independent church.

You're not and you only come along to this one because there is no alternative.

2. Why does it matter?

Because we want to obey all of God's Word including what it says about how churches should be structured.

Because it's worth knowing why the church we are members of or attend does things the way it does.

Because in the future we may have to make a choice about what church we are going to be part of.

Because in the past Christians we persecuted (and sometimes killed) by other Christians because they were independents.

B. Historically – what is an independent church?

1. A Protestant church.

A church that protests against Roman Catholic teaching since the time of the Reformation.

2. A Nonconformist church.

A church that refused to conform to or follow some of the practices of the Church of England prescribed by the 1559 prayer book and which is free from its control.

3. A Dissenting church.

A church that refused to conform to a system of church of church life and worship imposed by law (includes Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Methodist).

4. A Separatist church.

A church that believed civil magistrates and rulers should have no involvement in church affairs.

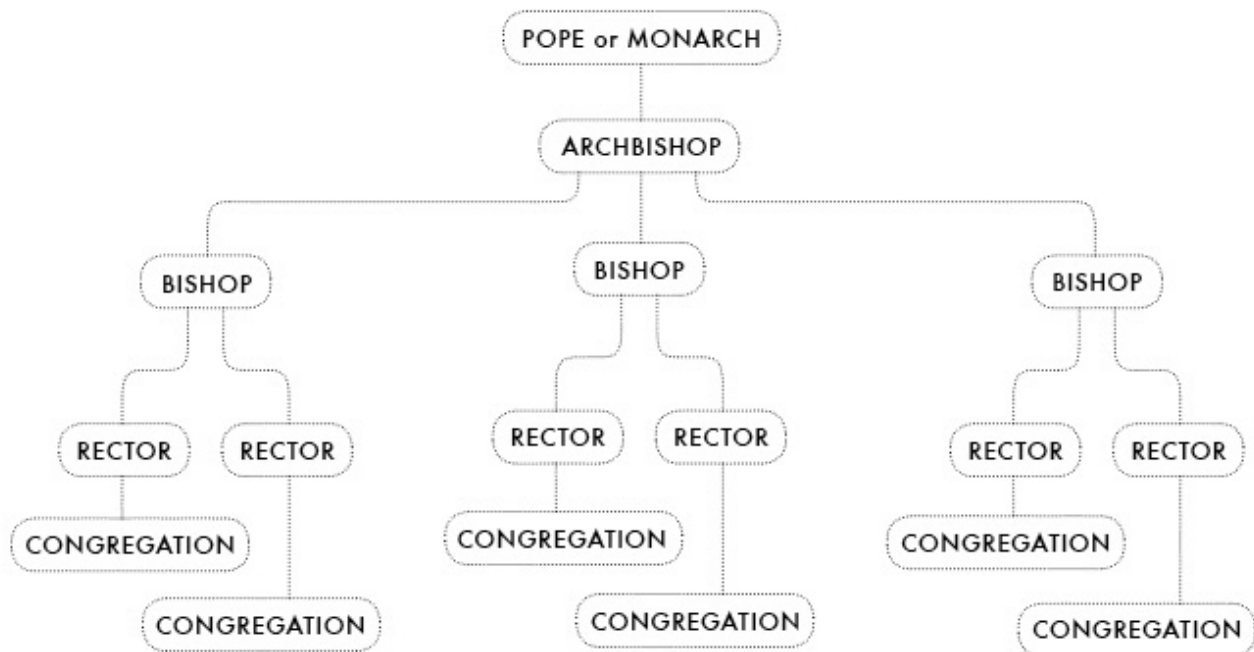
5. A Nondenominational church.

A church that is not part of any denomination or under denominational control.

6. A Congregational church.ⁱ

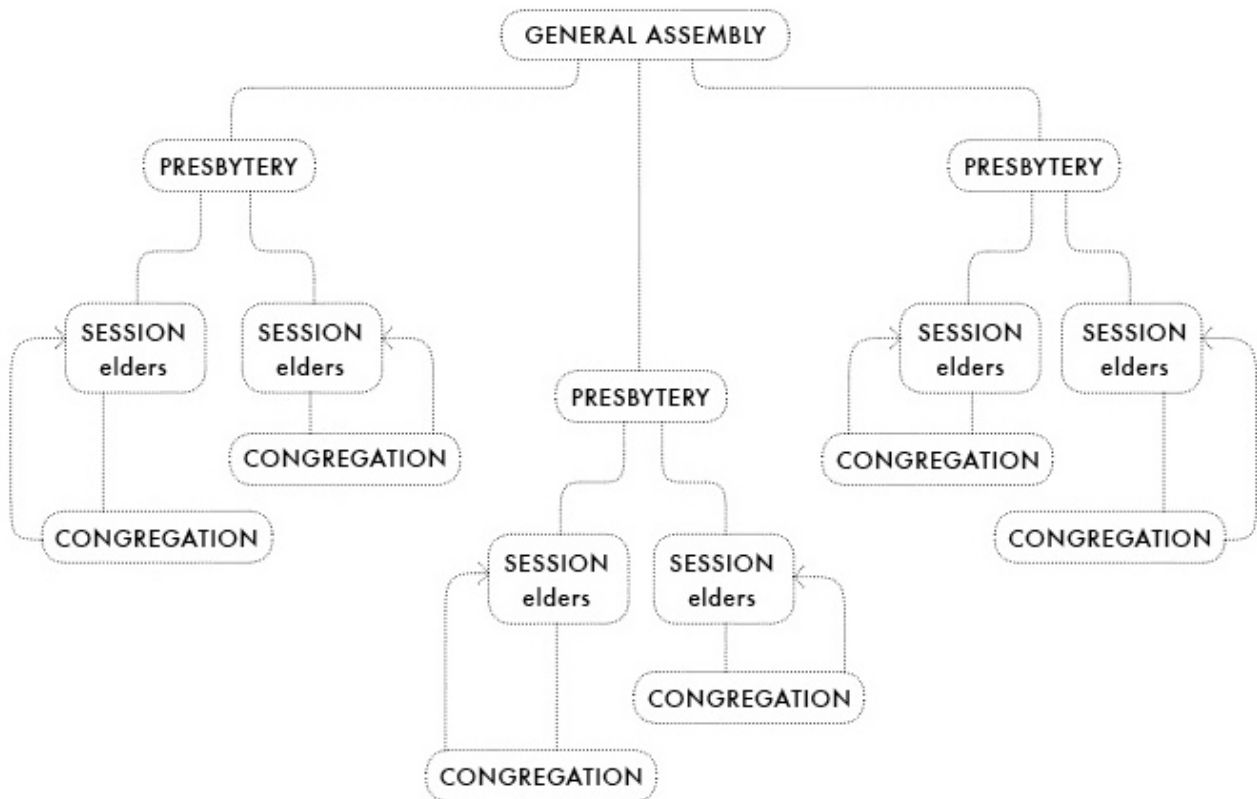
A church where the congregation chooses its own leaders under Christ, and has control over its affairs.

EPISCOPALIAN



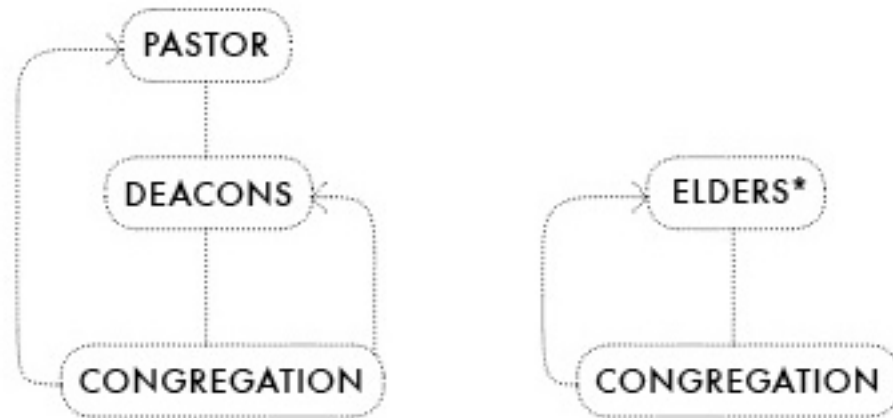
The Archbishop has authority over a number of bishops. Each Bishop is in charge of a Diocese that has a number of churches, and has the authority to appoint Rectors/Priests who are in charge of a local parish congregation.

PRESBYTERIAN



Each local church elects elders (including the pastor) to a session. The session has authority over the local church. The elders of the session are members of a presbytery that has authority over several churches in a region. Some of the members of the presbytery are members of the general assembly that has authority over all the Presbyterian churches in the nation or region.

CONGREGATIONAL



Each local congregation chooses its leaders. Some Baptist churches will have a single pastor with a group of deacons under his authority to advise and support him – the congregation elects individuals for both positions. In independent churches the congregation elects a plurality of elders (of which the pastor is one of the elders, and is engaged in the fulltime work of preaching and teaching).

7. A Free church.

An independent church is free to obey to what the Bible says as they understand it without interference from outside the local congregation.

8. A Persecuted church.

Independents for hundreds of years suffered severe persecution at the hands of the National Church.

9. A Biblical church.

The Bible has clear teaching about how a local church is to be organised and governed which is best reflected in independent churches.

C. Biblically – what is an independent church?

1. The Lord Jesus is the Head of the church.

“And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church.” (Ephesians 1:22)

“For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour.” (Ephesians 5:23)

“And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.” (Colossians 1:18)

The Lord Jesus tells us how His church should be organised in His Word.

2. The Lord Jesus instructs each local church to appoint a plurality of elders to oversee its affairs under Jesus, the chief shepherd.

The pattern in all New Testament churches is plural elders.

There is no suggestion of any church that only had one elder.

All the elders had equal authority in that local church.

"Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust." (Acts 14:23)

"This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question." (Acts 15:2)

"From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church." (Acts 20:17)

"The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you." (Titus 1:5)

"Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you." (1 Timothy 4:14)

"Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord." (James 5:14)

"To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow-elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed." (1 Peter 5:1)

"Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith." (Hebrews 13:7)

The suitably qualified elders are chosen or affirmed by the local church (by some kind of consensus or vote and in my opinion for a set term, in order to give the church the opportunity to get rid of them should they stray towards false doctrine).

"Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection. So they proposed two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. Then they prayed, Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs. Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles." (Acts 1:21-26)

"Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them." (Acts 6:3-6)

Elders are pastors (shepherds) and bishops (overseers). They are responsible for teaching, instructing, overseeing, ruling, giving direction and being examples to the flock of God under their care.

The elders will therefore be responsible for overseeing the day to day running of the church but will bring large decisions such as church discipline, appointment of a pastor, purchase of property etc before the church.

"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." (Acts 20:28)

"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." (1 Peter 5:2)

"Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task." (1 Timothy 3:1)

"Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless— not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain." (Titus 1:7)

"Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons." (Philippians 1:1)

The pastor is one of the elders who is chosen to give more time to the activities of preaching and teaching and often earn their living by doing this.

"It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers." (Ephesians 4:11)

"The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain, and The worker deserves his wages." (1 Timothy 5:17-18)

3. Independent does not mean isolated.

Local churches regularly communicated with one another.

"When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed." (Acts 18:27)

"Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings." (Romans 16:16)

Local churches worked together when there was a need.

"The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea." (Acts 11:29)

E. What does all this mean practically for Banstead Community Church?

1. We are an independent church.

We are led by a group of elders that includes the pastor.

Suitably qualified men have been chosen to be elders of this local church (for 3 years terms except the pastor) and have been affirmed in this role by the members through a vote.

2. We are part of a fellowship of independent churches.

"Could not these unattached churches so I began to ask myself be brought together in some association of mutual helpfulness?" (E. J. Poole-Connor)

We are part of both the FIEC and the South East Gospel Partnership.

This provides practical support, care, training, and opportunities for mission involvement with other local churches.

The only authority these two groups have over us is to exclude us from the association.

ⁱ The three diagrams produced by James Watts are based on those found in Wayne Grudem's Systematic Theology