

Valleybrook Community Church

Eldership as it is Defined in the New Testament

**“It is true that if someone wants to be
an elder, he desires an honorable responsibility.”**

1 Timothy 3:1 – NLT

The New Testament provides examples of leadership and principles of Church organization that should be applied and practiced today. Valleybrook Community Church is committed to following these Biblical examples and principles. The following information has been written to explain in simple terms the nature and function of Biblical eldership.

The term “elder” is derived from the Greek word “presbuteros” (from which we get the word “Presbyterian”). This literally refers to an older person, but the main idea behind the word is that of wisdom. The assumption is that wisdom comes with age. Thus, in Biblical times elders were experienced and mature leaders who guided others with wisdom and care.

In the New Testament the word “elder” is used sixty-six times and in four different ways:

- It is used to refer simply to older men. (Luke 15:25, Acts 2:17).
- It is used to refer to an important group of leaders within the Jewish nation (Matthew 15: 21 and Acts 4:5).
- It is used to refer to the primary leadership group of the local Church congregations (Acts 11:30, 14:23).
- It is used to refer to a special group of worshippers in Heaven (Revelation 4:4, 5:5).

Our first introduction to eldership is in the Jerusalem Church (Acts 11:30). This elder model of leadership was also established in other Churches as well. We read of elders being appointed in each Church to oversee the spiritual life of the congregation. [Acts 14:23, see also Acts 20:17-38, 1 Peter 5:1-4, James 5:14 & Revelation 4:4]

Two other words are used in the New Testament to describe and refer to elders. One is the word “overseer,” and is derived from the Greek word “episkopos” (from which we get our English word “Episcopal”). In the culture of that day an overseer was an appointed manager and guardian. Likewise, in the Church, elders are God’s appointed overseers and managers, watching out for and guarding the spiritual welfare of the Church. {Note: The word “overseer” is used interchangeably with “elder” in Acts 20:17-38 and Titus 1:5-7. In some Bible translations this word is also translated as “bishop.”}

In the New Testament elders are also described as “pastors.” The Greek term that is used is “poimen” and literally refers to a shepherd. Figuratively speaking, elders are to be spiritual shepherds and caretakers of the Church. For example, in Acts 20:38 and 1 Peter 5:1-2, the elders are given the specific responsibility of spiritually shepherding the Church.

These three Biblical terms give us a significant understanding of the task of elders. One spotlights maturity and wisdom (elder/presbuteros), while the other two stress function (overseer/episopos and shepherd/poimen). Clearly, elders are spiritually mature Christian men who are used by God to manage and spiritually shepherd His Church.

The position of elder is not an honorary position to be given to individuals simply because they are older and have attended the Church on a regular basis. Rather an elder is to be a man whose deep faith, sacrificial love, genuine maturity, and faithful service has been clearly witnessed by the Church and the surrounding community. He is qualified to serve both by his character and his actions. The attitudes and values of the Church will be strongly impacted by its leadership. Elders are to set a spiritual example and model biblical character traits as they help the congregation see how faith is to be lived out in everyday life. By living out the Biblical qualifications of their leadership role, elders stay in front and raise the standards by which they judge themselves and by which they are willing to be judged. It has rightly been stated that as the leadership goes, so goes the Church (see – Hosea 4:9).

Elders are not ceremonial to priestly leaders. They are “hands-on” leaders who oversee the spiritual life of the Church. Their calling is not to a position of high honor and standing, as much as it is to a position of humble service and faithful ministry. Elders submit their will to Jesus who is the Head of the Church. It is His leadership and His will that is ultimately important to the health of the Church. The leadership of elders will always be focused on Jesus, and it will always seek to honor and glorify Him. Whatever authority elders might possess is derived from Jesus and exercised in His name. Thus, elders must be followers before they can be leaders. They are to exercise a unique form of servant-leadership, following in the footsteps of Jesus (Matthew 20:26-28). Elders must be more concerned about being examples than being executives. Executives can work apart from their subordinates, but example-setters can be effective only as they live with and among the people as spiritual shepherds.

Elders are not perfect, but they are committed to living by Biblical standards. Over time, they have proved themselves to be faithful men, willing and able to lead and serve God’s faith-family. Foremost, they have a deep, passionate love for God and for the people of God.

The Bible gives some very specific qualifications for those who would serve as spiritual leaders within a Church. Two summary lists of elder qualifications are found in the New Testament, one in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and the other in Titus 1:5-9. The following is an overview of the qualifications set forth in these passages, with Valleybrook Community Church’s additional qualifications.

Attitude

- He should desire the work (1 Timothy 3:1) and do it voluntarily and eagerly (1 Peter 5:2 & Hebrews 13:17).

Personal and Moral Character

- He should be self-controlled (1 Timothy 3:2 & Titus 1:8).
- He should be temperate (1 Timothy 3:2).
- He should not be given to drunkenness (1 Timothy 3:3 & Titus 1:7).
- He should not be a lover of money (1 Timothy 3:3).
- He should not be a pursuer of dishonest gain (Titus 1:7).
- He should be disciplined (Titus 1:8).
- He should be one who loves what is good (Titus 1:8).
- He should be upright (Titus 1:8).

General Relationships

- He should not be violent (1 Timothy 3:3 & Titus 1:7).
- He should be gentle (1 Timothy 3:3).
- He should not be quarrelsome (1 Timothy 3:3).
- He should not be overbearing (Titus 1:7).
- He should not be quick-tempered (Titus 1:7).

Family Relationships

- He should be the husband of one wife (1 Timothy 3:2 & Titus 1:6).
- He should manage his own household well (1 Timothy 3:4-5).
- He should be successful in teaching his children things of the faith, obedience and respect (1 Timothy 3:4 & Titus 1:6).

Social Perceptions

- He should be above reproach and blameless (1 Timothy 3:2 & Titus 1:6-7).
- He should be respectable (1 Timothy 3:2).
- He should be hospitable (1 Timothy 3:2 & Titus 1:8).
- He should be of good reputation outside the Church (1 Timothy 3:7).

Spiritual Maturity

- He should be able to effectively teach scripture (1 Timothy 3:2).
- He should not be a recent convert (1 Timothy 3:6).
- He should be holy (Titus 1:8).
- He should hold firmly to the Word and to sound doctrine (Titus 1:9).

Additional Valleybrook Community Church Qualifications

- He should be Valleybrook Community Church member for two years or more,
- He should be active within the Church (teaching, servanthood, leading, etc.)
- He should be a regular financial giver to the Church (the Church treasurer will determine if the potential elder is a regular giver – treasurer will be looking at the regularity of giving and not the financial amount).

We do not have a detailed “job description” for elders within the New Testament, but we do have biblical references to make a summary of their activities and responsibilities. The following is a list of those biblical activities and responsibilities:

- 1) Elders assisted the hungry – Acts 11:30
- 2) Elders discussed doctrinal issues and made doctrinal decisions – Acts 15
- 3) Elders were intentional about their own spiritual growth, being built up by the Word of God and His grace – Acts 20:32
- 4) Elders gave spiritual care to the Church, providing comfort, compassion and protection to the body – Acts 20:28
- 5) Elders examined their own ranks – Acts 20:29
- 6) Elders maintained unity and peace without compromising the essentials of the faith – Acts 21:18-26
- 7) Elders equipped the members of the Church for ministry and service, helping the Church to grow to maturity and build itself up in love – Ephesians 4:7-16
- 8) Elders managed and cared for the household of God – 1 Timothy 3:5 & 5:17
- 9) Elders worked hard at teaching and preaching the Word of God – 1 Timothy 5:17
- 10) Elders help the weak and ministered to the sick – Acts 20:35 & James 5:14-15
- 11) Elders serve as examples to the congregation – 1 Peter 5:3
- 12) Elders confront, correct and discipline the rebellious and unruly – Titus 1:9-14

In summary, elders are given the responsibility to “feed” the Church through teaching and preaching; to “lead” the Church by example and by direction setting; to “care” for the Church, tenderly and compassionately; and to “protect” the Church from false teaching and from divisiveness. The main goal of elders is to do all they can to build a spiritually healthy and strong Church – one that is faithful to the mission that God has given to the Church through His Word.

In the New Testament Churches there is always a plurality of elders (see Acts 14:23, 20:17; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 5:17 & Titus 1:5). Churches were never led by a single, solitary elder or pastor. A plural leadership group within the Church helps avoid any potential abuse of power by a single leader. God never intended for the Church to be a democracy or to be guided by the principle of “majority” rule. Rather, the Church is to be a “theocracy (God ruled). That is why, elders serve both God and the Church as His designated leaders.

Additional Notes:

- There should never be more than two staff members on the Elder Board.
- There should be a non-staff elder as a recording secretary.
- There should be a non-staff elder performing the duties as an elder treasurer.
- During the time of dead locked issues, staff elders will be required to leave the meeting and the non-staff elders will then come to an agreement.
- Staff elders will have equal say in the meetings, other than in situations of issues being dead locked, staff discipline, staff evaluations and issues that pertain to wages and benefits of staff members.

- If the elder board is increased to more than four elders (including staff), then the elder board will add the position of chairman of the elders. The chairman will not have any more authority than any other elder, but will be used to facilitate the elder meetings. The chairman will make contact with the elder staff members and determine what will be on the agenda for the elder next meetings. During the meetings the chairman will make sure that the minutes from the last meeting are approved, all old business has been covered, all new business is presented, will make sure that the meeting does not get off task and will make sure that the meeting is moving along in a timely manner.
- There should be non-staff elder for every fifty (50) regular attendees of the Church (Exodus 18:12-21).
- After non-staff elders have completed their term(s) of eldership, they will then serve for two years after their term(s) as a consulting elder. Consulting elders will serve as a mentor (if needed) for any new elders, as a substitute elder in long term emergency situation or can be call upon for advise within the current eldership.
- It is recommended that if an elder who has completed two three year terms, that this elder should consider sitting out of the eldership for a minimum of one (1) year.