

# CHURCH POLITY POSITION PAPER

## Overview

We are a...

**Jesus-shepherded**

**Elder-led**

**Deacon-served<sup>1</sup>**

**Partner-engaged church**

## What does it mean that Mercyview is a “Jesus-shepherded” church?

Multiple times in Ephesians, Paul reminds us that Jesus is the head of the church (Eph. 1:9, 22–23; 4:15; 5:23). The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is the apostle who plants a church (Heb. 3:1). The apostle Matthew says in his gospel that Jesus is the leader who builds the church (Matt. 16:18). Peter tells us that Jesus is the senior pastor and chief shepherd who rules the church (1 Pet. 5:4). We use the phrase “Jesus-shepherded” to remind us who is leading this church. We must have an absolute dependence on Jesus to tell us where he is at work and then we must join him *in* that work. The church, then, is a local, autonomous, independent, and self-governing entity “functioning directly under the headship of Christ, his rule expressing itself through the preaching of the Word, the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the divinely instituted guidance of the elders.”<sup>2</sup>

James R. White says it this way:

“Christ is concerned with the daily work of his body and this includes how the church goes about her mission in the world so as to bring glory to God the Father. His exercise of divine power and authority in saving his people is only one aspect of his lordship: He continues to function as Lord over the gathered body of the redeemed, the church...the exercise of his lordship brings order and consistency to the expression of his church in the local bodies.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Because deacons, by way of their office, do not hold a position of authority in churchwide decision-making (as elders do) or affirmation of certain churchwide decisions (as the congregation does), we have chosen not to address their role in this white paper on church polity. It should be said that by way of their position as partner (as all deacons are also partners), they do, in this sense, affirm certain churchwide decisions as a part of the congregation within the local church.

<sup>2</sup> James R. White, *Perspectives on Church Government*, ed. Brand, Chad; Norman, Stan (2004-07-01), B&H Publishing. Kindle Edition, 261.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 258.

## Does the Bible teach one specific form of polity?

The Bible advances certain principles that suggest that its leaders and congregants partner together for the ministry and mission of God but stops short of a universal model for all congregations everywhere and at all times. It provides “a pattern of ecclesiastical organization and discipline in outline” but “not in detail” according to which certain principles are clearly taught and their application is left “to the judgment of Christians” in diverse contexts with employment of a “wise expediency.”<sup>4</sup> Millard Erickson says that “[t]here may well have been rather wide varieties of governmental arrangements [among New Testament churches]. Each church adopted a pattern which fit its individual situation.”<sup>5</sup> This is why Wayne Grudem says:

...the form of church government is not a major doctrine like the Trinity, the deity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, or the authority of Scripture. . . . It seems to me, then, that there ought to be room for evangelical Christians to differ amicably over this question in the hope that further understanding may be gained. And it also seems that individual Christians—while they may have a preference for one system or another, and while they may wish at appropriate times to argue forcefully for one system or another—should nevertheless be willing to live and minister within any of several different Protestant systems of church government in which they may find themselves from time to time.<sup>6</sup>

This does not mean that we believe it is helpful at Mercyview to be indifferent on the form of church polity we should use. As Thomas Witherow says, “Though we may not regard the polity of the New Testament Church as essential to human salvation, we do not feel at liberty to undervalue its importance.”<sup>7</sup> The issue of church government may not be a doctrine crucial to the *esse* (being) of the church, but it is a doctrine crucial to the *bene esse* (well-being) of the church and vital to its spiritual health.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it is important to understand the difference between what the Scriptures describes and prescribes as it relates to church polity and build out a model that is obedient to the Scriptures and true to its context.

To this end, the elders have attempted to take all the relevant texts on church polity from the New Testament in an attempt to synthesize the principles that are taught therewithin

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<sup>4</sup> William Williams, *Apostolic Church Polity* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1874), 51-71.

<sup>5</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 1084.

<sup>6</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 904.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Witherow, *The Apostolic Church: Which Is It?* 5th ed. (Charleston, S.C.: BiblioLife, reprint 2009), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Steven Cowan, *Who Runs the Church?: 4 Views on Church Government* (Counterpoints: Church Life) Zondervan. Kindle Edition, 11.

into a workable and biblical model. We desire to be cautious of conclusions that are too rigid or dogmatic but rather humbly submit these as what we believe the Bible principally teaches on the issue of church polity.

### **What does it mean that Mercyview is an “elder-led” church?**

The New Testament records pastoral oversight and authority by a group of elders in nearly all the first churches. We can discern many of the principles of authority found in the New Testament regarding how elders lead within the church. In fact, the New Testament offers more instruction regarding elders than on other important subjects such as the Lord’s Supper, the Lord’s Day, baptism, or spiritual gifts.<sup>9</sup> They are to rule (translated as lead, manage, govern, direct) and have charge over the church eagerly and willingly (1 Tim 5:17; 1 Pet. 5:2-3; 1 Thess. 5:12). They are called to shepherd and serve as examples to the flock, as well as exercise oversight and provide care (1 Pet. 5:1-5; 1 Tim. 3:1-2; Acts 20:28). They are to ensure order by stewarding the church well, including disciplining members and leaders as necessary, in partnership with the congregation (Titus 1:10-13, 7; Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Tim. 5:19-20). They are to appoint other leaders in partnership with the congregation, in particular elders and deacons (1 Tim. 4:14; Titus 1:5; Acts 6:1-4; 15:22). They are given authority and entrusted to make binding decisions for the church as representatives from within the congregation (Acts 16:4).<sup>10</sup>

At Mercyview, we believe these relevant texts describe that the highest level of leadership and authority in the life of a local church are what the Scripture call elders. The authority of the eldership comes from God. Theirs is an authority with a divine origin. Paul tells the Ephesian elders that the Holy Spirit made them overseers (Acts 20:28). They were called and given authority by God and not by man. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul states that Christ has given gifts to the church, including pastor-teachers (Eph. 4:11). Therefore, the office of elder does not derive its existence, or authority, from any other place but Christ, and the congregation’s role is that of recognition of God’s gifting and calling.

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<sup>9</sup> Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, 3rd ed., rev. and expanded (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 1995), 103.

<sup>10</sup> Mercyview is sympathetic to Dutch Reformer H.N. Ridderbos’ language that the congregation is *represented* by the elders. See *Matthew*, trans. Ray Togtman, Bible Student’s Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 339. “As representatives, the elders speak and act on behalf of the entire congregation. When Barnabas and Paul brought famine relief money on behalf of the church in Antioch, it was received by the elders of the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:30). Later, as Paul was journeying to Jerusalem from Greece, he briefly harbored at Miletus. There he called for the elders of the Ephesian church to come so that he might encourage them (Acts 20:17). Although his concern was for the whole church, he called the elders because they served as the leaders and representatives of the church.” Benjamin Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007) (Kindle Locations 920-922). “The elders represent the people as leading members from among the people.” Strauch, *Biblical Leadership*, 113.

It also must be said “that Christ has gifted the church with all that she needs to pursue her ministry, and this gifting is done within the context of how the Lord established his church from the beginning.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, “the elders of one local body are not to be placed under the authority of a single person or group of persons in some other locale.”<sup>12</sup> We find no other overarching authority that is established by the apostles to rule over the churches as a whole. This is seen negatively in the lack of any reference to an ecclesiastical structure existing above the elders of the churches.<sup>13</sup> If the local churches are seen to function independently, then it follows that the offices established by God in those churches are sufficient, in and of themselves.

### **What more specifically is an elder’s role at Mercyview?**

- Praying and studying the Scripture (Acts 6:4)
- Giving an account to God for the church (Heb. 13:17)
- Teaching the Bible correctly (Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3:2)
- Preaching (1 Tim. 5:17)
- Equipping the saints for the work of the ministry (Eph. 4:11–16)
- Praying for the sick (James 5:13–15)
- Refuting false teachings (Titus 1:9)
- Protecting the church from false teachers (Acts 20:17–31)
- Training prospective partners and receiving new partners into the church (1 Tim. 3:1-2, 5:17; 1 Pet. 5:1-5)
- Disciplining unrepentant partners of the church (Matt. 18:15–20; 2 Cor. 2:5-8)
- Identifying, testing, and appointing church leaders (Acts 6:1-6, 15:22; 1 Tim. 1 Tim. 3:10, 4:14, 5:22; Titus 1:5)<sup>14</sup>
- Disciplining church leaders (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Tim. 5:19-20; Titus 1:10-13)
- Making binding decisions for the church as representatives from within the congregation (Acts 16:4).
- Ensuring a healthy partnership with the congregation by providing open and accessible pathways for communication, in particular regarding the affirmation of

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<sup>11</sup> White, *Perspectives on Church Government*, 257.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 260.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 261.

<sup>14</sup> “This is the power and right given unto the church, essentially considered, with respect unto their officers—namely, to design, call, choose, and set apart, the persons, by the ways of Christ’s appointment unto those offices whereunto, by his laws, he hath annexed church power and authority. . . . The wisdom intended is not promised unto all the members of the church in general, nor are they required to seek for it by the ways and means of attaining it before laid down, but respect is had herein only unto the officers of the church.” John Owen, *The True Nature of a Gospel Church*, ed. William H. Goold, in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 16, (first published 1689; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1995), 39–41. “The elders, as the official overseers of the church, have the authority, as implied in their office, to develop and appoint others as elders. Overseeing a church, or any organization, includes the duty of assuring future, ongoing leadership.” Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 320.

disciplining partners, appointing/disciplining leaders, doctrine, and significant directional matters (Matt. 18:17; Acts 15:22; 2 Cor. 2:5-8; 1 Tim. 5:19-20).<sup>15</sup>

### **Who appoints elders?**

Simply stated, elders are appointed by God. As stated before, the position is divinely ordained. It derives its existence, or authority, from Christ. And while the Bible outlines qualifications and characteristics of those who would serve as an elder in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9, Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:1-3, there is no binding example or exact process for a local congregation to select an elder prescribed in the New Testament. Gene Getz says it this way, "...Paul simply gave Timothy - and us - qualifications, guidelines, principles, trusting that those of us who read his letters will develop approaches that indeed evaluate whether or not an individual is spiritually qualified to serve."<sup>16</sup> Neil Summerton agrees, "It is characteristic of...man of the twentieth century to worry abnormally about the precise mechanism of selection. But biblically of much greater importance is its manner and spirit...so long as all are certain that the outcome is the choice of God."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, leaders of local churches must identify a process that is God-honoring and will ensure that men who meet the biblical qualifications are enlisted to serve as elders. To this end, Mercyview's process is below.

### **How are elder-candidates nominated at Mercyview?**

While the nominating and/or appointing of elders is a part of the function of church leadership, both the congregation and the elders are partners in said process. The congregation should be involved because the prospective elder will serve the congregation. Thus, the congregation must have a voice in affirming elder-candidates. The elders must be involved because they are the spiritual leaders of the church. To ignore their insights and opinions would be unwise.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> "In the New Testament, there seems to be a balance between the authority of the elders and the authority of the congregation as a whole. To ignore either side will create an unhealthy and dangerous imbalance." Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons* (Kindle Locations 959-962). "Biblical elders want an informed, involved congregation. Biblical elders eagerly desire to listen to, consult with, and seek the wisdom of their fellow believers." Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 283. "The elders are not isolated from the congregation so that their activities are beyond the examination and response of the congregation itself, and, in the biblical model, the actions of the one reflect the mind of the other....The elders act in concert with the congregation, as fellow members thereof, yet they are called by the Holy Spirit into service in an office ordained by Christ through his apostles for the health and edification of the congregation." White, *Perspectives on Church Government*, 203-205.

<sup>16</sup> Gene Getz, *Elders and Leaders: God's Plan for Leading the Church* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003), 208.

<sup>17</sup> Neil Summerton, *A Noble Task: Eldership and Ministry in the Local Church*, 2nd ed. (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994), 33.

<sup>18</sup> Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons*, (Kindle Locations 2054-2058).

When surveying the relevant biblical passages, we see patterns of church leadership developed as the first-century church matured. We can trace three steps in the process of appointing leaders. Initially, it was the apostles who selected and appointed elders (Acts 14:23). After that, elders were appointed by those who were close to the apostles and involved in their ministry. For example, Paul specifically charged Titus with the appointing of elders (Titus 1:5). In the third phase, the elders themselves appointed other elders (1 Tim 4:14). In short, the ultimate responsibility for appointing elders was a part of the function of church leadership. This final phase was not a temporary model but rather the final biblical pattern that still holds today. Although a congregation affirms the elders' calling and authority, church leaders have the responsibility of identifying, training, and appointing other elders.<sup>19</sup>

Men who wish to serve as elders should have a known track record of serving, leading, and giving in ministry, with demonstrated teaching skills and observable fruit in ministry, marriage, and family life. This is in keeping with the instruction of 1 Peter 5:3 that elders should be “examples to the flock.” In order for a man to be considered an elder-candidate, the man must:

1. Be active in a leadership capacity in ministry
2. Be active in a personal discipleship capacity
3. Be a partner in good standing, including giving
4. Meets a cursory examination of the qualifications of a New Testament elder
5. Complete an exploratory interview with his wife. Discussion points will be the familial sustainability within the process, the wife's support, and any areas that might disqualify him from beginning the process.

There are three ways that prospective elders are nominated at Mercyview. First, a man may aspire to be an elder (1 Tim. 3:1). If he desires this office, he is encouraged to approach the current elder team to express his aspiration and the elder team will consider his desire. Men who aspire to eldership but are not yet qualified should submit to the counsel of current elders for assistance in their growth and development (Heb. 13:17, 1 Pet. 5:5). But if the elder team unanimously determines the man is fit to begin the examination process, he will be asked to complete an exploratory interview with his wife. Upon successful completion of the interview, he will be presented to the congregation

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<sup>19</sup> “I have no disagreement over the importance and biblical precedent (i.e. Acts 6:3; 14:23) for the congregation's role in confirming elders. Yet it is ultimately the responsibility of the elders to nominate and elect elders. For it is upon the elders of the church that God has placed the authority and responsibility of shepherding his people (Acts 6:1–7; 14:23; 1 Tim. 5:17–22; Heb. 13:17)...In either situation, if people from the congregation are nominating potential elders, or if the elders are nominating and electing potential elders, it is ultimately incumbent upon the existing elders of the church to discern who will be nominated, examined, and elected for the office.” Burk Parsons, “Electing Elders,” <http://9marks.org/article/electing-elders/> (March 1, 2010). See also John MacArthur, “Answering the Key Questions about Elders,” <http://www.gty.org/resources/positions/P11/Answering-the-Key-Questions-About-Elders> (August 17, 2009).

as an elder-candidate.<sup>20</sup> The congregation will be given three weeks to express any biblical concerns they might have about this individual entering the elder examination process. If there are no biblical concerns at the end of this period of time, he will be invited to begin a season of testing by the elder team.

Second, a man may be approached by the current elder team to consider entering the examination process (2 Tim. 2:1-2). If the elder team unanimously determines the man is fit to begin the examination process, he will be asked to complete an exploratory interview with his wife. Upon successful completion of the interview, he will be presented to the congregation as an elder-candidate and the congregation will be given three weeks to express any biblical concerns they might have about this individual entering the elder examination process. If there are no biblical concerns at the end of this period of time, he will be invited to enter a season of testing by the elder team.

Third, the elder team welcomes, at any time, recommendations from partners on potential elder-candidates. If a partner desires to make a recommendation, they are encouraged to talk with any member of the elder team. That elder will present the recommendation at the next scheduled elder team meeting. If the elder team unanimously determines the man is fit to begin the examination process, he will be asked to complete an exploratory interview with his wife. Upon successful completion of the interview, he will be presented to the congregation as an elder-candidate and the congregation will be given three weeks to express any biblical concerns they might have about this individual entering the elder examination process. If there are no biblical concerns at the end of this period of time, he will be invited to enter a season of testing by the elder team.

### **What does the examination process look like for an elder-candidate at Mercyview?**

The examination process is entrusted to the elder team by the congregation and its length is determined, on a case by case basis, by elders.<sup>21</sup> From the inception of this process, the congregation is encouraged to partner with the elders in observing and examining the prospective elder. This may include conversations with the candidate about their spiritual journey, about theological or philosophical issues, observing them in ministry settings (i.e., missional community or ministry leadership), etc. The elders welcome any communication from the congregation during the duration of the examination process. This allows the elders to have a leadership role in the process

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<sup>20</sup> "It cannot be stressed enough that only the elders should nominate other elders, both because they are the most spiritually mature members of the congregation and because they know the lives of the congregation best." Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 157.

<sup>21</sup> Factors that will be taken into account to determine the length of the process will be things like the nature of their relationship with those on the current elder board, involvement in and/or completion of seminary training, experience in ministry, observable track record from within Mercyview (if applicable), to name a few.

while, at the same time, continuing to allow the congregation to have a significant voice in the matter.

The examination process is an intensive season of testing that includes attending training meetings with the elder team (or a subgroup of elders charged with examination) to study the characteristics of an elder's doctrine and character (1 Thess. 2:8); completing a personal calling statement essay and doctrine statement essay; reading and studying Mercyview's governing documents, doctrinal statements, and philosophy of ministry; completing assessments/questionnaires by candidate and spouse (if married); a full review of stewardship and family finances by the Mercyview stewardship team; completion of a resume with three references; to include a supervisor, a peer, and a disciple; and concluding with a written exam testing Bible comprehension, an oral exam testing pastoral wisdom, applying the teaching of Scripture to various real-life pastoral and ministry situations, and a family interview/assessment, candidly assessing the elder and his family's readiness.

Throughout the process, the elder team desires to regularly communicate to the congregation on how the season of testing is progressing for the elder-candidate, particularly in the trimesterly partner meetings and worship gatherings, as well as other communication tools like The City, Facebook, and email. Partners within the congregation are encouraged to pursue conversation with the elder team at any point during the examination process as to understand how the process is progressing. The elder team will also pursue conversations with partners who are in close proximity to the elder-candidate (missional communities, team leadership, missional causes, etc.) to gauge their affirmation of his progress.

### **How are elders appointed at Mercyview?**

After the examination process has been completed as deemed by the elders, the candidate will be brought before the congregation to make them aware of the completion of the testing phase. The elder team will present the elder-candidate as one whom they believe should become a fellow elder according to the relevant biblical criteria. After the presentation is made, the congregation will be given three weeks to affirm their willingness to follow this potential leader, as well as bring forth any biblical reasons why he might not be fit for the office. The elder team will also send out a letter (typically via email) to all current partners detailing the last phase of the examination process as to further serve the congregation in their consideration. The elders will discuss all feedback given by the congregation and make a final decision to nominate the man as an elder, which must be unanimous. Providing nothing to disqualify the man arises, he is then formally installed as an elder during a worship gathering at Mercyview, with the elder team laying hands on the new church leader to show their support and unity (1 Tim 4:14).



## How are elders organized at Mercyview?

### *Male*

The entire New Testament presents a unified voice that teaches male headship in marriage and the family. This principle also was extended to the wider church family. Paul calls the church "the household of God" (1 Tim. 3:15). In listing the qualifications for an elder, Paul simply assumes that the position is intended only for men. He indicates that an elder must be "the husband of one wife" (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6) and "must manage his own household well" (1 Tim. 3:4). There is no hint in the context that women are eligible to serve as elders.<sup>22</sup>

### *Plurality*

The New Testament evidence indicates that every church had a plurality of elders. There is no example in the New Testament of one elder or pastor leading a congregation as the sole or primary leader. There were a plurality of elders at the churches in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30), Antioch of Pisidia, Lystra, Iconium, and Derbe (Acts 14:23), Ephesus (Acts 20:17; 1 Tim. 5:17); Philippi (Phil. 1:1), the cities of Crete (Titus 1:5), the churches in the dispersion to which James wrote (James 5:14), the churches in the Roman provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Peter 5:1), and possibly the church(es) to which Hebrews was written (Heb. 13:7, 17, 24). Based on this evidence, Grudem notes, "First, no passage suggests that any church, no matter how small, had only one elder. The consistent New Testament pattern term is a plurality of elders 'in every church' (Acts 14:23) and 'in every town' (Titus 1:5). Second, we do not see a diversity of forms of government in the New Testament church, but a unified and consistent pattern in which every church had elders governing it and keeping watch over it (Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:17; 1 Peter 5:2-3)." On the local church level, the New Testament plainly witnesses to a consistent pattern of shared pastoral leadership. Therefore, leadership by a plurality of elders is a sound biblical practice.

### *Co-equals*

There are a number of reasons why all the elders should possess equal authority in the church. First, all the elders have to meet the same qualifications. The qualifications do not list certain degrees thus no distinction should be made between them. Second, all elders share the same responsibilities—primarily teaching and shepherding. Although some may spend more time in these important tasks, all elders will be involved in them to some extent. Third, giving more authority to one elder implicitly creates a separate and distinct office. If the "pastor" (the full-time, paid staff) receives more authority than the "elders" (the part-time, non-staff), the outcome is that an unbiblical distinction has

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<sup>22</sup> Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons*, (Kindle Locations 1612-1616), Kindle Edition.

been made. Strauch is correct when he states, "To call one elder 'pastor' and the rest 'elders' . . . is to act without biblical precedence." He continues, "It will, at least in practice, create a separate, superior office over the eldership, just as was done in the early second century when the division between 'the overseer' and 'elders' occurred."<sup>23</sup> Consequently, all elders are due the same respect and honor and should be equal in value, power, and rank.<sup>24</sup> James White says it this way, "Since there is only one office of elder, as far as eldership itself is concerned, the elders would be equal to one another."<sup>25</sup>

### *A simple majority of lay elders*

As stated, all elders are equal in responsibility and authority but there is a natural distinction between those that work for the church (staff elders) and those who do not (lay elders). Because of the sensitive nature of financial matters in the church and the elder's role in approving how the money is stewarded in the church, it is important that there is a simple majority of lay elders within the elder body as to be above reproach.

## **What are the benefits to Mercyview having a co-equal, male plurality of elders?**

### *Biblical accountability*

Godly fellow elders are a great means for holding the other elders accountable to live, teach, and lead faithfully.

### *Wisdom*

There is more wisdom to be found in a multitude of counselors (Prov. 11:14; 24:6).

### *Balance*

No one man has all the gifts that are necessary to build up the church. Having a plurality of elders serves the church by bringing men with different gifts into the church's leadership who can complement the other elders' strengths.

### *Burden-sharing*

Caring for the whole church is a burden God does not intend one man to bear alone. Even the most faithful elder needs help from other godly men in order to pay careful attention to himself and to all the flock (Acts 20:28).

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<sup>23</sup> Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 47-48.

<sup>24</sup> Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons*, (Kindle Locations 1769-1773). Kindle Edition.

<sup>25</sup> White, *Perspectives on Church Government*, 280.

## Do elders serve terms?

Since the Bible does not specify the length elders should serve, wisdom is needed to apply biblical principles to this issue. While elder terms can allow many men to serve, avoids overworking the elders, and affords a potential method of releasing ineffective or unqualified elders, Mercyview does not believe terms, in this sense, justify their use.

When new elders come and go, as they do with the model that uses terms, it often causes a disruption in the work of the elders. Much time is spent getting new elders informed about past decisions and issues related to the shepherding of the congregation. As a result, the progress among the elders is delayed by orienting the new elders and there is a loss of continuity and efficiency. Furthermore, if the elders serve terms, this process inevitably will remove wise, mature elders who understand the needs of the church. Some elders are effective in their service and also have the desire and ability to remain as elders. If they serve under the term model, regardless of their calling and effectiveness, they are forced to rotate off the board so that someone else can serve.

Also, the term model assumes there will be enough leaders who are equipped and qualified to serve as elders. As new elders rotate in and old elders rotate off the board, the church must constantly find men who are qualified to fill the empty positions. Phil Newton argues against this, "Filling spots with unqualified men can weaken the effectiveness of the entire elder body, especially if biblical standards are compromised simply to fill a quota."<sup>26</sup>

Both models of eldership, of course, should have the same requirements for elders. But if a church is willing to give elders an indefinite term of service, the congregation is more likely to take the qualifications more seriously. If the office begins to be viewed as insignificant because it's term-limited then it also seems likely that the requirements to hold that office are going to be viewed as insignificant.

As the elders have surveyed the relevant arguments on this issue, we believe that there should not be term limits for elders. We sympathize with the thoughts of Gene Getz when he says, "...we have discovered that when we take the qualifications seriously and when elders themselves are accountable to each other, men will naturally step aside when it is appropriate" because they feel they are disqualified. This allows a man to resign with dignity and the full support of the elder team.<sup>27</sup> If an elder becomes personally convinced that he is no longer qualified to serve in that capacity, or if he no longer desires the position, he must be allowed to step down (cf. 1 Timothy 3:1). In such

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<sup>26</sup> Phil Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 151.

<sup>27</sup> Getz, *Elders and Leaders*, 305.

cases, before the elder steps down, diligent attempts should be made to encourage the man, who may simply be frustrated, discouraged, or excessively harsh in his self-examination (assuming the other elders and members of the church see him as qualified and effective). If the elder team recognizes that an elder has become overburdened and needs rest from his duties for health reasons or the good of his family, etc., he may decide on his own, or be encouraged by the other elders, to step down for a time of recovery and rejuvenation.<sup>28</sup>

While some point to the difficulty in removing an ineffective or disqualified elder, this only means that churches that use an indefinite terms model must have a means by which the other elders are able to remove an elder or a partner is able to present a formal charge against an elder.<sup>29</sup> See below under *“How are elders disciplined?”* for more information regarding the process of elder removal

### **How do elders make decisions?**

If all the elders are guided by the same Spirit and all have the mind of Christ, there should be unanimity in the decisions they make ([1 Corinthians 1:10](#); [Ephesians 4:3](#); [Philippians 1:27](#); [2:2](#)). If there is division, all the elders should study, pray, and seek the will of God together until consensus is achieved. Unity and harmony in the church begin with this principle. This is not to say that these decision are made without significant discussion with and affirmation of the congregation. We believe there is a deep partnership between the elders and the congregation in this sense. See below under *“What types of things do Mercyview partners “affirm?”* for more on this partnership.

### **What types of things do Mercyview partners “affirm?”**

First, affirmation means that in these issues, the elders will present these decisions as opportunities for discussion to the covenant partners, desiring to lead through consensus, not compulsion. If after sufficient conversation the elders discern unity and consensus within the body, they will make the final decisions on these matters as representatives of the body. Elders do reserve the right to call for a vote at their discretion.

Here are the items the elder body desire the partners of Mercyview to affirm:

- Nomination, appointment, and discipline of elders and deacons
- Discipline of covenant partners
- Annual budget

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<sup>28</sup> Christ Fellowship Elders, “Removal of an Elder, <http://www.ccwtoday.org/article/removal-of-an-elder/> (2004).

<sup>29</sup> Merkle. *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons*, (Kindle Locations 2097-2109).

- Acceptance of an amended or restated constitution or bylaws
- Indebtedness associated with the purchase of real estate
- Cumulative indebtedness for all other aspects of church business that exceeds twenty percent (20%) of the annual church operating budget
- The disposition of all or substantially all of the church's assets
- Filling the preaching pastor vacancy
- Merger or dissolution of the church
- Other actions the elders deemed as major or extraordinary by the elders

These opportunities for affirmation will typically take place during a regularly scheduled trimesterly partner meeting or a specially called meeting. In the case of a specially called meeting, the congregation will be given notice no later than 14 days in advance of the meeting.

We think this model of affirmation is consistent with the testimony of Scripture. Paul maintained a delicate balance between the role of leadership and the contribution of each member in the church. Leaders were important in the Pauline churches “but they did not operate in such a way that individual members' contributions were quashed; they led mainly by example and persuasion, not by coercion.”<sup>30</sup>

### **How do the elders and the congregation partner together to restoratively discipline partners?**

Matthew 18:15-17 is the principal model for restorative discipline in the church.<sup>31</sup> First, it must be said that restorative discipline is only to be initiated in issues of open, serious, and unrepentant sin of a covenant partner. If the process for restorative discipline is determined by these categories, it can and should begin. The first step of restorative discipline (which some consider informal church discipline) is “one-to-one” in which the offended party (which in some cases may be an elder due to an observable sin issue or in others, a congregant due to a dispute) is charged to go the offender to plead with them to repent of their sin (Matt. 18:15).

If this fails to bring about repentance, the next step or restorative discipline is “few-to-one” in which the offended party is to bring one or two others (and can include at least one elder) to both establish the charges against them and again plead with them to repent of their sin (Matt. 18:16). This is also, considered by some, as informal church discipline.

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 386.

<sup>31</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:6-7 is the other supplemental passage that describe restorative discipline in the church.

If the intervention of the two or three does not admit of a solution, the offended party is then instructed to tell the church (Matt. 18:17a). Many believe this is where *formal* church discipline begins. We believe to “tell the church” simply means that progressively, the congregation is to be made aware of the offender’s sin in an attempt that a greater number of people would enter into the process to pray and persuade them to repent. First, this begins by “telling” the entire elder body who in turn, takes a notable leadership role in this phase. Because Mercyview organizing structure is through our missional communities and because those in a missional community know the offender best, it makes sense for the second “layer” of “telling the church” to be done by a designated Mercyview elder to the missional community the offender is a part of. If after a period of time for prayer and persuasion by the missional community, the offender is still unrepentant, the elders will widen “telling the church” by presenting the charges to the entire covenant partnership in either a regularly scheduled trimesterly partner meeting or a specially called meeting. In the case of a specially called meeting, the congregation will be given notice no later than 14 days in advance of the meeting. The desire in telling the entire covenant partnership is as stated before - that a greater number of people would enter into the process to pray and persuade them to repent. This is why is inferred in Matthew 18:17b when it says, “And if he refuses to listen even to the church...” The elders will give the covenant partners three weeks to pray and pursue the offender.

If the intervention of the entire covenant partnership does not result in the offender’s repentance, the final step of church discipline is to give one final warning and if there remains unrepentance, exclusion from membership of the church, which the Scripture speaks of as disfellowship from the Lord’s Table (Matt. 18:17b). They are to be treated as someone outside of God’s covenant people and should not be allowed to partake of Christ’s covenant meal because they are now showing signs that they are not a Christian. The elders will present their conclusions to the entire covenant partnership in either a regularly scheduled trimesterly partner meeting or a specially called meeting to seek affirmation for the exclusion of the offender from partnership. In the case of a specially called meeting, the congregation will be given notice no later than 14 days in advance of the meeting. In this meeting, “excluding the offender from partnership” will be pursued through conversational consensus and a decision will be made by the elders in unison with the covenant partnership within this meeting.

After exclusion from membership, depending on the nature of the offense, the offender may be allowed, at the elder’s discretion, to continue attending the worship gathering as a means to continue to hear the gospel but they will be excluded from all other contexts within Mercyview. At this stage, partners will be asked not to associate with the person as if nothing is wrong but to continue to call them to repentance in the gospel.

If after some time there is repentance, restoration to the fellowship of the church can occur. What true repentance looks like depends on the nature of the sin. The question of true repentance is a difficult one that requires much wisdom. Caution must be balanced

with compassion. But once a church decides to restore a repenting individual to its fellowship and the Lord's Table, there should be no talk of a probation period or second-class citizenship. Rather the church should publicly pronounce its forgiveness (John 20:23), affirm its love for the repenting individual (2 Cor. 2:8), and celebrate (Luke 15:24).

### **How are elders disciplined?**

Paul's words in 1 Timothy 5:19 ("Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses") should not be construed to mean that elders are to be protected from proper disciplinary action when such becomes necessary. Paul knew that elders, being in a position of authority, could easily become the objects of false or frivolous accusations. His command in this passage is simply a warning to watch for such abuses. Elders are church members just as all others, and are subject to church discipline according to the same biblical disciplinary measures as anyone else.

When a partner or another elder believes that an elder is in sin, the first step is to approach the elder personally (in the spirit of Matthew 18:15). In this step, those who have been offended must be careful not to ascribe guilt without faithfully seeking the truth about what was done or said. Hearsay or second-hand reports do not qualify as a credible, formal charge.

If this fails to bring about repentance on the part of the elder according to the accuser, the next step of restorative elder discipline is outlined in 1 Timothy 5:19 (in the spirit of Matthew 18:16). It is important to note here that a formal charge against an elder is not the same as a criticism (when someone has not sinned against you, but you disagree with the decision they have made or sinned against you), a conflict (when someone has not sinned against you, but you simply don't get along well and interpersonal troubles are causing difficulty), or a complaint (when someone has not sinned you but you are unhappy with how something was handled). It should also be said that a decision to file a formal charge against an elder is essentially a request that the elder be removed from eldership and, if he is an employee of the church, fired. The kind of offense that would fit into this category would be a sin that is serious enough to disqualify an elder.

Because of the seriousness of leveling a charge against an elder and because of our desire to protect our elders from groundless and baseless charges while providing a transparent process for evaluating charges, we believe the language of 1 Timothy 5:19 ("Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses") is to be done with the other elders on the elder team, as they have been deemed qualified to this role of elder as men of spiritual maturity and integrity. As for what constitutes a "witness," we believe it could be those who have also been witnesses to the sin or those have been brought along to verify the accusations of sin through a thorough investigation by substantiating the claims.

In order to fully investigate the matter, the elder team requires a written report of the formal charge from the offended party and the two or three witnesses. All perspectives will be heard, including that of the elder in question. Any partners who have pertinent information regarding the situation will be asked for input. If the consensus among the elder team is that the elder in question is biblically disqualified for eldership, he will be asked to leave his position voluntarily. If he is unwilling to step down, he will be administratively removed by the elder team.<sup>32</sup>

If the accusation is found to be groundless and baseless, the accuser and witnesses will be notified of the elder team's decision and they will in turn determine whether the accuser should remain in fellowship at Mercyview as a partner. Any formal charge submitted to the elder team must also include a letter of resignation of partnership, in the event that the charge is groundless, sinful, or otherwise divisive.

1 Timothy 5:20 clarifies the last stage of discipline of an elder, "As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear." If an elder refuses to repent, he will be disfellowshipped from the congregation in the spirit of Matthew 18:17. This means that the elder is publically rebuked before the entire congregation - not just the elder team. Godly wisdom, counsel, and prayer will guide the elder team in implementing this instruction in individual cases. An elder's sin must be treated with great concern because it has grave ramifications for the church and the watching world. Public rebuke also fulfills another important purpose as seen in 1 Timothy 5:20, "...so that the rest may stand in fear." Not only is the the public discipline for the correction of the sinning elder, it is also for the entire congregation. God uses such fear as a powerful deterrent to keep people, especially church leaders but to everyone, from sinning.<sup>33</sup>

In rare and extreme cases, formal outside mediation and/or arbitration may be brought in to help reconcile two opposing parties and/or make a formal recommendation to the elder team. This outside mediation and/or arbitration must be agreed upon by both parties - the accuser and the accused.<sup>34</sup> The purpose of mediation is to invite a professional mediator into the conversation in order to help resolve conflict and explore solutions if the conflict cannot be resolved. Arbitrators can also be appointed to listen to render a binding decision about substantive issues. As such, the mediator and/or arbitrator's findings are to be given strong weight in the dismissal of an elder by the elder team.

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<sup>32</sup> All elders at Mercyview sign an agreement upon installation that if the other elders believe he should resign, he will abide by their decision.

<sup>33</sup> Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 218-219.

<sup>34</sup> Organizations such as [Peacemaker Ministries](#) and [Peacepoint](#) are independent third-party Christian dispute resolution and conflict reconciliation services that provides coaching, mediation, and arbitration to churches.



## **Can an elder be removed for non-disciplinary reasons?<sup>35</sup>**

Aside from disciplinary matters, there are other potential situations that would require an elder to step down from his position or make his administrative removal necessary. The purpose of this section is to explain the types of non-disciplinary circumstances that would necessitate the resignation or removal of an elder, and to describe the action we will take in such cases. In some cases, however, even these situations could escalate into disciplinary matters. All elders at Mercyview sign an agreement upon installation that if the other elders believe he should resign, he will abide by their decision. Those reasons are listed below:

### *The discovery of biblical disqualification(s) after appointment as an elder*

If an elder who formerly was (or was thought to be) biblically qualified is found to be disqualified according to the biblical criteria in any area, he must step down or be removed.

### *Inability or persistent failure to perform the biblical function(s) of an elder*

If it becomes clear that an elder is unable, unwilling, or persistently failing to perform the duties of an elder even after warnings and counsel from the other elders, he must step down or be removed. This could be because the man is unable or unwilling to perform his necessary functions due to mental or physical illness or incapacitation. It could simply be because of unavoidable circumstances (i.e. necessary care of an ill or injured family member, unavoidable financial struggles, etc.), because he no longer has the time and/or energy to perform his necessary functions, or because he has become so distracted by life's challenges (i.e. marital pressures, work-related stress, etc.) that he can no longer perform his necessary functions.

### *Unresolved doctrinal disharmony*

If it becomes clear that an elder holds and insists on teaching doctrinal positions contrary to those in our confession and/or core beliefs and if doctrinal harmony is unattainable through study and discussion with the other elders, the dissenting elder must step down or be removed.

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<sup>35</sup> Much of this content for the answer to this question was derived from the article, "Removal of an Elder," by Christ Fellowship Elders.

*Unresolved philosophical disharmony*

No team of elders will be perfectly like-minded in all things. Far from this being a hindrance to effective team leadership, these minor differences often encourage helpful dialogue, inspire fresh thinking, or prompt necessary change. It is even profitable, at times, to discuss the possibility of radical change. Having said this, it is still true that if a team is to pull strongly, they must be generally like-minded and moving in the same direction. If a single elder insists on pulling in a substantially different and incompatible direction regarding a major matter, and if he remains unyielding despite all attempts to harmonize his vision with that of the elder team, he must step down or be removed.

## Resources

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