

# Elders: Effectively Serving Together

## **Introduction:**

- I. Illustration: Siblings with very different personalities - parental solution?
- II. Illustration: Marriage versus dating
- III. The examination of this topic would always be timely, but perhaps more so at the present due to the challenges as a result of the covid19 pandemic.

## **Body:**

### **I. History of the Eldership at the KSR (Kelly Spring Road) Congregation**

- A. The congregation was formed in August, 2006 when a group of Christians (about 60) from the Gooch Lane congregation swarmed.
  1. We immediately engaged in a study of the qualifications of elders.
  2. By December 2006, two men had been selected by the congregation: Tim Smith and me.
  3. A third elder, David Williams, was added a couple of years later in 2008.
- B. We went through another elder selection process in 2014, adding two more elders.
  1. When Tim and I were selected to be elders, we promised that the congregation could periodically (no specified schedule) re-examine us to determine if we were still qualified. We have fulfilled that commitment for re-examination every two to four years.
  2. In re-examination process associated with this elder selection, we had one elder resign because of objections from the brethren, leaving four elders.
- C. We went through another elder selection process in 2017, resulting in the addition of two more elders (6).
- D. In more recent times, we had another re-examination process (no elder selection process) and another elder resigned, leaving us currently with five elders.
- E. In the interest of full-disclosure, I had never served as an elder prior to 2006 and my experience in that role is thus limited to a period of 15 years.

### **II. Key Factors in Effectively Working Together**

- A. A good understanding of the Scriptures on the part of each elder will provide unity of purpose and role.
  1. Qualification: "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; ESV).

2. Elders who do not share the same focus will have difficult working together.
- B. Mutual respect will accommodate many differences between elders.
1. Elders often have different skillsets.
    - a. One elder may be a better communicator or teacher than another.
    - b. One elder may be sought out by members because of his counseling skills more than another.
  2. Rather than compete with or depreciate the skills of others, elderships need to make use of the varied strengths of the individual elders.
- C. The ability to develop consensus in the process of making leadership decisions is required.
1. Consensus: “the quality or condition of being in complete agreement or harmony” ([www.thefreedictionary.com](http://www.thefreedictionary.com)).
  2. *Consensus* is also used in the sense of “general agreement or accord.”
  3. Elders need to be unified in their leadership of the congregation.
    - a. The pastoral metaphor is used to describe elders, implying that, as shepherds, they should lead (rather than “drive”) the flock.
    - b. They are to be examples to the flock, in contrast to being “domineering over those in [their] charge” (1 Peter 5:3).
    - c. How is the congregation affected when elders are leading in different directions?
    - d. I believe that actions should be delayed until there is consensus among the elders. Since some decisions are time-sensitive, this may lead to multiple and long discussions. I don’t believe in majority rule in an eldership.
  4. Even men who are in complete agreement about the teaching of Scripture may disagree about the best way to apply truth to specific decisions/actions.
    - a. Elders will sometimes have different opinions about the best course of action.
    - b. Obviously, the greater number of elders in a congregation, the more difficult it can be to reach a consensus decision.
    - c. Submission to one another is commanded of all Christians.
      - 1) **Ephesians 5:21 (ESV)**     <sup>21</sup> submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.
      - 2) **Philippians 2:3 (ESV)**     <sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.
    - d. A specific qualification of an elder is that he is not “self-willed” (Titus 1:7; KJV).
      - 1) *authades* (αὐθάδης) - “‘self-pleasing’ (*autos*, ‘self,’ *hedomai*, ‘to please’), denotes one who, dominated by self-interest, and inconsiderate of others, arrogantly asserts his own will” (Vine)
      - 2) ESV: “arrogant”
      - 3) The man who must always have his way in decisions doesn’t work with others effectively.

5. In addition to not being “self-willed,” there are several other qualifications that would relate to the willingness to submit to the opinions of others or to have profitable discussions about differences in opinion.
  - a. “self-controlled” (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8; ESV - *sophron*; σώφρων)
  - b. “gentle” (1 Timothy 3:3; ESV); Vine comments that this is the opposite of “self-willed.”
  - c. “not quarrelsome” (1 Timothy 3:3; ESV)
  - d. “disciplined” (Titus 1:8; ESV - *enkrates*; ἐγκρατής)
  - e. “not “violent” (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7; ESV)
  - f. “not “quick-tempered” (Titus 1:7; ESV)

D. Different personalities in elders can affect the ability of those men to work together.

1. Meeting the qualifications for elders in Scripture certainly doesn’t mean that everyone thus qualified approaches matters in the same way.
2. Not everybody responds to stress in the same way.
3. Different personalities may affect the speed at which decisions are made and then implemented.
  - a. Although all qualified elders should possess good judgment, some move more cautiously and others with greater alacrity.
  - b. It can be easy to assume that a fellow elder isn’t fully committed to following truth when he doesn’t seem to move with the same speed as another.
4. Just as passages that relate to how one Christian should treat another would apply to spouses, likewise such passages apply to elders in the way they treat one another.
  - a. **Colossians 3:12–13 (ESV)** <sup>12</sup> Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, <sup>13</sup> bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.
  - b. **Titus 3:1–2 (ESV)** <sup>1</sup> Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, <sup>2</sup> to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people.

E. Good communication between elders is critical.

1. Illustration: The importance of communication to interpersonal relationships
2. The digital communication accessible to elders and other members has several important consequences.
  - a. Information can move faster between people, raising the expectations of members about “timely” responses by the elders. Decisions and the implementation of those decisions may also need to move more quickly.

- b. Ironically, the ubiquitous nature of digital communication (email, texting, etc.) and particularly in social media means that most people are inundated by messages from others. Many people, including elders, suffer from information overload.
  - 1) It is easy for important information to get “buried” in the daily avalanche of emails and texts.
  - 2) If elders are trying to come to a consensus decision about some matter through emails or texts, the decision-making process can get bogged down by the failure of one or more elders to participate in the conversation thread. Obviously, the more elders a congregation has, the greater the likelihood of communication breakdown.
- c. Digital communication is often not as concise in conveying meaning as face-to-face conversation because it removes the non-verbal aspect of such conversations. This means that digital communication requires more care in crafting messages to avoid misunderstandings.

### III. Pitfalls

- A. Although it is important to prevent a united front to the congregation, no elder should defend or cover the wrongdoing of another elder.
  - 1. An eldership should never turn into a “good ole boys’ club,” i.e., all members of the club protect any blameworthy member from the consequences of his actions.
    - a. **1 Timothy 5:19–20 (NKJV)** <sup>19</sup> Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses. <sup>20</sup> Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear.
  - 2. At the same time, an elder should never undermine another elder(s) by criticizing him to other members. Not only is this pragmatically destructive to the leadership of the elders, but it violates scriptural instructions for how we are to treat brethren (e.g., Matthew 18:15-17; Galatians 6:1; Titus 3:2; James 4:11).
  - 3. An elder should be able to trust his fellow elders even as one spouse should be able to trust the other (e.g., Proverbs 31:11).
- B. Sharing information with members outside of the eldership about the decision-making discussions of the elders can lead to one elder being set against another.
  - 1. Illustration: Children “playing” their parents
  - 2. Members who are looking for support for their preferences/opinions will sometimes pit one elder against another.
  - 3. Sharing with the congregation the reasoning behind a consensus decision is a different point altogether and often has great value in helping the congregation understand the way the elders approach matters.

C. There is the strong potential for elders to compete with one another.

1. Who is going to be most influential?

a. Illustration: the encouragement of Ignatius of Antioch for churches to have monarchical bishops, i.e., that “elders” should submit to “the bishop”

1) “Ignatius believed that the church could be protected from heresy and could be unified only by one individual in each congregation assuming a position of authority. This position would naturally fall to the chairman of the group of elders. Since the word bishop originally meant overseer it is logical to believe that what Ignatius meant by his statement was that the chairman of the meeting of the elders should make decisions and set the standard for orthodoxy and unity, and that the others elders and deacons should be in submission to the chairman, whom he calls ‘Bishop.’ It seems clear that Ignatius felt the need for a strongly organized system in the church to meet the conditions of his day” (F. W. Mattox, *The Eternal Kingdom*, p. 60).

2) It has been my experience that elderships sometimes have a “lead” elder who pretty much determines policy and even the course of specific decisions.

2. Which elder is going to be the “most beloved” by the members?

3. Which elder is most “in touch” with the saints?

4. There may be the temptation on the part of one elder to assume the responsibilities (general or specific) of another. “Stay in your own lane, bro!”

5. A competitive attitude in an elder demonstrates the presence of sinful pride and perhaps the absence of certain qualifications.

D. It is possible for elders to get into the habit of discussing concerns without ever reaching an “action step.”

1. Opinions are expressed and options discussed, but in the end, nothing gets done.

2. If there is one elder who chairs an elders’ meeting (ideally, a rotating responsibility), it is good practice for that elder to make sure that there is some stated decision and an action step enunciated at the end of the discussion (assuming that some action needs to be taken) before moving to another matter.

3. It is also good practice for one or more elders to be assigned to the action item; otherwise, tasks can be lost in the shuffle.

a. “Everybody thought Somebody would do it, but Nobody did it.”

b. Assignments can be noted in the minutes of the elders’ meeting.

## IV. Practical Matters

### A. Discretion is a very important concern for elders.

1. Elders sometimes learn intimate information about members. For members to feel comfortable talking to their shepherds about personal matters, they must trust the elders to be able to keep such information confidential (as much as is possible).
2. Members sometimes prefer to talk with a particular elder because they have “history” with that elder or just feel more comfortable with him.
  - a. Must elders share with other elders everything that they know about various situations among the members?
    - 1) At KSR, new members are informed that, unless they indicate otherwise, information shared with one elder will typically be shared with the other elders.
    - 2) This can help avoid awkward or even damaging comments/actions made inadvertently by those elders who are not privy to a particular situation.
  - b. Elders need to be aware that “confirming the word of another by two or three witnesses” is a good principle for elders also! There can be danger in an eldership acting on the information of only one elder.

### B. Individual efforts versus corporate work can be a difficult balance to determine, especially as the ratio of elders to members becomes smaller, i.e., many members with few elders.

1. Although some responsibilities may be divided among the elders, my understanding is that each elder is a shepherd of the entire congregation, not just some subset of the members.
2. One elder may work with a specific individual, family or even small group in the congregation with the intention of reporting back to the other elder(s) so that appropriate action can be taken by the eldership as a whole or even the other elders as individuals.
3. It is good practice for an elder in some situations to clearly distinguish between his opinion as an individual and the consensus of the group.
  - a. For instance, a member may send a digital message that requires some response (or at the very least, acknowledgement of receipt) to all the elders, but one elder responds. If he responds before discussing his response with the other elders, he should at least indicate that he speaks for himself and not for the eldership.
  - b. In such a situation, it is usually best (if possible) simply to acknowledge receipt of the communication without making a specific response until the elders can determine if they are “on the same page” regarding a response.
  - c. Not all “shepherding” duties must be done in concert (“synchronized shepherding” - a future Olympic event). It is helpful, however, if efforts to help weak members are reported to the other elders for the sake of collaboration where possible or necessary.

- C. Congregations with many “issues” among the members or societal issues affecting the church can cause elders to experience burnout.
1. Some descriptions of burnout include (Minirth et al., *How To Beat Burnout*, p. 14):
    - a. “a depletion of energy and a feeling of being overwhelmed by others’ problems” (Herbert Freudenberger)
    - b. “job burnout is when people get to the point of just putting in their time, not making waves, and just barely getting by or going through the motions” (Edelwich and Brodsky)
    - c. “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do ‘people work’ of some kind” (Christina Maslach)
    - d. “Feeling physically and emotionally exhausted, victims frequently cannot face the future, and they detach themselves from interpersonal closeness. Sensing themselves to be drained emotionally, they also suffer spiritually.”
  2. Elders can be watchful for the signs of burnout in fellow elders. Several steps can be taken for remediation, including lessening another’s load by temporarily shifting responsibilities (by permission), verbal encouragement regarding past accomplishments, etc.
- D. As additional men are incorporated into the eldership of a congregation, some challenges arise.
1. Will those men be treated as “junior elders” by the previously serving men?
    - a. Will newer elders be left out of the decision-making process in some cases? “Just be quiet and learn!”
    - b. The more elders a congregation has, the greater the difficulty in getting them all together in person at one time, especially in light of busy work and personal schedules.
  2. It is also possible that newer elders may feel the need to “prove” that they belong in the eldership and may even try to “take” over the eldership, particularly if they have felt the eldership to be inadequate in the past.
- E. Record-keeping of discussions and decisions can avoid controversy and disagreement later as elders attempt to recall specific information.

## **Conclusion:**

- I. Illustration: Attempting to help resolve marital problems can be a complicated business, involving communication and actions that occurred over years of marriage. And that’s just with TWO people! Add more individuals, and the complexity of any relationship can increase exponentially (not advocating polyamory here; talking about the eldership!).
- II. It is difficult to over-estimate the value of qualified elders who work together effectively.