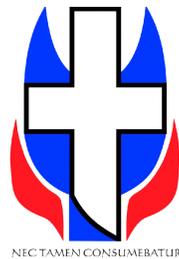


THE UNITING PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA



THE FUNCTIONS AND DUTIES OF ELDERS

A STUDY DOCUMENT

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Introduction

The Purpose of the Book

The purpose of this booklet is to clarify the important role that Elders must (ought to have) in The Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa.

This is done by looking at the biblical basis for the office of Elder, the functions and responsibilities of Elders, as well as the personal qualities that Elders need to possess.

This booklet is written for the Elders of The Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa. It therefore contains references to the Manual of Faith and Order as well as to the Service Book and Ordinal of this Church.

The book is brief, as the purpose is to stimulate discussion or more in-depth research. It can be used by individuals or by groups, eg Session, as a source for corporate study and discussion. The material used in this book originally formed the basis of discussion for an Elders' Retreat in July 1988, when the Elders of the Fort Beaufort, Alice and St Andrews Mthatha Presbyterian Congregations, came together for a weekend of study, worship and prayer. The booklet has since been revised and updated in 2013.

The bible passages quotes are taken from the New International Version.

**Prepared by Rev. Dr. Eddie Germiquet
Ministry Secretary UPCSA**

CHAPTER 1

BIBLICAL BASIS FOR THE ELDERSHIP

Clear references of people in leadership positions, together with their designations, can be found in the New Testament.

1. The Apostle
2. The Elder
3. The Overseer or Bishop
4. The Deacon

The designation of Apostle applied mainly to the Disciples of Jesus and was not used to refer to other people after they had died. We therefore pass on to the **Elder**.

References to the establishment and presence of Elders

As the original New Testament was written in Greek, the word for **Elder** in its original language is *Presbuteros*. From this word is derived **Presbyter**. The Presbyterian Church is the Church where the **Elders** have a God-ordained responsibility to lead the Church.

In his missionary journeys, Paul went from town to town establishing new churches. He did not leave the churches leaderless when he moved on, but appointed **Elders**. Thus, on his First Missionary Journey in about 48AD “Paul appointed **Elders** in each church” (Acts 14:23). The concept of a congregation led by a **group of Elders** (Session) is biblical as evidenced by Paul’s appointment of Elders to lead them after his departure.

The church in Judea was led by **Elders**, (see Acts 11:30). The gifts from the church in Antioch were sent to the **Elders** in Judea.

Further references to the presence of Elders in the church are found in Acts 15. A great controversy had arisen in the church and as a result a Council was convened in Jerusalem in about 49 AD.

Acts 15:6 “The Apostles and ELDERS met to consider this question.”

Acts 15:22 “The Apostles and ELDERS, with the whole church, decided.....”

Acts 15:23 “The letter containing their decision began with the words: “The Apostles and ELDERS,
your brothers....”

Acts 16:4 At the beginning of his second missionary journey, Paul together with Silas: “delivered the decision reached by the Apostles and ELDERS in Jerusalem for the people to obey.”

Towards the end of his third missionary journey, Paul called for the ELDERS of Ephesus to meet him in Miletus.

Acts 20:17 “From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the ELDERS of the church.”

These references indicate that the position of ELDER was prominent in the leadership of the early church.

Origins of the title ELDER

The position and function of ELDER was instituted during the period when Moses was leading the Israelites out of Egypt. The demands made on his time and resources were beginning to be too burdensome. As a result of God’s leading, Moses called 70 of Israel’s ELDERS to help him. The Spirit of the Lord empowered them to fulfill their responsibilities. **Numbers 11:14-17 & 24-25**

The ELDERS acquired an important role in the Jewish society. Every synagogue had ELDERS to preside over worship, discipline and in the settling of disputes.

The Elders were people with leadership qualities who were given oversight with respect to the spiritual and material affairs of the people. There are references to such Jewish ELDERS in the New Testament (Mark 7:3; Matt.27:20 & 41 and Acts 24:1).

Thus the appointment of ELDERS in the Christian Church by Paul was not a new innovation but simply a continuation of the pattern of authority already present in the synagogues which both Jesus and Paul had known.

Chapter 2

Overseer/Bishop

The word used in the original language of the New Testament for this particular function was “*EPISCOPOS*” (Greek). The prefix EPI means “over” or “on top”. While SCOPOS means “one who looks”. So an *EPI-SCOPOS* is literally an “OVERSEER”. The word EPISCOPOS has undergone some reduction to produce the well-known title “Bishop”. ie. EPISCOPOS → PISCOP → BISHOP. Thus a Bishop is literally an “overseer”.

Different editions of the bible translate the word EPISCOPOS in various ways. The NIV translate it “overseer” with a footnote indicating the traditional usage as “bishop”. The R.S.V. and N.E.B. generally used the word “bishop” in the text, while the Good News Bible avoids the issue by translating it as “leader”.

Occurrences and uses of the word OVERSEER/BISHOP

The New Testament use of the word OVERSEER/BISHOP does not give direct evidence of a distinct office from the ELDER. Rather it points to the two titles referring to the same office. The designation as ELDER has a Jewish background and gives a description of the office-holder. The designation as OVERSEER/BISHOP has a Greek background and gives a description of the function and responsibilities rather than being a title.

The word OVERSEER/BISHOP is used five times in the New Testament.

1. Philippians 1:1 : “To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the OVERSEER and DEACONS. In this reference to church leaders, nothing is said about ELDERS. This may lead one to deduce that OVERSEER/BISHOP is a distinct office from that of the ELDER. It is true that during the first half of the second century the office of OVERSEER/BISHOP emerged as one higher than ELDER. The local church could consist of a BISHOP with a number of ELDERS under the bishop. However, the evidence of the New Testament which was written during the first century, points to the two offices being synonymous.

2. In I Timothy 3, Paul lists the qualities that are required by OVERSEERS/BISHOPS. A comparison of this list with that compiled by Paul specifically for ELDERS in Titus 1: 5-9 brings to light the great similarity between the responsibilities of OVERSEERS and that of ELDERS. Of particular importance is that Paul refers to two qualities of ELDERS in I Timothy 5:17 namely: (a) able to teach and (b) able to direct the affairs of the church; two qualities that are also specifically mentioned by Paul in his list for OVERSEERS in I Timothy 3:2 and 5.
3. In Acts 20:17, Paul calls the ELDERS from Ephesus to meet him at Miletus. The whole content of his address (vs 17 to 35) is in terms of their responsibilities as ELDERS. However, in vs 28, Paul refers to them as OVERSEERS/BISHOPS. “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you OVERSEERS.” He is speaking to the same people. Thus the functions of the Elder was to be an Overseer.
4. In Paul’s letter to Titus there is a similar parallel. Titus 1: 5 & 6 refers to the qualities of ELDERS but in vs 7 there is a change to OVERSEER/BISHOP. The context indicates that the same office is being referred to.
5. In I Peter 5:1 & 2 “To the ELDERS among you I appeal as a fellow ELDER Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as OVERSEERS

Chapter 3

DEACON

A brief comment on the title DEACON shows their position in church authority as found in the New Testament.

The DEACON is a distinct office whose function is not entirely clear. The general picture is that of being involved in the practical aspects of church work and service. The word deacon is derived from the Greek word “*DIAKONOS*” and is used to indicate a personal form of service that one person gives to another with the understanding that it is done in love.

The word is used in John 2:5 & 9 to refer to the servants at the wedding feast. Other general uses of the word occur in Matthew 22: 13 in referring to the “servants” of the master; John 12: 26 in the sense that a Christian is a “servant” of Christ; likewise in Mark 9: 35, 10: 43 and Matthew 20: 26 and 23: 11, where the task is to “serve” ones fellows.

The DEACON as a Church Official

There are two references in the New Testament to DEACONS as a distinct office in the church.

Philippians 1: 1”To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and DEACONS.”

I Timothy 3: 8 & 12. This follows a list of qualities essential for OVERSEERS. “DEACONS, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect.....”

“A DEACON must be a husband of one wife... “

In Romans 16: 1 there is a reference to Phoebe, the DEACONESS. Whether Paul is referring to her as a servant of the church in general terms, or whether he is referring to the office, is not clear. However, by the second century the office of DEACONESS was well established.

Nevertheless, the New Testament church had only two offices:

Firstly: ELDER/OVERSEER whose responsibility was overall oversight in the congregation.

Secondly: DEACONS who came under the authority of ELDERS/OVERSEERS and whose task was practical service.

In the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa, the function of DEACONS has in most cases been taken over by the Stewardship Board or Stewardship Committee. However, congregations that so wish are entitled to constitute a Deacon's Court (see Manual of Faith and Order chap. 8.2.1) to which DEACONS are inducted.

Chapter 4

THE FUNCTION AND DUTIES OF ELDERS

The key to the purpose and function of ELDERS can be found in I Timothy 3: 14 & 15. “I am writing to you these instructions so that ... you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and the foundation of the truth.” (Words that every Elder should meditate upon!)

Paul was probably writing to Timothy from Rome, towards the end of his life. Paul realized the importance of sound leadership for he had seen many problems in the church.

For example:

False teachers: I Timothy 1: 3 – 11; I Timothy 6: 3 (Also II Peter 2: 2)

Greed for money: I Timothy 6: 5

Preaching of other gospels: Galatians 1: 9

Deceivers within the church: Acts 20: 29 – 30

Disgusting behavior at communion: I Corinthians 11: 20 – 22 (and many more)

Behavior such as the above undermines the position of the church as the “pillar and foundation of the truth”. An effective way of preventing and correcting wrong practices and beliefs in the church is by sound leadership and oversight.

When Paul addresses the ELDERS from Ephesus he says to them: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you OVERSEERS.”

The Manual of Faith and Order describes the function and duties of ELDERS in the following terms: “The Session is a Council of the Congregation that is responsible for OVERSEEING all aspects of the Congregation’s life....” (Manual 7.2)

The Session: “exercises OVERSIGHT over the Congregation’s instruction in the faith and its doctrine,” (Manual 7.3)

“The Session has OVERSIGHT of the members of the Congregation....” (Manual 7.16)

As spelled out in I Timothy 5:17, Paul divides the oversight of the congregation into two categories: “The ELDERS who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.”

The two categories are:

1. ELDERS who direct the affairs of the church (Ruling Elders).
2. ELDERS who focus on preaching and teaching (Preaching/teaching Elders).

There is an overlap of the two functions. It is not implied that Ruling Elders should never preach or teach. One of the marks of an OVERSEER in the church is that he should be able to teach (I Timothy 3: 2). Nor is it implied that the Preaching/Teaching Elder should never direct or rule in the affairs of the church. However there should be a clear difference in priority between the two.

The special focus of each category of ELDER is expanded on below:

1. Ruling Elders

The priority of these Elders is to direct and steer the church by sound administration. In I Cor. 12: 27-30 Paul explains that there are various forms of service in the church. He includes those with the gift of “administration”. The Greek word KUBERNESEIS refers to the responsibility and work of a pilot who steers a ship safely through the rocks and shoals to the harbor. It is not a glamorous job, but it is essential; so too the work of a Ruling Elder.

Romans 12: 8 is part of a list of gifts that God has given to people. One of the gifts listed is that of “leadership”. Literally translated it means “to stand in front”. Paul states that if leadership is one’s gift it should be exercised diligently and with zeal.

Elders are elected because the church needs sound leadership. An Elder is Ordained and Inducted to “govern, guide and teach in God’s church” (see “Ordination and Induction of Elders” in the Service

Book and Ordinal p125.02E) Where there is disorder in the church it is often symptomatic of poor leadership.

In order to be effective leaders, the Elders Primary Duties are listed in the Manual of Faith and Order 7.1 as follows:

1. Elders are obliged to be faithful in the study of scripture;
2. To pray.
3. To live holy lives.
4. To govern, guide and assist in the maintenance of the life of the congregation.
5. To participate in the fellowship and work of the Session
6. To subject themselves to the authority and discipline of the Church.
7. To seek the unity and peace of the Church.

2. Preaching and Teaching (Ministers)

The direction and order of a congregation is also very dependent on sound preaching and teaching. This requires a lot of preparation and meditation if it is going to be a faithful exposition of God's Word. The early church soon discovered the important position preaching and teaching ought to have in the church. The sound preparation of sermons can be hampered by placing too many responsibilities on those who ought to be preparing the presentation of God's Word. See Acts 6: 1 – 7; vs 2 reads: " So the twelve gathered all the disciples together and said: 'It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables.' " Paul reminds Timothy of the importance of preaching, (II Timothy 4: 1 & 2): "... I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction."

Unlike the Ruling Elder, a Minister's priority is preaching and teaching. In the ordination service of a minister the following words are used: "we have ordained you to the holy ministry in the church and we give you authority to minister the **Word and Sacraments**."

A minister who is unable/unwilling to delegate, is in danger of being unable to fulfill the task that she/he was specifically set aside to do.

Three biblical images of Oversight

These may assist Elders to know how to implement the authority that has been delegated to them by the church.

The images are:

1. Father
2. Shepherd
3. Ruler

The Elder/Overseer as FATHER

I Timothy 3: 4 & 5 “He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him. (If an Elder does not know how to manage his/her own family, how can that Elder be entrusted to manage God’s Church?)

Some of the characteristics of a father relevant for the Elder are:

- a) **Loves** those under his/her care.
- b) **Leads** people to maturity.
- c) **Corrects** errors and **disciplines**.
- d) **Encourages** and **comforts**.
- e) Being a symbol of **consistency** and **dependability**.
- f) **Protects** and seeks the **welfare & unity** of the family/church.

The Elder who manifests these qualities, helps those under the Elder’s care to appreciate the Fatherhood of God. Romans 8:15f “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by Him we cry Abba, Father.”

The Elder as SHEPHERD

I Peter 5: 1 – 4 “To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, Be **shepherds** of God’s flock that is under your care.”

Acts 20: 28 “Keep watch over yourselves and all the **flock** of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be **shepherds** of the church of God.”

Psalms 23 “The Lord is my **shepherd**.”

Ezekiel 34 (the leaders of Israel are rebuked for being bad shepherds)

Characteristics of the shepherd applicable to the Elder:

- a) **Keeps the flock together**. Guards the **Unity** of the church. The Elder is alert to divisive elements and issues that will threaten the unity of

- God's church. Alert to the teachings of sects which will cause confusion, controversies and division in the church.
- b) **Leads the flock** to good pastures. Assesses whether the congregants are being fed solid spiritual food or whether they are simply getting spiritually fat.
 - c) **Protects** the flock against poachers, jackals and poisonous plants. Exercises oversight and discipline.
 - d) Alert for any lost sheep. The Elder sees to it that the membership roll is maintained and regularly scrutinized. The Elder follows up on those who appear to have become detached from the congregation.

The Elder as RULER

I Timothy 3:4 – 5. Apart from being a Father figure, these verses raise the issue of an Elder being able to account for his/her ability to rule by giving evidence of it in the home situation. The ruler is conscious of the mandate and makes decisions accordingly and faces the consequences.

See Acts 15 Council of Jerusalem (First General Assembly) Having done their best to discern God's will the members of the Council communicated their decision to the churches (vs.23 – 30).

In order to rule effectively, Elders need to be diligent in attending and contributing to Session meetings, Presbytery meetings and General Assemblies. The Ruling Elder sees to it that decisions made are implemented. An Elder is prepared to be responsible and accountable for action taken. See Manual of Faith and Order: Chap. 7 Section 2 for the Function and Duties of the Elders; which include the need for Elders to report to Session concerning their Districts; exercise of spiritual authority over the congregation and responsibility to the Presbytery for the proper discharge of duties.

Chapter 5

QUALITIES THAT ELDERS/OVERSEERS NEED TO HAVE

Before an Elder's name can be put forward for nomination, it is the responsibility of the Session to inform the prospective Elders about the qualifications and duties of an Elder. Manual 7: 58 "The Session arranges Awareness workshops for nominees to acquaint themselves fully with the first section of the 'Basic Eldership Course' or an updated version of it, as approved by the General Assembly." In a similar way, the Minister needs to explain to the congregation the qualifications and duties of an Elder (Manual of Faith and Order 7: 54)

It is also the right of any member to object (with reasons) to the ordination to the Eldership of any person whose character or doctrinal opinions they believe to be unacceptable (Manual of Faith and Order 7: 57).

In I Timothy 3: 1 – 7 and Titus 1: 6 – 10, Paul lists 15 qualities that ELDERS/OVERSEERS need to have. These qualities are essential, not optional. According to Paul the qualities MUST be evident. They may prove helpful in assessing the suitability of candidates for the Eldership/Ministry.

The qualities outlined below are all related to the required tasks expected of Elders. Reflecting and meditating on the list makes one aware that Paul had high expectations of people entrusted with the oversight of the congregation.

1. **Above reproach** (*anepileptos*) I Timothy 3: 2 Other translation: "Without fault"

It refers to a person against whom no criticism can be leveled.

Blameless (*aneklektos*) Titus 1:6

There are to be no grounds on which to accuse the Elder. This does not mean that Elders have no problems, but there are to be no dominating sins or character traits which put into question an Elder's ability to discharge the responsibilities of an Elder, and which undermines the truth of which the church is meant to be a pillar.

2. **The husband of one wife.** Other translation: “Married only once.”
Infidelity was widespread. An Elder whose integrity was questionable would thereby have an authority that was undermined from the outset. A pastoral visit of an Elder to a home must be exactly what it is meant to be. There should not be any hidden agenda.
In I Thessalonians 4:1 – 8 Paul instructs Christians about sexual purity. Elders need to be pure in thought and action.

3. **Temperate** (*nephalios*) Also referred to in Titus 2: 2. Other translation: “sober”
In those days wine was watered down, therefore to be a drunkard one really had to drink in excess. Drunkenness was therefore a sign of lack of self-control. People would find it difficult to put their trust in an Elder who is unable to exercise self –control. Such an Elder becomes a discredit to God and God’s church.
An Elder needs to be wise and perceptive for it is the Elder’s responsibility to discern God’s will and to relate that discernment to his/her own life; the church’s life as well as to the wider society. This requires clear thought and leaves little room for vagueness of any kind.

4. **Self-control** (*sophron* – literally “to be of sound mind”) Also Titus 1: 8.
Other translations: “temperate, sensible”
The same word is used in Mark 5: 15 where the healing of the demoniac results in the man being restored to his “right mind”.
Paul uses the same word in Romans 12: 3 when he writes: “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with “sober judgment”.”
The idea conveyed by this word is that an Elder’s life must be characterized by rational and disciplined behavior. Lack of self-control is the evidence that other forces, apart from God, also have a hold on the Elder. An Elder’s behavior should be consistent with his stated desire to uphold the truth of Christ. The church, of which the Elder is a leader, is “the foundation and pillar of the truth.” (I Timothy 5: 17) “Repentance” is a close companion to the Elder who is aware of personal failure in “self-control”.

5. **Respectable** (*kosmion*) Other translations: “courteous, orderly, dignified”

The Greek word “*kosmion*” is the root of the English “cosmos” and conveys “order”. This characteristic therefore applies to the outward appearance as well as the inner qualities of an Elder. The Elder is well behaved outside because his/her inner self is in order. The Elder’s inner orderliness results in an outward harmony and integrity.

The Elder therefore keeps promises, is punctual for meetings, delivers on commitments brings constructive suggestions to session meetings and is reliable.

6. **Hospitality** (*philoxenos*) Other translation: “must welcome strangers”

“Philo-xenos” is the opposite to “Xeno-phobia” The open heart is reflected in the open door. Christianity was spreading at a time when inns for travelers were often flea infested and immoral places. Travelling Evangelists were thus able to find rest and security in the homes of hospitable Christians. This injunction is also repeated in Titus 1: 8; Rom. 12: 13 and Hebrews 13:1 & 2. It has been the experience of many a host that the visitor enriches the home.

Elders should see to it that people visiting the congregation are made to feel welcome and integrated. The church should not be dominated by an “in-group” who keep others at arm’s length. Mothers with small infants should be made to feel welcome and provision made for their needs. Youth should also be made to feel that their presence is valued and not simply tolerated.

7. **Able to teach** (*didaktikon*) Other translations: “a good teacher; an apt teacher)

Also Titus 1: 9

False teachers were active in the early church. Paul’s farewell speech to the Ephesian Elders includes the warning about false teachers. Acts 20: 29 “I know that after I leave savage wolves will come in among you and not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth....”

See also I Timothy 1: 3 and I Timothy 4: 1-3 which gives some examples of wrong teachings of the day.

An effective way of combatting wrong teaching is to give correct teaching. Therefore the Elder needs to have a good grasp of the basics

of Christianity and be able and willing to share the faith with other people when the opportunity arises. The Elder needs to be able to recognize false teaching and correct it. See *Elder's Primary Duties*: "Elders are obliged to be faithful in the study of Scripture and prayer..." A Christian teacher cannot teach without a sound knowledge of scripture.

Knowing the high calling of the eldership, Paul did not appoint (ordain) Elders on his first visit to a town but only at a later stage (Acts 14: 21-23). Paul also stipulates that no Elder/Overseer should be a recent convert (I Timothy 3: 6). It takes time to mature! It has been said of modern day Christianity that there is much preaching and too little teaching.

Questions:

As an Elder are you part of a bible study group?

As an Elder are you able to lead a bible study?

Are you able to share your faith with a non-believer in a clear and concise way?

8. **Not given to much wine** (*paroinon*- literally: "One who does not linger by his wine") Other translations: "Not given to drink; must not be a drunkard."

See also Titus 1: 7

This is similar to the second quality of being "temperate." In addition to what is mentioned there, excess drinking may well be symptomatic of other problems in a person's life. Problems such as: loneliness, wrong use of money, depression, unresolved strife or inability to cope. Such severe problems make it virtually impossible for a person to discharge the responsibilities of the Eldership effectively.

9. **Not violent** (*plektes*- literally: "not a striker") Other translation: "Not a brawler"

To interact with people by resorting to violence is not the example that a leader in the church ought to set. Other undesirable qualities which may not be as physical but which follow the same trend are: bullying; irritability; and bad tempered speech. Such qualities should likewise not be part of an Elder's interaction with people.

10. Be gentle (*epieikes*)

There is not direct translation for this word in English. It is the gentleness shown by one who has power and authority and who knows that the law is on his/her side. It represents authority combined with clemency. (Acts 24: 4; Governor Felix is asked to show clemency which corresponds to his high office) It portrays firmness and gentleness exercised simultaneously.

The Elder exercises firmness/gentleness because the church the Elder represents does not belong to him/her but to God. The Elder is duty bound to correct the errors that people make but to do it gently.

11. Not quarrelsome (*amachos* – literally: “disinclined to fight”) Other translation: “peaceful”.

There are some people who have to be treated cautiously because a difference of opinion will erupt into an argument or a fight. An Elder needs to be approachable even by some people who do not understand certain standpoints of the church and who may have pertinent or apparently petty questions to ask. The Elder basically wants peace with fellow human beings.

12. Not a lover of money (*aphilargurion*)

The love of money has caused many a person to lower their proclaimed high standards. The Elder must be known as a person whom money cannot buy for he/she upholds qualities to which a financial value cannot be linked. Elders must see to it that financial statements of the church are without fault and that they are presented to the congregation regularly. Elders must show an attitude of contentment with the money and possessions that they have (Hebrews 13: 5). If a person is controlled by money, that person is no longer controlled by God.

13. Aptitude to rule Verses 4 & 5.

Also I Timothy 3: 4 & 5.

If an Elder is going to rule and give direction in the wider community, the same Elder should be able to show that same aptitude in a lesser sphere.

An Elder’s home should not be a place of strife, but it should be a place where problems are dealt with in love and sincerity. The home

of an Elder ought to be a place where the other members of the household know that they are appreciated, loved, prayed for and forgiven.

Children should be willing to submit because they respect their parents and appreciate the security of stable relationships.

Titus 1: 6 the Christianity of the parents should not be contradicted by the disobedience and wildness of their children. Thus it may be necessary to spend more time with one's spouse and children rather than allow the undermining of one's calling to the eldership to be undermined by an unsatisfactory home situation.

14. Not a recent convert. Other translation: "Mature in the faith"

Maturity takes time! If an Elder is to teach and defend the Christian faith and doctrine, it is not only enthusiasm that is needed. It takes time to learn how different aspects of the Christian faith hold together. It also takes time to learn how to be under God's authority and to be able to discern when and where God is at work.

In Matthew 8: 5 Jesus commends the centurion for realizing that faith is linked with a proper understanding of authority. An Elder who is inflated with pride because of the public nature of the position, has been ordained too quickly.

"Old habits die hard!" A recent convert needs time for old habits and thought patterns to be replaced. It is often better to have a small but mature Session, than one where Elders are pulling in different directions because of a lack of maturity as Christians.

15. Good reputation with outsiders.

Also I Timothy 3:7

There are few things that damage the church more than office bearers who have a bad reputation amongst outsiders. There are two reasons:

- a. Usually the whole Christian community is judged as a consequence of the bad reputation of its leader.
- b. Outsiders are the very ones to whom the Christian community ought to be witnessing. The bad reputation of leaders renders the mission of the church impossible even before it has started.

There should be no contradiction between an Elder's stated beliefs and the Elder's reputation in the wider community. Strife within a congregation and disputes between Christians do not go un-noticed by outsiders. Many a potential convert has been put off Christianity because of the hypocrisy of some church members. This accusation ought never to be leveled against Elders.

Chapter 6

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF CHURCH MEMBERS TOWARDS ELDERS

The Function and Duties of Elders are set out in the Manual of Faith and Order chap. 7 par. 1, 2 & 3.

The basic responsibilities of Elders, as described in the above paragraphs, can be summarized by the words: govern; guide; and by the phrases: general oversight and oversight over the instruction of the faith and doctrine. In the light of the congregants having elected the Elders to assume those responsibilities assigned to them, it is important that the congregants accept the leadership they provide. This acceptance can be expressed in two ways:

- a. Submission
- b. Teachable

Submission

This is not always a popular concept! However, if a person has learned to submit to God there will seldom be a problem in submitting to a person ordained to lead the church of God.

In I Thessalonians 5: 12 – 13, Paul closes off his letter with the following call to submit to leaders in the faith: “Now we ask you brothers, **to respect those who work hard** among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in **highest regard** in love because of their word.”

The author of Hebrews goes a step further and states that people must make the work of Christian leaders “a joy not a burden.” This they do when they submit. (See Hebrews 13: 17)

A congregation that is submissive to its leaders will also manifest the unity for which Jesus prayed and it will become a witness to the world that Jesus is Lord. (See John 17: 20 & 21)

When Elders are inducted into a congregation the following question is put to the congregation: “**Do you the members of this congregation accept**

these persons as ruling Elders; and do you promise to honour, encourage and obey them as they rule you under the Lord's guidance? If so, will you please stand.” (See Service Book and Ordinal: Ordination and Induction of Elders page 125.03E) The Elders have been inducted to rule and all those who stand indicate their willingness to submit.

It should be remembered that there are procedures in the UPCSAs as to how complaints about Elders should be handled and the grounds on which discipline should be considered. (Manual of Faith and Order chap. 18) The disliking of an Elder or a difference of opinion with an Elder should not be an excuse to cease submitting.

Teachable

Another important function of Elders is to exercise oversight concerning the instruction of the faith and doctrine in the congregation.

When people claim to be serious about God then they ought to be teachable, for no-one can exhaust the truth of God.

We see the aptitude of being teachable in the Centurion Cornelius, for when he called for Peter to come over to his house he welcomed him with the words: “Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.” (Acts 10: 33)

Being teachable and submissive does not mean being gullible. In the Acts of the Apostles one reads Luke's editorial comment concerning the Bereans being of noble character: “they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul was saying was true.” (Acts 17: 11) The Bereans were teachable but not gullible.

Church members should be willing to attend church and bible studies so that they can hear the message taught from the Scriptures. Congregants should be discerning about what they are taught and examine and test it to see if it is true. To be indifferent to God's Word and to make petty excuses in order to avoid being taught, is to misunderstand the responsibility of being a member of God's church. To sit in judgment over the teacher/preacher and to take the message lightly is to manifest the absence of a vital characteristic of a Christian, namely; being teachable.

Chapter 7

ORDINATION AND RIGHT HAND OF FELLOWSHIP

Ordination

The practice of ordaining elders with the laying on of hands is recorded as having taken place in the church in the New Testament.

The significance of the Laying on of Hands was to commission a person to a special ministry.

1. Acts 6: 1 – 6 records the setting aside of seven men to look after the distribution of food and to wait on tables (Deacons). Vs 6 reads: “They presented these men to the Apostles, who prayed and **laid their hands on them.**”
2. Acts 13: 1 – 3 records the setting aside of Paul and Barnabas for their missionary work. Verse 3 reads: “So after they had fasted and prayed they **placed their hands on them and sent them off.**”

The following three examples concern the laying on of hands for the commissioning of the eldership in particular.

1. I Timothy 4: 14, Paul reminds timothy of the important work of preaching and teaching to which he was ordained “when the body of **Elders laid their hands on you.**”
2. I Timothy 5: 22, Paul is warning Timothy: “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands....” As the context shows, Paul is referring to Elders. (See I Timothy 5: 17 – 19)
3. Acts 14: 23, Paul and Barnabas **ordained** Elders for them in each church....” The word “ordained “ is one of the translations of the Greek word “cheirteino” which literally means “stretching of hands” The NIV Bible has a note in the text of verse 23 next to the word “appointed” and indicates that the word could also be translated as “ordained” or “elected”. The reason for these three possible translations is:

- a. Hands are stretched during an ordination, when hands are laid.
- b. Hands are stretched when an appointment is made, when it is being indicated who is appointed.
- c. Hands are stretched in an election when hands are raised to vote.

In the UPCSA all three aspects of the “stretching of hands” is evident. Elders are first elected at a congregational meeting. Then follows the service where the elected Elders are ordained. The ordination is then followed by the appointment (induction) to a particular congregation. See the guidelines for the “Election, Ordination and Induction of Elders”; Manual of Faith and Order Chap. 7 Section 12.

It is worth pausing for a moment during an Elders’ Ordination Service to reflect over what is being done being not simply Presbyterian tradition but a continuation of what was already taking place in the church during New Testament times.

Right Hand of Fellowship

It is the practice in the UPCSA that newly ordained Elders are welcomed by the “right hand of fellowship”.

This was a common practice amongst both Hebrews and Greeks and indicated a pledge of friendship.

In his letter to the Galatians (chap. 2) Paul recalls how he went up to Jerusalem to explain his ministry to the leaders of the church. Verse 9 reads: “James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the **right hand of fellowship** when they recognized the grace given to me.”

The Ordination Service together with the offering of “the right hand of fellowship” is a public acknowledgement that the Elder has shown signs of spiritual maturity and that the Elder is commissioned to lead others to the Grace of God.

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