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Elders with an “S”

Plural Pastors in the Life of a Local Church

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Introduction

And when [Paul and Barnabas] had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23 ESV)¹

The church I serve, Evangelical Church of Fairport (hereafter referred to as ECF), is an independent, reformed, credobaptist church with an elder-led congregational church government. This paper will advocate for this form of church polity for independent, non-denominational churches and explain to an extent how this form of church government functions at ECF.

I would like to acknowledge 9Marks.org², with online and print resources that are invaluable for churches governed by a plurality of elders and for church leadership in general.

Elders are Overseers are Pastors

For the purposes of this paper, we're going to accept the traditional view that elder (Greek *presbuteros*) and overseer (*episkopos*) refer to the same office. Benjamin Merkle cites Jerome in the early fifth century as noting that in the early church, "the names were synonymous."³

After discussing opposing views, Merkle provides four reasons why he views the terms as representing the same office. First, he points out that the terms are often used interchangeably and as part of that, he cites Titus 1:5-7.⁴ In verse 5, Paul uses the term elders, and in verse 7, he replaces elders with overseers.

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you— ⁶if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. ⁷For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, ⁸but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. ⁹He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. (Titus 1:5-9)

Merkle notes also that elders are never given separate qualifications from overseers⁵ and that elders and overseers have the same function, "ruling/leading and teaching."⁶ Lastly, Merkle states that nowhere in the New Testament are elders and overseers listed as separate offices, and he points to Ignatius in his second-century epistles as the first to separate overseer and elder in the form of a monarchical bishop and the elders (or presbytery).⁷

Merkle summarizes with an explanation about why the two terms were employed.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016. Print.

² 9Marks: Leadership. <https://www.9marks.org/leadership/>, accessed 6 February 2021.

³ Benjamin Merkle. *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons (40 Questions & Answers Series)* (Kindle Location 699). Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2008. Kindle Edition.

⁴ *Ibid.* (Kindle Location 724).

⁵ *Ibid.* (Kindle Location 735).

⁶ *Ibid.* (Kindle Location 746).

⁷ *Ibid.* (Kindle Location 758).

The reason could be explained by the general use of the terms: elder is more a description of character, whereas overseer is more a description of function." It appears that originally various congregations preferred one term over the other. The Jewish congregations apparently favored the term *presbuteros*, while the Gentile congregations favored the term *episkopos*. Over time, however, these two terms came to be used in the same congregations and could be used interchangeably since they referred to the leaders of the congregation. It is likely that both terms remained due to the important connotations each term carried. The term *presbuteros* conveyed the idea of a wise, mature leader who was honored and respected by those of the community. The term *episkopos* spoke more to the work of the individual whose duty it was to "oversee" and protect those under his care.⁸

What then of the office of pastor? Merkle calls this synonymous with elder and overseer, citing Ephesians 4:11, where *poimenas* is rendered "pastor" or "shepherd" in various English translations. He argues that because elders/overseers and pastors are both given the task of teaching and because there is no separate listing of qualifications, that "pastor" should not be considered a separate office.⁹

In the rest of this paper, the terms elder and pastor will be used interchangeably and are to be understood as the same office of the church. (When updating the church constitution of ECF and in practice as discussed later, the term "pastor" is emphasized intentionally to show to the congregation that full-time paid pastors and non-vocational pastor/elders are holding the same office within the church, even though their roles, responsibilities, and compensation may and do differ.)

Church Polity

It is useful before we continue further to identify various models of church governance, with more detail on those we would find in a generally Reformed setting, and then with additional emphasis upon the form found at ECF.

In their book *Elder Governance: Insights into Making the Transition*, authors Daniel Evans and Joseph Godwin Jr. identify three primary forms of church government: episcopalian, presbyterian, and congregational.¹⁰ Merkle adds "nongovernmental" to the list, referring mainly to some Brethren and Quaker congregations.¹¹

Merkle describes the episcopal form of government – which takes its name from *episkopos*, as described above – as "hierarchical-autocratic" and categorizes "Episcopalians, Anglicans, Methodists, Eastern Orthodox churches, Roman Catholics, and some Lutherans," as having this form of church government. This form of church polity finds authority centralized in the office of the bishop, who is responsible for ordaining and appointing leaders for local churches.¹²

⁸ *Ibid.* (Kindle Locations 768-773).

⁹ *Ibid.* (Kindle Location 512ff).

¹⁰ Daniel Evans and Joseph Godwin Jr. *Elder Governance: Insights into Making the Transition* (p. 11). Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2011. Print.

¹¹ Merkle. (Kindle Location 758).

¹² *Ibid.* (Kindle Location 181ff).

The presbyterian form of church government – taking its name from *presbuteros* – is practiced by Presbyterians and other Reformed denominations. Merkle describes this form as “hierarchical-representative.”¹³

The model of congregational church government has in itself multiple models – or “sub-models” – of organization. Wayne Grudem identifies five sub-models of congregational church government: single elder (or pastor), plural local elders, corporate board, pure democracy, and “no government but the Holy Spirit,” which corresponds to Merkle’s nongovernmental form.¹⁴ The first three of those sub-models are of specific interest to this paper.

A single elder (or single pastor) church with an elected deacon board is the most common form of Baptist church polity in the United States¹⁵, according to Grudem, who also notes that sometimes the board of deacons in concert with the elder/pastor will serve as a form of a board of elders. Grudem finds support for a single elder lacking in Scripture as he argues against A. H. Strong’s 1907 *Systematic Theology*¹⁶ and against pragmatic church growth models.¹⁷

Grudem uses the term “plural local elders” with an emphasis on *local* to differentiate from a presbyterian system in that elders, “when gathered on the level of the presbytery or general assembly, have authority over more than their own congregations,” although that does not prohibit associations beyond the local congregation.¹⁸ (ECF is a member of such an association, F.I.R.E., or the Fellowship of Independent Reformed Evangelicals, “a unifying network for independent Reformed (and Reforming) baptistic churches to experience mutual edification, fellowship, cooperation and prayerful support in ministries and missions.”¹⁹) While not a distinctive of any particular denomination, this form of church government is common in many individual and independent congregations.²⁰ This, along with a board of deacons, is the form of church government currently in place at ECF and will be discussed in further detail below.

Also of note for the purposes of this paper is the “corporate board” form of church government, patterned after the example of a modern corporation in which a board of directors hires an executive officer. Grudem calls this the “you-work-for-us” structure.²¹ (Prior to the adoption of its current constitution in 2017, ECF had a form of this church polity, with a corporate board who saw its role to include oversight and hiring of pastors, a board of elders whose duties were to assist a senior pastor in his shepherding duties, and a deacon board, which was limited mostly to benevolence activities. The difficulties with this structure are discussed later.)

Biblical Qualifications

Before going into more detail on congregational church government with a plurality of elders, it will be useful to review the Biblical qualifications for elders.

¹³ *Ibid.* (Kindle Location 189).

¹⁴ Wayne Grudem. *Systematic Theology* (p. 928-936). Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1994. Print.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* (p. 928).

¹⁶ *Ibid.* (p. 928-931).

¹⁷ *Ibid.* (p. 931).

¹⁸ *Ibid.* (p. 933).

¹⁹ About FIRE. <https://www.firefellowship.org/about-us>, accessed 7 February 2021.

²⁰ Grudem. (p. 931).

²¹ *Ibid.* (p. 938).

Paul does this in letters to Timothy (1 Timothy 3:1-7) and Titus (Titus 1:5-9 as referenced earlier).

1 Timothy 3:1-7:

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷ Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

At ECF, when we sought a full-time associate pastor to eventually serve as lead pastor, we had two sets of standards that had to be met. First was that the man chosen must meet biblical qualifications as outlined in the pastoral epistles as primarily delineated in 1 Timothy. Secondly, there needed to be a close alignment theologically, especially in areas that are distinctives for our church.

We use those same qualifications when choosing non-vocational pastor/elders.

Here is a review of some of the requirements for elders as Paul outlined them in his first letter to Timothy along with some observations from my own experience in serving as an elder.

A Noble Task

"The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task." (1 Timothy 3:1).

In his book, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*, Thabiti M. Anyabwile acknowledges what I have found to be the case from experience: this isn't as easy or as straightforward as it sounds.

Some men may "want the office," but their wanting is really lust for power, and so they are not fit. Conversely, some men who are fit for the office think that wanting it shows pride, ungodly ambition, or impoliteness. Finally, some men are probably qualified, but they either lack the desire or think they are not qualified because they're holding onto some idea of a "super elder."²²

In my experience at ECF, it has been common to find young men eager to preach to the gathered assembly. Often there are younger men who have some gifting in public speaking and perhaps who would like to find themselves as the center of attention. But that eagerness to be the voice echoing from the pulpit becomes less eager when the opportunity is given to preach at a nursing home or at a rescue mission.

Other times, those who might have a desire to teach are turned off by other duties of the office, many of which may seem mundane: discussing budgets, administration of meetings, and other "non-spiritual" duties that are part of the orderly operation of a church.

²² Thabiti M. Anyabwile. *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons (9Marks)* (p. 51). Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.

Even the offer of a chance to teach a Sunday school class or a Bible study may discourage someone from seeking the office of an elder if he is seeking it for his own acclaim rather than to serve. It's not unlike a new hire at a company who is dismayed that he doesn't have the corner office after six months.

About 10 years ago at ECF, we had a "1 Timothy" class that met monthly that was designed to start young men on their way toward eldership. The first class had about 20 in attendance. But as the months progressed, fewer and fewer attended as they saw the commitment in study and service that was required. We saw a similar pattern when offering the Porterbrook Network's curriculum that was designed for training church planters and church leaders. Eventually the group of 15 or so that had been interested dwindled to about seven.

The task is also noble because of whom the task models: Christ. It requires a man to desire to be an example to a church even as he strives to follow the example of the Great Shepherd. He must be "an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity." (1 Timothy 4:12)

If Anyabwile is correct that it can be difficult to find men aspiring to serve as an elder, then that suggests that we must find and cultivate that desire in those who we see serving in "elder-like" ways. Anyabwile suggests four traits to watch for, which I will summarize here.

*1) Take note of those men who regularly attend the church's services and the church's business meetings.*²³

We have had young men who have expressed a desire to become an elder yet fail to attend many of the church's regular meetings – even some who will attend a Bible study when it's their turn to lead or teach, but not when others are leading. That is a red flag indicating someone may not be teachable or who may only want to be the one at the center of things.

*2) Note the men who already appear to be shepherding members of the church even though they don't have the title "elder" or "pastor."*²⁴

This may be the most important area for identifying someone. Is he already teaching, mentoring, and shepherding? Does he seek opportunities to serve and assist? And is he doing it without seeking recognition? If you can answer yes to these questions about someone, then he is already serving as an undershepherd without the office.

*3) Note those men who show respect and trust in the existing leadership, who work to understand the directions pursued by leadership, who ask good and appropriate questions in appropriate settings, and who avoid creating confusion or dissension in public meetings.*²⁵

Seeing those who we have identified as possible future elders failing to show respect or to cause dissension has been one of the great disappointments I have had while serving as an elder.

*4) Be patient and note those men who evidence the desire over time.*²⁶

²³ *Ibid.* (p. 53).

²⁴ *Ibid.* (p. 53).

²⁵ *Ibid.* (p. 53).

²⁶ *Ibid.* (p. 53).

Perhaps more patience on my part and of the other elders in our church would have avoided the disappointment we have seen when those whom we identified as potential future elders have faded away.

It's also important to emphasize a need to be patient in those who seek to be elders. I am often reminded of James Montgomery Boice's commentary on Paul's years of preparation after being called on the Damascus Road. He notes that Paul had spent nearly 12 years being prepared to be sent out as the missionary to the Gentiles. Boice observes:

You may be in a time of preparation too, even though you are thirty, forty, fifty, or more years of age. If you are, don't cut your years for preparation short. If you have been given such years, cherish them and use them wisely. Christians emphasize missions, and missions are important. Don't give up on missions, but don't give up on preparation for other Christian work either. The important thing is to keep close accounts with God, study the Bible, learn about others, and serve everyone as widely and as well as you can. It may be that in the years to come, you will look back on this very time and say, "God was working," and others will note that God was indeed preparing you for even more useful service.²⁷

I've found those words to be tremendously encouraging, and I've used those to encourage others.

We'll move more quickly through the other qualifications, highlighting those that apply to the question of appointing elders and how they will serve in light of the congregational/elder-led view of church polity, although the qualifications apply to any sort of church governance.

Above Reproach

Paul continues with a phrase that is the umbrella for the subpoints that follow: "Therefore an overseer must be above reproach ..." (1 Timothy 3:2).

Paul is asserting that "the person should be of stellar character and free of obvious or provable black marks against his character."²⁸

Are we looking for sinless perfection? Certainly not.

Being above reproach means that an elder is to be the kind of man whom no one suspects of wrongdoing and immorality. People would be shocked to hear this kind of man charged with such acts. Being above reproach does not mean that he maintains sinless perfection. It means that his demeanor and behavior over time have garnered respect and admiration from others. He lives a life worthy of the calling of God (Eph. 4:1; 5:1-2; Phil. 1:27; Col. 1:10-12).²⁹

In our pastoral search, character – one that is above reproach – was the foremost qualification that was required.

Paul teases out "above reproach" (as the ESV renders it) as he continues.

²⁷ Boice, James Montgomery. *Acts: An Expositional Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997. Print.

²⁸ Yarbrough, Robert W. *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*. Ed. D. A. Carson. Grand Rapids, MI; London: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2018. Print. Pillar New Testament Commentary.

²⁹ Anyabwile (p. 57).

The Husband of One Wife

Paul continues in verse 2 that an elder must be “the husband of one wife,” or alternately, “one-woman man.”

This is a phrase that has been a source of controversy

Anyabwile references Phil Ryken on this point.

To be above reproach, an elder must be “the husband of one wife.” This does not prohibit bachelors from serving as elders. Commonly, elders will be married, and God will use the demands of their callings as husbands and fathers to do much of the sanctifying work that needs to be done in their lives before they are ready to serve as officers in the church. But remember that Paul himself was single and commended singleness to others as an opportunity for greater service in the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 7:17; 9:5). Some suggest that the phrase means “married only once.” This would disqualify widowers who remarry, as well as men who have been through a divorce. If this is what Paul meant, however, one might expect him to be more explicit. The point of the phrase is probably more general: elders must be morally accountable for their sexuality. The Greeks and the Romans of the day generally tolerated gross sexual sin. Polygamy was practiced by both Greeks and Jews. Marriage was undermined by frequent divorce, widespread adultery, and rampant homosexuality. The words of Demosthenes show the scope of the problem: “Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our persons, but wives to bear us legitimate children.”³⁰

Merkle argues similarly:

First, the focus of the phrase is not that a man is married but that he is faithful to his “one” wife. The Greek literally reads, “one-woman man” (*mias gunaikos andra*), with emphasis placed on the first word, “one” (*mias*). Second, Paul clearly teaches that singleness has many advantages over being married. In 1 Corinthians, Paul even encourages singleness, explaining how those who are not married are able to serve the Lord with undivided attention (7:32-35). Third, Paul could have written that an elder must be a man who has a wife (which is different from saying he must be a “one-woman man”). Fourth, this qualification would eliminate Paul, Timothy, and the Lord Jesus Himself from being eligible to serve as elders. Fifth, to be consistent, we would have to require men to have more than one child since Paul indicates that a potential elder must manage his “children” (plural) well.³¹

John R. W. Stott – who himself never married – offered this view:

First, it is suggested that Paul is excluding those who have *never married*. Certainly he assumes that pastors will normally be married (as were the other apostles), and without doubt the experience of marriage and family life greatly helps them in their ministry. Nevertheless, Paul is not intending to disqualify those of us who are single (or indeed married but childless, verse 5). Only the Eastern Orthodox churches have taught from this

³⁰ Ibid. (p. 62) referencing Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Timothy, Reformed Expositors Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007) (p. 111).

³¹ Merkle (Kindle Locations 1220-1225).

text that marriage is obligatory for parish clergy (while requiring their 'higher' clergy to be celibate monks). But Jesus and Paul both maintained that some are called to remain single.³²

At ECF, the elders are in agreement with Ryken and Stott, or this author would not be an elder.

Able to teach

"Therefore an overseer must be ... able to teach ..." (1 Timothy 3:2).

As described above, our position at ECF is that there is not a delineation between ruling elders and teaching elders, but that all elders must be able to teach. Indeed, as one reviews all of the qualifications for elders that Paul enumerates, most should apply to all Christians, and certainly mature ones. But the duty to teach is one that applies specifically to elders who are entrusted with the faithful preaching and teaching of the Word of God.

The ability to teach does not necessarily mean being a gifted public speaker; it may also mean being able in one-on-one or small group settings.³³ Because teaching is something that is specifically called out for elders to perform for the entire church, it is teaching that is central to the duties of all pastors and elders. Anyabwile notes that even in setting an example for others, a pastor/elder is teaching. "So what should a good pastor do? He should devote himself to these three pursuits: public reading of Scripture, exhortation, and teaching."³⁴

While a church may be organized in such a way that certain individual pastor/elders do the majority of preaching and teaching, Scripture does not allow for an elder who is not able to teach.

The Duties of Elders

Anyabwile provides a concise list of duties or responsibilities for pastor/elders in the third section of his book beginning on page 111.³⁵ It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe each in detail, but his main headings and supporting Scripture references are given below.

Elders Refute Error³⁶

He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. (Titus 1:9)

Elders Avoid Myths and Train for Godliness³⁷

Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; (1 Timothy 4:7)

³² Stott, John R. W. *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996. Print. The Bible Speaks Today.

³³ Anyabwile (p. 78).

³⁴ *Ibid.* (p. 141).

³⁵ *Ibid.* (p. 111-159).

³⁶ *Ibid.* (p. 111).

³⁷ *Ibid.* (p. 117).

Elders Hope in God³⁸

We have our hope set on the living God. (1 Timothy 4:10)

Elders Command³⁹

Command and teach these things. (1 Timothy 4:11)

Elders Let No One Despise Their Youth⁴⁰

Let no one despise you for your youth. (1 Timothy 4:12)

Elders Set an Example⁴¹

But set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. (1 Timothy 4:12)

Elders Teach⁴²

[D]evote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. (1 Timothy 4:13)

Elders Grow⁴³

Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. (1 Timothy 4:15)

Elders Watch Their Life⁴⁴

Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. (1 Timothy 4:16)

Elders Watch Their Doctrine⁴⁵

[T]each what accords with sound doctrine. (Titus 2:1)

Elders with an S

As noted earlier, ECF is an independent, generally reformed, credobaptist church with an elder-led congregational church government. As such, we do not belong to a denomination, but, as mentioned previously, do belong to an association. F.I.R.E. has regular national and regional meetings, provides referrals to people looking for churches, provides resources for missions, and serves as a network

³⁸ *Ibid.* (p. 123).

³⁹ *Ibid.* (p. 127).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* (p. 131).

⁴¹ *Ibid.* (p. 135).

⁴² *Ibid.* (p. 141).

⁴³ *Ibid.* (p. 145).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* (p. 151).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* (p. 155).

for pastors and church leaders looking for support on various issues. At ECF, we do not have responsibility for other churches in any formal way.

Probably the biggest difference for elders in an elder-led congregational church – or as Grudem describes it, “plural local elders” – and presbyterian polity is that all elders in an elder-led congregational church are expected to serve both in the roles of teaching and ruling.

The difference in approach to elders between the two systems of church polity is explained here not to argue against a presbyterian form but to draw the distinctions in order to better describe an elder-led congregational form as practiced by many independent churches and by ECF.

Merkle states that the support for separate teaching elders and ruling elders is based on 1 Timothy 5:17: “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”⁴⁶

Merkle describes the requirements for and duties of a teaching elder in a presbyterian form of church government:

For example, in most churches with a presbyterian style of government, the teaching elder must be (1) seminary trained, (2) thoroughly examined by the presbytery, and (3) ordained. He alone is allowed to perform the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. He also can conduct weddings and funerals and is charged with the task of preaching and teaching. He is not a member of the church where he ministers but is a member of the presbytery.⁴⁷

He contrasts this with ruling elders:

Seminary training is not needed by the ruling elder and neither is an examination by the presbytery nor ordination. He cannot baptize or conduct the Lord's Supper. He is not allowed to officiate weddings or funerals and does not usually teach or preach. He is a member of the church where he serves, but his service is usually defined by or limited to terms.⁴⁸

At ECF, we would agree with Merkle's summary: “In 1 Timothy 5:17, Paul is simply acknowledging that some elders, because they have more time, talent, or training, deserve to be compensated for their work in the church.”⁴⁹

This is not to diminish by any means the benefit from seminary training. When we were seeking an associate pastor, our list consisted of the biblical qualifications described earlier. However, seminary training is quite valuable in preparing a man to be apt to teach, and finding a pastor who has trained at an institution with theological distinctives that align with that church is highly beneficial.

Because we do not draw a distinction between ruling and teaching elders at ECF, we permit all elders to teach, preach, baptize, preside over the Lord's Supper, and conduct weddings and funerals.

⁴⁶ Merkle. (Kindle Location 780).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* (Kindle Locations 789-791).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* (Kindle Locations 792-794).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* (Kindle Locations 823-824).

However, the largest share of each of those is performed by the paid or vocational pastors. As previously mentioned, we also have made an intentional decision to refer to all elders as pastors so as not to create a division or hierarchy. More about each of these in practice is described later.

The current church government at ECF consists of two offices: pastor and deacon. (In addition, for non-profit corporation purposes, we have a secretary and treasurer as appointed positions, with the lead pastor serving as the president of the corporation.)

The ECF Constitution and Bylaws delineates these duties and qualifications for pastors:

Section 1. Duties

The body of Pastors shall oversee the spiritual affairs of the Church and perform all functions necessary to the discharge of this responsibility, including the following:

- A. Provide for the teaching and preaching of the Word.
- B. Assist the Lead Pastor in administering the ordinances of Baptism and Communion.
- C. Recommend the adoption of additional or different policies and practices of the church.
- D. Consider all disciplinary matters of the Church.
- E. Oversee the individual boards and committees of the Church.
- F. Appoint a music coordinator(s) who would provide song leadership at each service, assist in musical presentations by the congregation, and oversee the use and maintenance of all musical instruments of the Church.
- G. Pastors shall organize themselves, with the Lead Pastor as the Chairman.
- H. Pastors shall oversee employment of staff, recommend staff policies, and establish compensation policies and benefits for all such pastoral and non-pastoral staff positions. Any person receiving compensation directly or indirectly from the Church shall not be in a position to determine the nature or amount of said compensation.

Section 2. Qualifications

Each Pastor shall be a man of true Christian experience and established character. Each member of the Pastors board must be an active member of the Church and possess the qualifications described in 1 Tim. 3:17 and Titus 1:6-9. He shall:

- A. Have an open profession of saving faith in Jesus Christ.
- B. Be a voting church member with regular attendance.
- C. Have no open sin indicating disqualification.
- D. Be physically and mentally capable of executing his responsibilities.⁵⁰

Although the constitution allows the hiring of other pastors, the Lead Pastor is likely to be the only paid and full-time pastor and has these additional duties:

The Lead Pastor shall be the primary spiritual overseer and advisor of the Church. He shall be an ex-officio member of all boards and committees. Also, he shall assume the responsibilities of president of the church as a legal Corporation. He, or a designee, shall provide for all the worship services of the Church, and shall arrange for all special meetings, conventions and evangelistic campaigns with the approval of the Pastors and in consultation with the Deacon board as provided for under Article 12. No person shall be

⁵⁰ Evangelical Church of Fairport. *Constitution and Bylaws* (p. 10). Fairport, NY: Self-Published, 2017. PDF.

invited to speak or preach in the Church without his approval. He shall have the authority to delegate responsibilities, as he sees fit, to other Pastors.⁵¹

The board of pastors is assisted by a board of deacons. ECF allows both men and women to serve in as deacons. (A discussion of whether women may serve as deacons is beyond the scope of this paper.) The duties, qualifications, and selection of deacons is as follows:

Section 1. Duties

The deacons, consisting of deacons and deaconesses (hereafter referred to only as deacons), shall oversee certain needs of the congregation as outlined below, and perform all the functions necessary to the discharge of these responsibilities, including but not limited to the following:

- A. Implement church care for the poor, sick, bereaved, or otherwise needy.
- B. Assist the Pastors, as needed, in the spiritual care of the congregation.
- C. Assist the Pastors, as needed, at Communion and Baptism ordinances.
- D. Serve as Church ushers, greeters at the door, and Church collectors or appoint, as needed, individuals to assist in these duties.
- E. The deacons as a body, under the leadership of a chairman, shall be able to recruit others and organize among themselves as they see fit.
- F. The care of the property of the congregation and conduct the church's financial and business affairs. In matters affecting church property requiring unbudgeted expenditures exceeding \$10,000, approval of a simple majority of the votes cast at a special or annual business meeting is required.
- G. Deacons or a designee shall oversee employment of indirect staff and independent contractors, recommend indirect staff/contractor policies, and establish compensation policies and benefits for all indirect staff and independent contractors.
- H. Under the advisement of the Pastors, the deacons shall prepare, or cause to be prepared, a budget and present it to the congregation during the annual business meeting for a vote.

Section 2. Qualifications

Each deacon must be an active, voting member of the Church and possess the qualifications described in 1 Tim 3:8-13. He or she shall:

- A. Have an open profession of saving faith in Jesus Christ.
- B. Be a voting Church member with regular attendance.
- C. Have no open sin indicating disqualification.
- D. Be physically and mentally capable of executing his responsibilities.

Section 3. Organization, manner of induction and tenure of office

Candidates for the office of deacon shall be nominated by any Pastor, with recommendations also being welcomed from the congregation at large. The names of those approved by the Pastors shall be announced to the congregation and posted at least three weeks prior to their assuming the office of deacon. If any member of the Church knows of any reason why a candidate should be disqualified from consideration, this should be brought to the attention of the Pastors at least one week prior to the time of which the candidate is to assume office. Their term of service is perpetual until voluntary retirement, permanent or long-term incapacitation, death or disciplinary removal. If it is not possible to

⁵¹ *Ibid.* (p. 11).

secure the needed number of deacons, the duties of the office shall devolve upon the Pastors.⁵²

While deacons are selected by the board of pastors, the selection of a lead pastor and other pastors must be approved by the congregation. For pastors, the board of pastors nominates new pastors, who are then approved by a majority vote of the membership, either at a special business meeting or the annual business meeting. For the lead pastor, there is a specified process which includes formal nomination and a special business meeting at which the affirmation of the candidate must receive a three-quarters majority vote.⁵³

Plurality of Elders in Practice at Evangelical Church of Fairport

This section of this paper represents the observations by the author of a plurality of elders in practice at ECF and the transition from its previous structure to an elder/deacon model. The amount of detail here is limited and the names of people involved are not included to allow the distribution of this paper.

I became a member of ECF in 2007 and an elder in November 2009. Prior to becoming an elder, I served for about 18 months as a member of the church's corporate board. As described above, the ECF church government consisted of a corporate board, a deacon board, and an elder board, with a senior pastor who was hired by the corporate board. This led to problems with conflicting responsibilities. The corporate board oversaw the church budget and several times created dissension within the church when it unilaterally slashed the mission budget as proposed to the congregation – which resulted in heated debate at annual meetings as amendments to the budget were proposed by mission-minded members. The corporate board also was in control of the budget for benevolence although the distribution of that budget was by the deacons.

This form of government caused ongoing problems with authority in the church. Rather than the elders having oversight of the church, they were essentially reduced to being assistants to the senior pastor, with the corporate board and chair acting as the board of directors and CEO of the church. Similarly, the deacons were limited to parceling out a benevolence budget that often was inadequate.

The conflict among the three boards – especially between the corporate board and elders – came to a head in late 2011 and early 2012 when ECF's senior pastor required a medical leave and the decision needed to be made as to whether to grant a sabbatical. In addition, there was a disagreement about how to fill the pulpit and other responsibilities during the senior pastor's absence. The remaining elders had agreed among the four of them to fill the pulpit and to nominate one elder (the author) to serve as interim pastor part-time during the week. The church's budget had already allocated a part-time salary for an associate pastor who was to be brought on during the latter part of the summer, and the elders proposed that this salary be used to compensate the interim pastor for the six months he would serve.

At the same time, the corporate board wanted to hire an interim pastor and proposed someone who had been a substitute preacher at the church, but whose theology was not completely in line with

⁵² *Ibid.* (pp. 11-12).

⁵³ *Ibid.* (pp. 10-11).

ECF. The elders strongly opposed the hiring and convinced the corporate board to accept the elder board's plan.

The elders worked out a preaching schedule to cover Sundays, first a series through Colossians 1:15-29 and then a topical series on the "one-anothers" of Scripture. The elders shared counseling, visitation, and oversight duties and kept things going during the six-month sabbatical.

The response from the church was overwhelming to the elders. One family became members because they saw that the church did not revolve around one man and could continue if there were a disruption. The corporate board chair who had been strongly opposed to the plan of the elders serving as they did said to the author at the end of the sabbatical, "You [the elders] made sure we were well cared for and well fed. Thank you."

After the senior pastor's return, the elders kept a higher profile at the church than previously. The elders worked out a schedule so that the senior pastor would have one week off from preaching each month, which provided a "mini-sabbatical" on a regular rhythm and allowed the other elders to preach to the congregation.

The difficulties and disagreements that the three-board church government created were made clear during the time leading up to and during the senior pastor's sabbatical, and it was recognized that a new or radically amended church constitution would be required. At first, the assignment to research a constitution was given to a church member who was pursuing a Master of Divinity degree as a project for his coursework. Subsequently, an elder chaired a committee of five, including the M.Div. student, to draft an amended constitution. Work on that continued for three years, culminating in a new constitution approved by a congregational vote by ECF in June 2017. (The duties for the board of pastors and the board of deacons were described above.)

The ECF constitution identifies one individual to serve as Lead Pastor. In practice, that pastor serves as a first among equals. Deference is given to him in areas of preaching, counseling, relations with other churches, and the exercise of church policy; in return, approval and consensus is sought from the entire board of pastors before major changes are made. Among the board of pastors, frequent and open communication is emphasized. In addition to monthly and ad hoc meetings, the pastors maintain an active group email so that hardly a day goes by without communication.

Unity has been central to the activities and decisions of the elders at ECF. Often there will not be unanimity on a decision, but consensus is sought. When a decision has been agreed upon, the elders commit themselves to unity behind it. This has been particularly important in recent years as politics and the pandemic have polarized members of the church. It also will be important in the next month as the members of the church will be asked to affirm the nomination of a new Lead Pastor.

ECF has continued the pattern started during the senior pastor's sabbatical of shared responsibilities of oversight, teaching, and regular preaching by all pastors.

Observations

At ECF, I've observed several benefits to the pastors by serving as a team, but more importantly to the church when it comes to shepherding.

Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety. (Proverbs 11:14)

I am often struck by the wisdom of the men I serve with. They come from a breadth of life experience, education, and vocation – even theological emphasis. When we have an issue to deliberate, the collected wisdom generally leads us in a sound direction while individuals might overlook some points or be inclined to act impulsively. Even an experienced pastor needs counsel, and to have that counsel as part of the pastoral team is a blessing.

⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸ For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. (1 Corinthians 12:7-11)

Each of the men on our board of pastors brings different gifting to the table. Whether it's in music, medicine, Bible knowledge, preaching, counseling, care, encouragement – the list could continue. No one man has all of the gifts needed to shepherd a congregation. Even the three offices that Christ executes, according the Westminster Shorter Catechism, are beyond the ability of most men to execute in a church, and certainly by no means adequate in light of the Lord Jesus Christ:

Q. 23. What offices doth Christ execute as our redeemer?

A. Christ, as our redeemer, executeth the offices of a prophet, of a priest, and of a king, both in his estate of humiliation and exaltation.

Q. 24. How doth Christ execute the office of a prophet?

A. Christ executeth the office of a prophet, in revealing to us, by his word and Spirit, the will of God for our salvation.

Q. 25. How doth Christ execute the office of a priest?

A. Christ executeth the office of a priest, in his once offering up of himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and reconcile us to God; and in making continual intercession for us.

Q. 26. How doth Christ execute the office of a king?

A. Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies.⁵⁴

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2)

The burdens of ministry are many. The toll is emotional, spiritual, physical, and temporal. Having brothers to share the load and bear the toll may be the difference between thriving as a shepherd ... or abandoning the flock.

As we have shared pastoral duties and spiritual burdens, we have strengthened one another, allowed each to have time to refresh, and have stood together against the enemy. This has been

⁵⁴ The Orthodox Presbyterian Church: Shorter Catechism. <https://opc.org/sc.html>. Accessed 8 February 2021.

especially important as we have worked through policies for the pandemic and responded to dissent and rebellion even among church leadership.

¹ Behold, how good and pleasant it is
when brothers dwell in unity!
² It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down on the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down on the collar of his robes!
³ It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion!
For there the Lord has commanded the blessing,
life forevermore. (Psalm 133)

As was mentioned above, the pastors at ECF are not always unanimous in a decision. Even if there is general agreement, often there will be points of disagreement. However, there is always a spirit of unity and a goal of consensus. This unity is indeed “good and pleasant.” Striving in this way even makes long elders meetings times of good fellowship, even if the topics discussed are weighty and burdensome.

Conclusion

For an independent church, once it has gotten too large for one pastor’s schedule and attention, a plurality of local elders is likely the best way to ensure pastoral care and shepherding for the church. But that advantage is lost if there is not unity among the elders; a commitment to unity and consensus is necessary. It is also important for a church to commit to all elders being visible in serving so that the church understands that all are pastors and there is not just *the* pastor.

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (1 Peter 5:1-4)

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