

October 31, 2023

Dear Acts 29 pastors and churches,

For 25 years, Acts 29 has worked together to plant and grow churches, first in the U.S. and now across the world. In these years, we've endured a lot of change—some of it exciting and some of it painful discipline. Yet, the Lord has remained faithful to us and continues to write our story, which now includes over 700 partner churches.

It's always been our conviction that a certain kind of church is urgently needed in our day—churches committed to the centrality of the gospel, the sovereignty of God in salvation, the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, the equality of men and women with men acting as responsible servant leaders in the home and church, and missional engagement with our lost world. We derive these convictions from Scripture. And we believe that it's because of these distinctives that the Lord has sustained us.

Complementarianism Task Force

One of these distinctives is commonly known as “complementarianism.” In the last few years, we've heard questions from some of our pastors about the role it plays in our network. Some have also asked the degree to which we are still committed to it as a founding distinctive.

Wanting to understand these questions better, we commissioned a task force earlier this year to consider how Acts 29 churches practice complementarianism and to make recommendations to the Board on how we can remain aligned on this distinctive. The task force conducted a survey open to all Acts 29 churches and interviewed a cross-section of lead pastors. They also conducted their own research by studying historic and current theological resources. Their findings show that Acts 29 churches continue to be happily and faithfully complementarian. We specifically asked them to provide feedback on our official complementarian distinctive statement (see below). 97% of survey respondents said that it accurately describes their church's beliefs and practices.

At the same time, we heard a consistent theme that clarity is desired on two questions: (1) What does our complementarian distinctive mean regarding pulpit ministry? (2) If questions arise about whether or not a member church is still committed to one of our distinctives, including complementarianism, how do we resolve those questions?

By providing further clarity on these, we hope to help Acts 29 pastors and churches work together with trust and enthusiasm.

Complementarianism & Pulpit Ministry

Our complementarian distinctive statement reads:

Both men and women are together created in the divine image and are therefore equal before God as persons, possessing the same moral dignity and value, and have equal access to God through faith in Christ. Men and women are together the recipients of spiritual gifts designed to empower them for ministry in the local church and beyond. Therefore, men and women are to be encouraged, equipped, and empowered to utilize their gifting in ministry, in service to the body of Christ, and through teaching in ways that are consistent with the Word of God.

While husbands and wives are responsible to God for spiritual nurture and vitality in the home, God has given to the man primary responsibility to lead his wife and family in accordance with the servant leadership and sacrificial love characterized by Jesus Christ.

This principle of male headship should not be confused with, nor give any hint of, domineering control. Rather, it is to be the loving, tender, and nurturing care of a godly man who is himself under the kind and gentle authority of Jesus Christ.

The elders/pastors (terms used interchangeably) of each local church have been granted authority under the headship of Jesus Christ to provide oversight and to teach/preach the Word of God in the corporate assembly for the building up of the body. The office of elder/pastor is restricted to qualified men.

Regarding pulpit ministry, this means that preaching to the gathered assembly of the local church should be performed by elder-qualified men.

There are several reasons we believe that men giving authoritative exposition of God's Word should be the standard in Acts 29:

- It reflects the biblical model of headship in the home and church, grounded in creation order, that God has given for our good (Eph. 5:22–33; 1 Tim. 2:12–13).
- It is consistent with our founding and history, as reflected in the convictions of our leaders and the practice of nearly all our partnering churches.
- It is consistent with the assessment standards we use for new Acts 29 applicants.

In our survey, we also found several practices that are occasional in some churches. In noting these, we are not prescribing them as official recommendations from Acts 29. But we also want to be clear that we view them as within the scope and spirit of our complementarian distinctive:

- Men of good character and sound doctrine who are not currently serving as elders in a local church, preaching at the invitation of the elders (eg. retired from active pastoral ministry, preparing for pastoral ministry, in an elder-development process, serving in parachurch ministry).
- Non-elders, men or women, speaking during the primary church gathering in a way that complements the preaching or helps the church grapple with specific issues of Christian living where their expertise and experience are pertinent (eg. marriage, parenting, singleness, sexuality, local missions, global missions, abortion).

Assessing Commitment to Acts 29 Distinctives

If questions arise about whether or not a member church is still committed to our distinctives, including complementarianism, we resolve them through conversations and our annual partnership renewal process.

Most conversations start at a regional level and within cohorts. They may also include network leadership if necessary. These conversations tend to move slowly, at the pace of relationships. But in almost every case where a church has shifted away from one of our distinctives, this has worked to resolve the issue—either by the church adjusting back or opting out of Acts 29 during partnership renewal. In cases where this doesn't resolve the question, Acts 29 has a church removal process that has been approved by the Acts 29 Board and is carefully implemented by Acts 29 regional and senior leadership.

We believe this approach best fits our nature as a relational network as opposed to a confessional denomination. A network exists primarily for building partnerships, learning from each

other, and supporting church planting. We devote our resources (budget, staff, programs) to these purposes, not to governance and oversight of member churches. A confessional denomination, on the other hand, will prescribe more matters of polity and secondary theology and will have more far-reaching oversight processes. Both kinds of organizations have benefits (some of our churches participate in both), and Acts 29 has always sought to cultivate “network” benefits. Our distinctives also serve a networking purpose, ensuring that there’s enough common ground to enjoy working together. Therefore, when questions arise, we lean into the relational nature of our network more than formal processes or litigation.

If you become concerned about something happening in another Acts 29 church, we’d encourage you to handle it in a way that honors the relational nature of the network. Part of your partnership with Acts 29 involves a commitment to pursuing peace among the churches and pastors in the network. That means that you should reach out directly to a pastor, church, or regional leader and should not take to the internet to air concerns or demand quick “enforcement” actions from network leadership.

Let us be known as a network that labors to engage in constructive conversations in a way that reflects reasonableness (Phil. 4:5) and patience (1 Cor. 13:4) that can lead to redemptive resolutions. Let’s work against the tendency to bite and devour one another (Gal. 5:15) and instead “let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (Rom. 14:19).

By working in a patient, relational way of resolving concerns, we believe we can continue to enjoy the camaraderie and brotherhood for which we all joined Acts 29.

The Way Forward

Finally, we want to celebrate the good work that is being done by so many of our churches to live out complementarianism! In our conversations, we’ve noticed two recurring themes that we want to commend. Both show how complementarianism is integral to our mission:

1. For many of our pastors, complementarianism is a pressing pastoral concern. They are regularly faced with pressure from inside and outside the church on questions of gender. While we are convinced that complementarianism reflects Scripture’s teaching on God’s gift of gender, it is often resisted or criticized, even from within evangelicalism. In this environment, many of our churches are doing skillful work to give a biblical apologetic for its truthfulness and a cultural apologetic for its goodness. They are doing this with both clarity and charity!
2. Many of our churches are also keen to flesh out a holistic vision of complementarianism—one that doesn’t stop at the office of elder being filled by qualified men but also offers a comprehensive vision of men and women working together to build up the body of Christ. They have energy to both develop godly male elders and develop the gifts of women for service in the church and Kingdom. We believe this represents a maturing vision of complementarianism. You are showing us that men and women need each other and that we all have work to do in fulfilling the Great Commission.

We believe that combining these two emphases is the way forward. Let’s give a cogent defense of complementarianism in the face of cultural pressure, and let’s develop the gifts of men and women together.

This is the gift we hope Acts 29 will offer to the broader Church and to the next generation of church planters! It’s urgently needed in our day and will require planting many more churches that share this vision.

In Christ,
The Acts 29 Board