The Model Church/Church Models

Early Church Models-Structure, Assembly & Leadership

A comprehensive look at how the New Testament church organized itself across diverse cultures, geographies, and theological contexts — and how those patterns speak to us today.



Session Agenda

A roadmap for our time together, exploring the biblical models of the early church and their relevance for modern ministry.

01

The Five Primary Early Church Models

Exploring the Jerusalem, Antioch, House Church, Ephesian, and Corinthian models.

02

Early Church vs. Modern Church Forms

Comparing assembly practices, leadership structures, and ministry philosophy.

03

The Five-Fold Gifts in Each Model

How apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers functioned uniquely.

04

2,000 Years of Structural Evolution

Tracing the shift from plurality to the modern Senior Pastor paradigm.

05

Contemporary Movements & Transitions

APEST, Micro-Church Networks, and Plural Elder models restructuring leadership today.

INTRODUCTION

One Spirit, Many Structures



Why Does Structure Matter?

When looking across the New Testament — especially Acts and the Epistles — the early church did not operate under a single uniform organizational model.

Local assemblies adapted their structures, meeting places, and leadership styles based on their cultural, geographic, and theological contexts.

The Five Primary Models

1. ## Jerusalem Model

   The Apostolic / Mother Church — centralized, deeply Jewish, focused on communal care and apostolic authority.

2. ## Antioch Model

   The Missional / Multi-Ethnic Hub — decentralized, outward-focused, pioneering in cross-cultural missions.

3. ## House Church (Oikos) Model

   Organic, intimate, family-centered gatherings of 15–40 people, decentralized and gift-led.

4. ## Ephesian Model

   The Regional Network / Training Center — a hub for multiplication and equipping across an entire province.

5. ## Corinthian Model

   The Charismatic / Participatory Assembly — fluid, Spirit-driven, and highly interactive.

MODEL A

The Jerusalem Model

Acts 2:42–47 · Acts 4:32–35 · Acts 15

Core Identity

Centralized, highly relational, deeply Jewish, and focused on communal care and preserving apostolic authority.

Form of Assembly

A two-tier structure: large public gatherings in the Temple courts for teaching and praise, then small house-to-house groups for table fellowship and the Lord's Supper.

Leadership & Governance

Governed by the Twelve Apostles alongside local elders (presbyters) like James. It operated as a spiritual mother church that settled doctrinal disputes for surrounding communities, as seen in the Jerusalem Council.

> *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."* — Acts 2:42

MODEL B

The Antioch Model

Acts 11:19–26 · Acts 13:1–3

Core Identity

Decentralized, outward-focused, culturally adaptable, and pioneering in cross-cultural missions.

Form of Assembly

Multi-ethnic household gatherings that blended Jewish and Gentile traditions without demanding cultural conformity to Jewish customs.

Leadership & Governance

Led by a team of prophets and teachers from diverse cultural backgrounds: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius, Manaen, and Saul.

Leadership focused on discerning Holy Spirit direction to commission and send out apostolically gifted workers — making it the original missional sending hub.

MODELS C · D · E

House Church, Ephesian & Corinthian Models

MODEL C — OIKOS

House Church Model

Gatherings of 15–40 people in residential living areas or courtyard dining rooms. The primary venue was a full, shared meal including the Lord's Supper. Hosted by prominent household heads — men or women — with leadership shared organically by spiritual gifts. *Romans 16:5 · Colossians 4:15 · Philemon 1:2*

MODEL D — EPHESUS

Regional Network / Training Center

Centered on a daily public lecture hall (the School of Tyrannus) for deep instruction, connected to a network of local household churches. Plurality of elders and overseers working alongside five-fold ministry gifts to equip all members for ministry. *Acts 19:8–10 · Ephesians 4:11–16*

MODEL E — CORINTH

Charismatic / Participatory Assembly

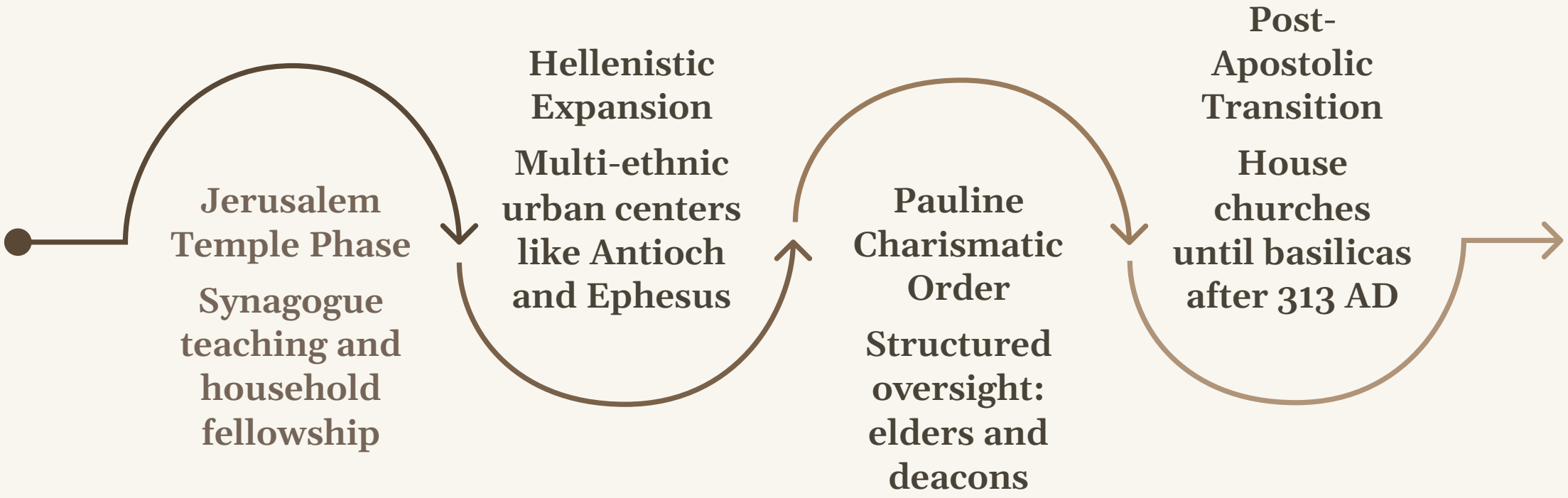
Interactive, open gatherings where every member was expected to bring a contribution — a psalm, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation (1 Cor 14:26). Less focused on formal hierarchy; more reliant on spiritual gifts functioning in harmony. *1 Corinthians 12–14*

Early Church vs. Modern Church Forms

The contrast between how the early church assembled and how modern churches operate reveals a striking structural divergence across every major dimension of congregational life.

Aspect	Early Church Assemblies	Modern Church Forms
Physical Space	Homes, rented halls (Tyrannus), public temple courts, outdoors	Dedicated ecclesiastical buildings, auditoriums, sanctuaries
Gospel Orientation	Inward community care paired with outward, organic neighborhood reach	Attractional (bring people to the building) or program-driven outreach
Service Focus	Interactive teaching, participatory contributions, and shared covenant meals	Monologue preaching, professional worship bands, and structured itineraries
Leadership	Plurality of elders, team-based leadership, and spiritual gift networks	Single Lead/Senior Pastor model, corporate board of directors, hierarchical staff
Lord's Supper	A full fellowship meal eaten together as a community (Agape feast)	A symbolic, ceremonial token (wafer/bread and juice) within a main service
Financial Flow	Direct aid to the poor, supporting itinerant workers, mutual relief funds	Property maintenance, staff salaries, audio/visual technology, operational overhead

Structural Evolution: Four Phases



From Jewish temple courts to Roman basilicas — the early church's structural journey spans four distinct phases, each shaped by persecution, expansion, and cultural context.

EPHESIANS 4:11–13

The Five-Fold Gifts: Function Over Title

Paul outlines five distinct functions given to the body of Christ: apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds (pastors), and teachers. Rather than functioning as hierarchical titles, these gifts operated dynamically as function-based team gifts.

Apostles (Apostoloi)

Pioneer, architect, foundation-layer. Establishes new communities and oversees networks.

Prophets (Prophetai)

Speaks timely, Spirit-inspired direction. Discerns opposition, warns of crises, and verifies council decisions.

Evangelists (Euangelistai)

Herald of the Gospel. Activates believers in sharing their faith and reaches new communities outwardly.

Shepherds / Pastors (Poimenes)

Cares for the flock. Focuses on soul care, conflict resolution, community health, and financial equity.

Teachers (Didaskaloi)

Grounds believers in sound doctrine. Oversees curriculum, worldview formation, and theological clarity.

Five-Fold in the Jerusalem Model

The Jerusalem church operated as the foundational mother church. Its governance blended apostolic witness with an elder-led council system, implementing the five-fold gifts in a preservation-focused framework.



Apostles — Foundational Authority

The Twelve held a unique status as eyewitnesses of the resurrection. They authenticated new movements (e.g., sending Peter and John to Samaria in Acts 8) and established core doctrine.



Prophets — Timely Direction

Jerusalem prophets such as Agabus, Judas Barsabbas, and Silas operated locally and as itinerant messengers. They warned of coming crises (Acts 11:27–28) and verified council decisions to Gentile churches.



Shepherds & Teachers — Day-to-Day Oversight

As the Jerusalem assembly grew into the thousands, oversight shifted to a body of elders (presbyteroi) headed by James. Shepherds handled communal care and table fellowship; teachers grounded converts in how Jesus fulfilled the Hebrew Scriptures.



Evangelists — Sent Outward by Persecution

Initially proclamations were made at the Temple courts. When persecution arose, Philip moved outward to Samaria and the coastal plains (Acts 8:4–5, 40), heralding the gospel beyond Jerusalem's borders.

Five-Fold in the Antioch Model

Antioch rejected a single dominant leader in favor of a flat, team-based leadership core that prioritized spiritual discernment and cross-cultural expansion. Acts 13:1 explicitly names its leadership structure.

> ***"Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen… and Saul."*** **— Acts 13:1**

1

Prophets & Teachers: The Core Engine

Prophets cultivated an atmosphere attuned to Holy Spirit direction through fasting, prayer, and worship. Teachers spent an entire year grounding Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus' teachings (Acts 11:26).

2

Apostles: "Sent Ones" Born from the Team

Apostolic ministry was born out of the prophetic/teaching team. The Holy Spirit instructed: *"Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them"* (Acts 13:2). Antioch released — not retained — its best leaders.

3

Evangelists & Shepherds: Frontlines & Folds

Evangelists reached Gentiles directly (Acts 11:20–21). Shepherds then folded new converts into diverse household networks, ensuring unity between Jewish and Gentile believers across ethnic and economic lines.

Five-Fold in the Ephesian Model

Ephesus was a major provincial capital in Asia Minor. Here, the five-fold gifts operated explicitly under the equipping paradigm of Ephesians 4:11–12 — "to equip the saints for the work of ministry."

Teachers at the Hub

Daily systematic instruction at the School of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9–10) trained practitioners who carried the message throughout Asia Minor — founding churches like Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis.

Apostles as Network Architects

Paul operated as a "master builder" (1 Cor 3:10), establishing the Ephesian hub, overseeing satellite church plants, and appointing local elders to steward established communities (Acts 20:17).

Prophets — Discerning Opposition

Ephesian prophets worked alongside apostles to lay foundational theology and discern spiritual opposition in a city steeped in magic and idolatry (Acts 19:18–20).

Shepherds — Protecting the Flock

In Paul's farewell address (Acts 20:28), the elders were called to operate as shepherds and overseers who protect the flock from "savage wolves" (false teachers) and care for local house churches.

Evangelists — Equipped & Deployed

Evangelists like Timothy were trained at the Tyrannus hub and sent into surrounding towns to activate everyday believers in sharing their faith (2 Tim 4:5).

Summary: Five-Fold Focus by Model

Five-Fold Gift	Jerusalem Model	Antioch Model	Ephesian Model
Primary Role	Foundational council & doctrinal guardians	Sent-out missional teams	Network architects & equippers
Dominant Mix	Apostles & Elders (Shepherds)	Prophets & Teachers	Teachers, Apostles & Shepherds
Operational Mode	Top-down council & house-to-house care	Pluralistic team fasting & Holy Spirit commissioning	Regional lecture hall instruction & local house application
Ministry Goal	Preserve truth & care for the community	Pioneer cross-cultural mission	Equip every believer to multiply churches regionally

The transition from team-based, fluid leadership to the modern Senior Pastor model represents a 2,000-year structural evolution.

2,000 Years of Structural Evolution

Four distinct historical phases — each driven by the need to safeguard doctrine, the institutionalization of Christianity, and modern organizational theory.



PHASE 1

The Post-Apostolic Shift: Plurality to Monarchical Bishop

c. AD 90 – AD 150

The New Testament Reality

The terms presbyteros (elder), episkopos (overseer/bishop), and poimen (shepherd/pastor) were used interchangeably to describe a local team of leaders (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5–7). No single leader presided over a city's churches.

Key Drivers of the Shift

Death of the Apostles: Local churches faced a leadership vacuum and needed a clear point of authority.

Threat of Heresy: Gnosticism, Marcionism, and Montanism threatened orthodoxy, driving the case for a single recognized overseer per city.

Ignatius of Antioch (c. AD 110) became the primary proponent, urging churches to do nothing without the bishop — effectively replacing pluralistic five-fold teams with a single authority at the top of a citywide hierarchy.

PHASE 2

Roman Imperial Institutionalization

c. AD 313 – AD 500

When Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan (AD 313) and legalized Christianity, church organization adapted to match Roman civic administration — with sweeping consequences for every dimension of church life.

1

313 AD — Edict of Milan

Christianity was legalized. The imperial state began funding church construction, shifting assemblies from intimate house churches into civic Roman basilicas.

2

c. 325 AD — Dioceses & Clergy Class

Church boundaries were redrawn to match Roman imperial districts. Bishops were granted state judicial powers and legal status equivalent to Roman magistrates.

3

c. 380–500 AD — Rise of Sacerdotalism

Ministers transitioned from "equippers of the saints" to mediating priests. The Lord's Supper moved from a shared Agape feast to an altar-centered sacrifice administered strictly by ordained clergy.

The five-fold gifts were absorbed into a rigid three-tiered hierarchy: Bishop, Priest, and Deacon. The laity were reduced to passive recipients of holy sacraments rather than active participants (1 Cor 14:26).

PHASE 3

The Protestant Reformation: The Teaching Pastor Takes Center Stage

16th Century

What the Reformers Restored

Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli rejected the Papacy and the Roman Catholic sacramental priesthood, restoring the doctrine of the Priesthood of All Believers (1 Pet 2:9).

The pulpit — rather than the altar — became the physical and structural focal point of the church service, exalting the Word above sacrament.

What the Reformers Did Not Fully Restore

John Calvin and other Reformers argued that the offices of Apostle and Prophet were extraordinary gifts restricted solely to the 1st-century foundation of the church.

They recognized only Pastors and Teachers as ongoing offices. While Calvin established a plurality of elders in Geneva, in practice, the ordained, formally educated Teaching Pastor became the primary leader of local congregations — creating the prototype of the solo clergyman.

PHASE 4

The Modern Era: Corporate Industrialization & the Solo Senior Pastor

19th – 21st Century

Factor	Historical Mechanism	Structural Result
Frontier Revivalism (19th Century)	Circuit riders and itinerant evangelists like Charles Finney prioritized pragmatic, charismatic individuals who could gather and manage large crowds quickly.	Established the pattern of a single dynamic leader driving local church growth.
Corporate Business Models (20th Century)	Churches adopted modern organizational management theory, structuring themselves like corporations with CEOs, boards, and staff hierarchies.	The Pastor became the "Chief Executive Officer," responsible for vision casting, staff oversight, and budget growth.
Attractional / Megachurch Era (Late 20th – Present)	Church growth methodologies prioritized professionalized weekend services built around high-production worship and a single communicator's pulpit presence.	Five-fold functional equipping was largely replaced by professional staff managing programs for consumer-oriented congregants.

Contemporary Movements Responding to These Limitations

In response to the limitations of the traditional single senior pastor/CEO structure, several contemporary ecclesial movements are actively restructuring leadership around team-based, decentralized, and participatory New Testament frameworks.

While these movements differ in culture and scope, they share a common goal: shifting the local church from a consumer model led by a single professional to an equipping ecosystem driven by shared leadership.

The APEST / Five-Fold Movement

Restoring all five Ephesians 4 gifts as active, functional roles within leadership teams.

Micro-Church & Organic Networks

Decentralizing the church into dozens or hundreds of autonomous gatherings of 15–30 people.

Plural Elders / Co-Pastor Models

Transitioning existing traditional churches into team-led structures without dismantling the local congregational format.

Movement 1: The APEST / Five-Fold Movement

Key Figures: Alan Hirsch (*The Forgotten Ways*), Mike Breen (3DM), Movement Leaders Network. Core conviction: relying primarily on Shepherds and Teachers produces a church culture focused on internal maintenance rather than outward expansion.



Apostolic Types

Deployed as church planters, social entrepreneurs, and missional innovators.



Prophetic Types

Trained to give voice to justice, prayer, discernment, and cultural critique.



Evangelistic Types

Lead outward engagement and train believers in relational storytelling.



Shepherding Types

Focus on soul care, small groups, and conflict resolution.



Teaching Types

Oversee curriculum, worldview formation, and theological clarity.

Movement 2: Micro-Church & Organic / House Church Networks

Key Figures: Neil Cole (*Organic Church*), Francis Chan (We Are Church), Underground Network (Tampa), Kansas City Underground. Core conviction: true discipleship thrives in intimate settings of 15 to 30 people where every member actively participates.

Decentralization of Assembly

Rather than inviting people to a central building, the church decentralizes into dozens or hundreds of autonomous micro-churches meeting in homes, coffee shops, workplaces, and community hubs.

Bi-Vocational / Unpaid Leadership

Leadership is decentralized away from paid professionals. Micro-churches are led by unpaid, bi-vocational team leaders — often pairs or small teams — who earn their living in secular vocations.

Decoupling Overhead from Growth

Financial resources bypass property mortgages, staff salaries, and staging production, redirecting funds straight to local mercy ministries, global missions, and community relief.

Network / Hub Governance

A small centralized team (often an apostolic/coaching core) provides oversight, theological training, and crisis intervention without controlling week-to-week operations of individual micro-churches.

Movement 3: Plural Elders / Co-Pastor Models

Key Figures: Alexander Strauch (*Biblical Eldership*), Acts 29 Network, Redeemer City to City. Focus: transitioning existing traditional churches into team-led structures without completely dismantling the local congregational format.

Co-Pastoral Teaching Teams

Replacing the single primary preacher with a teaching team of 3–5 elders who rotate in the pulpit. This prevents a congregation from tying its identity, theology, or survival to one charismatic personality.

First Among Equals (Primus Inter Pares)

Where a lead staff role is retained, the Lead Pastor holds equal voting power within an elder board, serving as a team leader rather than an authoritative manager.

Separation of Governance and Operations

The Elders (Spiritual Oversight): Focus strictly on prayer, theological integrity, soul care, and strategic vision.

Deacons & Ministry Directors (Operational Execution): Manage physical assets, administrative logistics, financial stewardship, and program execution.

Modern Structural Models: Comparison

Aspect	Traditional Senior Pastor	APEST Movement	Micro-Church Network	Plural Eldership
Primary Leader	Single Senior Pastor / CEO	Shared APEST Leadership Core	Bi-Vocational Co-Leaders	Plurality of Elders (Primus Inter Pares)
Gathering Size	100 to 5,000+ (Auditorium)	Varies (Hubs + House Networks)	10 to 30 (Living Rooms / Hubs)	100 to 2,000+ (Sanctuary / Campus)
Pulpit Ministry	Monologue by Lead Pastor	Rotating five-fold equippers	Participatory discussion / Table fellowship	Rotation among teaching elders
Financial Model	High overhead (Staff, facility)	Balanced (Equipping, mission)	Low overhead (Direct relief, planting)	High to moderate overhead
Primary Goal	Attractional growth & centralized gathering	Equipping saints for five-fold deployment	Decentralized multiplication & missional presence	Orthodoxy & healthy pastoral care

Key Challenges Facing These Transitions

1 The Consumer Mindset

Modern congregants are often accustomed to passive church attendance and high-production services, making active participatory leadership feel demanding or unfamiliar.

2 Economic Realities

Traditional denominational and financial models are built around supporting full-time professional pastoral staff, requiring significant structural retooling to support bi-vocational or team models.

3 Leadership Pipeline Strain

Decentralized and five-fold models require a continuous pipeline of mature leaders. Without intentional training systems, decentralized networks risk leader burnout or doctrinal drift.

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