

# Elders and Deacons

## *Revised October 2021*

This paper explains how leadership functions at the Village Church of Barrington (VCB). The New Testament mentions two offices with enduring significance for the church: elders and deacons (Acts 14:23; 15:6; 20:17; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:1-13; 4:14; 5:17; Titus 1:5-9; Jam 5:14; 1 Pet 5:1-5; cp. Acts 6:1-6).<sup>1</sup> Both are mentioned in Paul's greeting to the Philippians: '*To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons*' (Phil 1:1).<sup>2</sup> *Overseer* is another word for "elder."<sup>3</sup>

The New Testament models a division of labor in church leadership. In Acts 6, the apostles devoted themselves to '*prayer and the ministry of the word*' (v.4), whereas the deacons managed the distribution of funds (vv.2-3). The church flourished with this system (v.7). Thus, at VCB, elders are responsible for doctrine, discipline, and direction, whereas deacons are responsible for building, budget, and benevolence. In the rest of the paper, we delineate the qualifications and responsibilities for each office.

## I

### *Elders*

#### **Qualifications**

Elders are spiritually mature men of sound doctrine and character. The qualifications are set forth in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. An elder must be:

- Above reproach
- Husband of one wife<sup>4</sup>
- Sober-minded
- Self-controlled
- Respectable
- Hospitable
- Able to teach
- Not a drunkard
- Not violent but gentle
- Not quarrelsome
- Not a lover of money or greedy for gain
- He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive
- Not a recent convert
- Well thought of by outsiders
- His children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery and insubordination
- Not arrogant or quick-tempered
- A lover of good
- Upright
- Holy

- Disciplined
- 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.

Only one item concerns job performance: teaching (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:9). The rest deal with character. This is because elders serve as examples to the flock (1 Pet 5:3; cp. 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Phil 3:17; 2 Thes 3:7, 9; Heb 13:7).

An elder serves willingly, not under compulsion (1 Pet 5:2). He must demonstrate a Spirit-given desire to be an elder (1 Tim 3:1). This desire demonstrates itself in action: caring for people, sharing Scripture, and bearing responsibility in the church. Those nominated to be elders typically have been doing the work of an elder long before they are given the title.

### **Selection**

Candidates for the office of elder are identified and vetted by the Nominating Team and then approved by the congregation, according to the stipulations in our Constitution and Bylaws. Those elected receive a three-year term, which can be renewed up to twice for a maximum of nine years of continuous service. An elder must then take at least one year off before becoming eligible again for nomination.

### **Classification**

There are four categories of elders. Though all hold the same office with respect to biblical rights and responsibilities, they have different functions. This allows us to effectively manage our church body.

- *Active Elders.* Those elders currently serving a three-year elected term. They, along with the Senior Pastor, make up the elder board. They are responsible for the doctrine, discipline, and direction of the church. They are accountable to the congregation, which empowers them to lead on its behalf.
- *Elders at Large.* Former Active Elders who have fulfilled their elected term, yet continue to meet the qualifications for elder and to fulfill the biblical responsibility of an elder to shepherd the flock. Though not actively sitting on the board, they may be called upon to carry out special assignments, as they are able.
- *Senior Pastor.* An *ex officio* member of the elder board. Like the Active Elders, he is responsible for the doctrine, discipline, and direction of the church. He is also responsible for the Pastors under him, assigning areas of authority to them. The Senior Pastor is accountable to the Active Elders.
- *Pastors.* Members of the pastoral staff who have been ordained by the Evangelical Free Church are also considered elders. Though they do not sit on the board, they are responsible for shepherding in their specific area of responsibility. The Pastors are accountable to the Senior Pastor and, in some cases, the Associate Senior Pastor. The Associate Senior Pastor is an adjunct member of the Elder Board (non-voting).

We believe that all four types of elders have the same biblical rights and responsibilities. Because they have equal spiritual importance to the body, they deserve equal honor. They are to be respected for their God-given office, not merely the particular role they fulfill in the congregation.

## Responsibilities

The elders are to ‘*shepherd the flock of God*,’ which Christ obtained at great personal cost (1 Pet 5:2; cp. Acts 20:28). They feed, guard, and lead the people whom God has entrusted to their care. This corresponds to their three primary areas of ministry:

- *Doctrine* (Feed). Elders provide sound teaching to establish the congregation in God’s truth. They work with the Senior Pastor to establish a preaching plan that addresses the whole counsel of God; oversee and protect the teaching ministry of the church in cooperation with the Pastors; ensure that the congregation rightly understands the foundational doctrines of our faith; and prayerfully assess the spiritual progress of the congregation as it grows to know and obey God’s Word.
- *Discipline* (Guard). Elders affirm what is good, and they correct errant or divisive behavior. They pray regularly for the flock and let them know this is happening; monitor attendance and involvement of members to address potential problems as early as possible; encourage positive Christian behavior and activity through public testimony and personal encouragement; confront errant or divisive behavior quickly with love and humility; admonish the straying person with a view toward correction, reconciliation, and restoration; provide teaching and training in matters of holiness and purity; model the walk worthy of our high calling, holding each other accountable; and exercise church discipline on those who disregard the faith, with the ultimate goal of restoring the erring brother or sister to the Lord and his church.
- *Direction* (Lead). Elders prayerfully seek God’s will for the church. They work closely with the pastoral staff to assess the needs of the congregation, as well as soliciting input from the congregation; develop a high-level strategic plan for the church; determine a process to communicate with the congregation; and cast a clear vision for the future.

## Evaluation

The elders undergo periodic evaluation, both formally and informally. As mentioned above, active elders serve three-year terms with the possibility of renewing twice. Renewal is not automatic, however. The elder must fill out an Elder Renewal Application, which assesses his current responsibilities, spiritual health (including any areas of struggle with sin), and family health. The application is reviewed with the Elder Chairman and Vice-Chairman. If the elder seems fit, then he may stand for re-election. Additionally, the Senior Pastor is asked to provide an annual 360-degree feedback to the Elders on ways they can shepherd and encourage him in his role more effectively.

Furthermore, the Elder Chairman completes informal check-ins with each elder on a quarterly basis, asking questions about their spiritual health, their family, and any areas that need specific prayer. The Elders also meet for breakfast once per month, to check on what God is teaching

each of them through their study of his Word. This is also an opportunity to share any areas of current struggle, where encouragement and/or accountability is needed.

## II *Deacons*

### **Qualifications**

Deacons are spiritually mature men and women of sound doctrine and character.<sup>5</sup> The qualifications are set forth in 1 Timothy 3:8-12. A deacon must be:

- Dignified
- Not double-tongued
- Not addicted to much wine
- Not greedy for dishonest gain
- They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience
- They must be tested
- Blameless
- Their wives must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things<sup>6</sup>
- Husband of one wife<sup>7</sup>
- They must manage their children and their own households well

### **Selection**

As with the elders, candidates for the office of deacon are identified and vetted by the Nominating Team and then approved by the congregation, according to the stipulations in our Constitution and Bylaws. Those elected receive a three-year term, which can be renewed once for a maximum of six years of continuous service. A deacon must then take at least one year off before becoming eligible again for nomination.

### **Classification**

The deacon board is comprised of six to eight deacons and three officers. The officers are similar to deacons, yet have specialized roles:

- *Treasurer.* This individual, in collaboration with the Associate Senior Pastor and Bookkeeper, oversees the expenditure of church funds. He or she is elected to a two-year term, which can be renewed twice for a maximum of six years of continuous service.
- *Financial Secretary.* This individual oversees donations to the church. He or she is elected to a two-year term, which can be renewed twice for a maximum of six years of continuous service.
- *Clerk.* This individual, in collaboration with the Director of Community Life, oversees the membership roll. The clerk also arranges membership interviews, and keeps minutes at deacon meetings and congregational meetings. He or she is elected to a one-year term, which can be renewed up to five times for a maximum of six years of continuous service.

The Elder Chairman also chairs the deacon board. The Associate Senior Pastor is an *ex officio* member of the deacon board.

## Responsibilities

The deacons (and officers) provide servant leadership in three primary areas:

- *Building.* Deacons, in collaboration with the Facilities Director, ensure the operational readiness of the church's building and property for ministry. They oversee major capital improvements.
- *Budget.* Deacons steward the money entrusted to the church, in order to fund the vision of the church. They provide oversight for all financial matters; propose the annual operating budget; and create financial reports for the board and congregation.
- *Benevolence.* Deacons care for the hurting by administering several funds set aside for various needs, including the Deacons' Fund, Disaster Relief, and the Philippians Fund.

In addition to these responsibilities, deacons also provide input to the elders on direction; approve church policies; and provide tactical support and plans for accomplishing the church's vision for ministry.

## Conclusion

The danger of having two boards is the potential to create the proverbial "two-headed monster." Yet that need not be the case. With the right people on each board, the same person chairing both boards, and a mutual commitment for each board to stay in its own lane, unity can be preserved. Having both elders and deacons worked for the early church, and it still works today.

---

<sup>1</sup> Though Eph 4:11 also mentions apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers, we see these as gifted individuals within the church rather than formal offices.

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture, unless otherwise noted, is from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (ESV).

<sup>3</sup> The terms *pastor*, *elder*, and *overseer* are used interchangeably in the New Testament (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:1-2).

<sup>4</sup> This does not preclude single men. Jesus and Paul were both single. Nor does it preclude those who have been remarried, whether due to divorce or the death of a spouse. The phrase in Greek can literally be rendered: 'a one-woman man.' It denotes a married man who is devoted to his spouse. If a man has a divorce in his background, it requires discernment as to the timing and circumstances. As with the other qualifications, it applies to his current circumstances, not what may have happened in the distant past.

<sup>5</sup> VCB allows women to serve as deacons. In Romans 16:1, Paul refers to Phoebe as '*a servant of the church in Cenchreae*.' The Greek word for servant there is *diakonos*, which can also be rendered 'deacon.'

<sup>6</sup> The Greek word for *wives* could also be rendered 'women' (hence the NASB and NIV). This could constitute further biblical proof for female deacons.

<sup>7</sup> See footnote 4 above.