



Introduction

Elders are important people in the Presbyterian Church. Ministers tend to come and go, so often it is the Elders who provide a continuity of commitment and leadership in the Church. They represent a unique insight of our Reformed tradition. Ministers do not serve alone. The Church is not the Church without dedicated Elders who serve Jesus Christ while earning their own living, yet living their faith in the world.

I assume you are reading this booklet because you are an Elder (or possibly you have been invited by Session to consider such a call). Maybe you have been elected for the first time. Whether you are a novice or veteran, I hope this brief introduction to the Elders' Ministry will help equip you for effective service. You join the ranks of an ancient and honourable company. You also face unprecedented change and challenge as a Church leader in the twenty-first century. New crises and opportunities demand fresh insights and creative Church leadership!

This booklet is a modest attempt to help you prepare for your important Ministry.

The second part of this booklet is a copy of Chapter 7 of the *Manual of Faith and Order* of the U.P.C.S.A. As the Presbyterian Church operates under a Session, it is important that you are aware of what the Session does. It also includes the Confession of Faith of the Church.

I trust this booklet will be of benefit to you!

Rev. Geoff Probert

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Full Grey Beards?

Most ancient people groups looked to the “Elders” among them for wisdom, leadership, and government. The word “Elder” implies maturity, insight born of experience, and discretion. In Hebrew the word literally means “a full, grey beard!” Most Elders in ancient times were older, the patriarchs of prominent families. Elders appear early and often in the Bible. They are mentioned first by God in that famous conversation with Moses at the burning bush. God told Moses to return to Egypt and assemble the Elders of God’s enslaved people. They were the first to hear the good news of Israel’s liberation: *“I declare that I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt”* (Exod. 3:17). When the burdens of leadership became too heavy, Moses heeded the advice of his father-in-law, Jethro. He appointed “able men” to help oversee the faith and conduct of God’s people (Exod. 18:13-27). These officers were drawn from the ranks of Israel’s Elders.

Later, the Elders met at the gate of each city to settle disputes and administer the justice God required (Ruth 4:1, 11; Job 29; Amos 5:15). At crucial moments in Israel’s history—when the Priesthood was established (Exod. 9) and when the people yearned for a king (1 Sam. 8:4-5), the Elders were present to represent the people and to seek God’s will for their community.

At the time of Jesus' Ministry, Councils of Elders, together with the local Rabbis, governed the affairs of Jewish synagogues. When the first Christian Congregations organised for worship and mission in Christ's name, they naturally turned to this familiar model.

The Apostles, who had known and followed the Lord, provided primary leadership. They traveled about, preaching, teaching, and establishing Churches. Local Congregations were guided and governed by Elders, who were recognised as possessing the gifts of mature faith, leadership, and administration. Paul and Barnabas appointed Elders in each Church they founded (Acts 14:23). The New Testament word for Elder, *presbuteros*, is the source of the word Presbyterian. It means government by councils of Elders, as most Churches in the Reformed tradition are governed to this day.

The early Church, of course, recognised other important ministries. We read of Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors (Ministers), Teachers, Healers, and Administrators, among others (1 Cor. 12:28, Eph. 4:11). Some Biblical texts speak of Elders and Bishops (*episkopos*) or Overseers interchangeably (1 Tim. 3:1-7, 5:17-22, Titus 1:5-9). Apparently, some Elders were appointed to preach the Word and serve the Sacraments, while others provided local decision-making, direction, and discipline. Leadership positions were fluid and flexible in New Testament times. They varied from Church to Church, depending on the gifts of the Holy Spirit and local needs.

It is clear that Elders played a crucial role in the life and witness of the first Christian Congregations. They shared the ministry of leadership with other "Presbyters" or "Bishops" who preached and served the Sacraments, and with "Deacons," who served widows and the poor (Acts 6). A sharp division between Clergy and laity is not found in the New Testament.

When elders disappeared

The distinction between Clergy and laity began to arise as early as the second century. Strong central leadership was required in the face of persecution and heresy. Bishops were given control in local Congregations and eventually over Churches in a wider region. With the rise to prominence of the Bishop of Rome and the doctrine of Apostolic succession, a hierarchical concept of Ministry and a separation between Clergy and laity emerged. The Pope, as Peter's successor became the supreme leader of the Church. Only Bishops and Priests ordained by Papal approval were said to possess the authority of Christ to guide his flock, the power to forgive sins, and the right to administer the Sacraments, upon which the laity were taught to depend for saving grace. By the fourth century, Clergy dominance had won the day and the office of Elder had disappeared.



Offices of the Church

The Protestant Reformation sought renewal of Church government as well as of worship and Theology. Salvation by works, a superstitious sacramentalism, and Clergy dominance were subjected to new scrutiny in light of the Holy Scriptures, the Word of God. Martin Luther reinvigorated the Church with his emphasis on “the priesthood of all believers.”

But the reformer John Calvin did most to restore the laity to their rightful place in Church government. Calvin identified four New Testament Ministries which he believed to be essential and permanent offices of the church: (1) Ministers or Pastors, he said, are called to preach the Word of God, administer the sacraments, and care for the flock. (2) Ruling Elders maintain order, exercise Christian discipline, and assist in pastoral care. (3) Deacons provide ministries of mercy and justice for the poor. To this “three-fold ministry” of the local Church, Calvin added a fourth office, that of teacher or doctor, responsible for sound doctrine and the education of Ministerial students.

Rejecting the Clergy hierarchy, he called for a government founded on the sovereignty of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Christ is the only Head, and the Church is his body (Eph. 4:11-15). All Ministry is a representation and extension of Christ’s Ministry. His Ministry is given to the entire body, not just to a few clerics! At Baptism every Christian is ordained to the one Ministry of Jesus Christ.

In the U.P.C.S.A, the role of Deacon largely falls within the Elders function as the denomination is small and does not warrant large leadership structures (as apposed to countries like the U.S.A). In some Churches within the U.P.C.S.A, there are Deacons Courts, which is another name for a Management Committee. Deacons are ordained. The office of Elder and Deacon is a recognised office in the U.P.C.S.A.

The Representative Principle

Every Christian is a minister. But not every Christian is a Church leader. Within the one Ministry of Jesus Christ, some are called by God, gifted by the Holy Spirit, and elected by the Church to fulfill leadership functions essential to the life and witness of the whole.

The Congregation elects members to serve as Elders and then pledges to honour them and abide by their decisions taken at Session meetings. You may think that this is similar to national governance, but there is a crucial difference.

Elders are accountable first to Jesus Christ, the head of the Church, not to their electorate. Elders should be sensitive to the desires of the people. But their first duty is to seek and follow the will of Christ for the Church, even if some members disagree.



Called and ordained

As part of the vows taken, you as an elder have said (or will say) *“As far as I know my own heart, I am moved to enter this ministry by zeal for the glory of God, love for the Lord Jesus Christ, the call of the Holy Spirit and a desire for the salvation of mankind.”* (U.P.C.S.A Service Book and Ordinal). Therefore, Church leaders are more than volunteers. We do not choose to lead; we are chosen. God takes the initiative in calling all Christians to faith and service and some to Ministries of leadership. The Presbyterian tradition speaks of an “inner call” of the heart and the “outer call” by the Church. Both are required for ordained leadership.

Ministers usually hear the inner call of God first. It must be confirmed through years of Theological training and post-academic training and the call of the Church to a particular Ministry.

For Elders, the call of the Church often comes first to awaken an inner sense of call. Your first response may be “Why me? Isn’t so-and-so more qualified?”

By asking you to serve as an Elder, your church recognises in you the Holy Spirit's gifts for mature Christian leadership. The call of the Church is truly God's call. You may accept it with that assurance and inner conviction.

Ordination is a public rite of recognition and commissioning. Persons called by God and elected by the Church receive the authority of Jesus Christ to fulfill their respective Ministries within his body. Since the earliest days of the Church, ordination includes prayer for God's continuing grace and gifts, with the laying on of hands in the presence of the Congregation (Acts 6:6, 13:3, 1 Tim. 4:14, 2 Tim. 1:6).

Elders are ordained for life in the U.P.C.S.A. This does not mean that you can never have a break (there are provisions for this). Nor does it mean that you are automatically an Elder should you transfer to another town and join the Presbyterian Church there. Should your new Presbyterian Congregation feel led to call you to serve again, you will be inducted into the position.

In the Presbyterian Church, Elders may retire on reaching the age of 68 or anytime after that. Elders may also retire due to ill health or other circumstances. Upon retiring, they may be given *emeritus* status. Furthermore, an Elder may resign, retire or simply wish to have leave of absence for a period of time. But Eldership is not "taken away" except in extreme circumstances. Ordination should be a great moment for any Christian leader.

You have an office!

The essential leadership functions in a Presbyterian Congregation are called the "offices." Offices may be status symbols in our secular society but status-seeking has no place in Church government. The word "office" comes from the Latin *officium*. It means "duty" or "responsibility."

An office in the Church is a God-given responsibility, not a superior position. Jesus is our model. *“I am among you as one who serves,”* he said (Luke 22:27). *“Whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all”* (Mark 10:44). A Church office is a call to servanthood, not status!

Lone Rangers need not apply!

Elders never act individually or in isolation. They join with the Minister as a Session of Elders to provide oversight and care for members. The Session includes the offices of Elder and Minister in decision-making.

Presbyterian Church government is not hierarchical. Those elected to Church offices are equals. Recognising the power of self-interest and the reality of sin, people in the Presbyterian tradition have always preferred to invest local authority in groups rather than in individuals—in Elders and Ministers governing jointly. The “higher” councils (regional Presbyteries, and the General Assembly) include both Minister and Elder delegates for the same reason.

Government by colleagues is another way we express our conviction that Jesus Christ is the only Head and Ruler of the Church. All authority belongs to Christ. We who serve in his ordained Ministry receive his authority equally. This parity of Ministry means that Ministers and Elders serve together in a horizontal, not a vertical, relationship. One does not “move up” the ranks. Nor does a Minister possess an authority greater than that of an Elder. Our Ministries are different but equally important. Each represents an essential part of the one Ministry of Jesus Christ.

“Lone rangers” need not apply, because the full Ministry of Christ always requires guiding and nurturing through government and discipline, ministering and witnessing through mercy, service, and outreach, preaching and teaching through Word and Sacraments. Only by serving together do Elders and Ministers represent and continue the many-faceted ministry of Jesus Christ in the Church and for the world.



Who elders are

What do a young mother, a successful businessman, a retired teacher, a university professor, and a librarian have in common? Each one belongs to an ancient and honorable company of leaders with deep roots in the history of God’s people. Each one is an Elder in our Church!

But what is it that makes these very different people qualified to be Elders in the church? Clearly, it is not human distinctions of age, gender, ethnicity, education, or economic status. Rather, it is God’s call and the gifts of the Holy Spirit discerned by the Church that are the key qualifications.

These qualifications, and how we might see them lived out in people, were set down long ago by the Apostle Paul. He set a standard for Church leadership which, admittedly, could not be attained perfectly by anyone, but which nevertheless illustrates his high regard for the office.

A spiritual leader, says Paul, must be *“above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an able teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money”* (1 Tim. 3:2-3). Paul’s list of qualifications goes on to include healthy family relationships and being *“well thought of by outsiders”* (vss. 4, 7). Elders are people of sound reputation in their Church and community.

Perhaps the Biblical word maturity best sums up an Elder’s qualifications. Paul urged the Corinthians: *“do not be children in your thinking; rather be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults”* (1 Cor. 14:20). Ephesians 4:13, central to a Presbyterian understanding of Church government, states the goal of Christian ministry: *“to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity [my emphasis], to the measure of the full stature of Christ.”*

Elders need not be older, but they must be mature! Jesus Christ is the measure of a mature Christian life. Those who lead the Church should have a vital relationship with the Lord of the church. This personal commitment will be visible in their lives. Elders are people who pray and study the Scriptures. Growing in their own relationship with Jesus Christ, they are able to teach and guide others to do the same.

Elders have a mature self-awareness, neither thinking more highly of themselves than they ought to think (Rom. 12:3), nor insecure and reluctant to use their God-given gifts (2 Tim. 1:6). Elders are open and sensitive to people. They think, pray, and work well with others. They have courage to stand firm on major issues of faith, grace to yield minor points for the peace of the church, and wisdom to know the difference.

These qualifications of Elders have endured since the beginning of the Church. But as times have changed, so have some of the traditional pictures of Elders.

Before the industrial revolution, change came slowly to societies. People gained the wisdom of experience simply by living longer. Now, young people grow up in a world quite different from that of their parents and grandparents. While some in our Congregations remember life before electricity, others surf the Internet. Faith perspectives and spiritual needs will be very different from generation to generation.

Where the Holy Spirit is present, young people see visions and old people dream dreams (Acts 2:17). Intergenerational leadership among Elders will help a Church discern God's will for today and tomorrow.

Similarly, many women are now being called to places of leadership in our Congregations. In those places, the Ministry of the Elders has been deepened and enriched in a new way through the truth Paul declared: *"there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus"* (Gal. 3:28).

A living faith, a healthy sense of self, and deep concern for people: these are marks of mature leadership. People who possess these Christ-like qualities are far from perfect. Christian maturity is a lifetime journey, after all. The best Church leaders are those who have made good progress on the way. They are qualified to lead God's people and to *"present everyone mature in Christ"* (Col. 1:28).



What Elders do

The Presbyterian Church has a Manual of Faith and Order. Chapter 7 of this Manual deals with the duties of Session and Eldership.

This chapter has been included at the back of this booklet for your convenience. The Manual of Faith and Order sets forth the doctrine, worship, and government of our Church. Your Minister can assist in getting a copy for you if you so wish.

It is also important that the Elder also familiarises himself / herself with the Confession of Faith of the Church. This document clearly defines the belief of the U.P.C.S.A as a sub-ordinate standard to the Word of God.



Oversight - Guiding and

The Elders, together with the Minister, comprise the Session and are responsible for overseeing the entire life and mission of the Congregation. Elders and Ministers are particularly responsible for “spiritual oversight.”

A wise Session makes sure its Elders are fully involved in the committees and programmes that provide Christian nurture for children and adults, pastoral care, and the worship of the Church and that its Elders are active in these teaching and caring ministries.

But Spiritual oversight is not limited to the faith, conduct, and care of members – it may include things like missionary support and Christian Aid. However, decisions about building maintenance, staff salaries and the annual budget fall under the control of the Management Committee. This Committee meets regularly and will

have as its members some Elders and others who have been elected to serve the Committee by the Congregation. Other Committees such as Sunday School Teachers or Worship Committees may or may not have Elders as members, although they will often approach the Session to assist with any decision that falls outside of its mandate.

It is true that a neglected facility, a decline in giving, a poorly paid Minister or inadequate parking may hinder the Church's ministry and indicate deeper Spiritual problems. Spiritual oversight includes setting the right priorities!



Discipline means discipling

Since Reformation times, Church discipline has been a defining responsibility of the Elders. Church members are accountable to Jesus Christ and to one another for the faith they profess and the lives they live. Choosing “to live in the way of Christ” means turning away from false values and lifestyles to join a community of faith, hope, and love. Elders, together with the Minister, are responsible for holding each other and the community to a loving accountability.

Effective Church discipline rejects the legalism, coercion, and punishment sometimes practiced in the past. In our age of democracy, individualism, and the volunteer, people are always free to find another Church. Many do, when confronted by judgmental Church leaders! Yet people hunger for the security of an authentic faith and a responsible Community.

The words discipline and disciple have the same root. The positive purpose of Church discipline is to guide members to mature discipleship. Ministers and Elders lead first by example. They accept the cost of discipleship themselves. Then they challenge others to do so in freedom and love. The goal of Church discipline is commitment, not mere compliance! Discipline means discipling!

If Elders feel the need to discipline a member, this should be done with grace, sensitivity and in accordance with God's Word. The goal should always be the person's repentance and restoration to the community. Beyond these exceptions, the Elders' Ministry of discipline will be a continuous effort to provide the example, care, and nurture to help each member grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ.



Gatekeeping

Israel's Elders sat in the city gate to serve the people. Today's elders are gatekeepers, too!

The Session welcomes new members, admits children to the Lord's Table, hears young and old make their confessions of faith, and acts on requests for infant baptism. Elders are also charged to review Church membership rolls regularly, to declare "inactive" those members who have withdrawn from the worship and life of the Church, and to seek diligently to restore them. The Elders may remove members who remain inactive. They may also transfer members to other Congregations upon the request of the member.

As gatekeepers, Elders have special opportunities to know and guide members toward deeper faith and discipleship. Transition times are teachable moments in members' lives.

When parents ask to have their baby baptised or to bring their children to the Lord's Table, they may be especially receptive to the assurances and responsibilities of our covenant theology—a theology which emphasizes God's eternal commitment to us and to each other.

Many Churches provide classes for potential members prior to their joining. In these, Elders can play a major teaching role. As lay leaders, Elders are well qualified to explain the benefits and commitments involved in faithful Church membership, because they live them. Teenagers in a class for new members may pay closer attention if they know their faith and learning will be explored in a meeting with the Elders. In some Churches, Elders serve as mentors for individual students throughout the teaching and nurturing process.

As gatekeepers, Elders should do more than meet among themselves to talk about Church members, determine their status, and act on their requests. Beyond perfunctory motions, members need to be known, included, instructed, and loved. Your position at the gateway of the Church enables you to touch lives and deepen discipleship at moments when people are most receptive to God's call.

Visiting



A common way of ensuring that members are cared for is through visitation. A graceful ministry of visitation is needed even more in today's secular society. When people stop coming to Church, as they are in growing numbers, the Church must go to them.

Ministers are responsible for this outreach, but they cannot do it alone. Nor should they. Elders, who live and work in that same secular society, are credible representatives of Christ, and the Church in the world of members' homes, families, and daily concerns. Belonging and commitment increase when the focus of a visit is the member's faith, involvement, and needs, not the church budget or program. Careful preparation and training in active listening skills will make calls more effective and Elders more comfortable in this role.

In our modern society – using alternatives to the “house call” can be used – such as email, cell phone messaging, phone calls on birthday's etc. Elders should also report pastoral concerns to the Minister to follow up on.

Elders and the Minister



Do you ever wonder who ministers to your Minister? Although they come under the pastoral care and discipline of the Presbytery, it would be unwise to assume that your Minister does not need the care and support of the local Session. Most Ministers are highly dedicated, hard-working people. Their sincere desire is to preach powerfully and helpfully, to serve the people gracefully, and to lead the Church in mission effectively. People rely on their Minister in times of crisis and stress. Many confidences must be kept. The burdens are often heavy, and the Ministry can be a lonely calling. Ministers are also people with families, personal emergencies, and human frailties. They need the same care and spiritual nurture we all do.

Elders, who work closely with the Minister in the Ministry of the Church, are in a good position to provide that nurture. Your Minister should have a safe environment in which he / she is able to share personal concerns. A kind word, a listening ear, or a pat on the back are both welcome and needed.

In rare instances, a Minister may be accused of immoral or illegal acts. For this reason, the Elders must know their role and

limitations. When allegations of misconduct arise, the Elders should consult with the Minister and other concerned parties to determine fact and to expose rumour and false information. If the evidence justifies formal charges, they must be submitted through the correct channels. The Presbytery will be best equipped to deal with this should it arise (The Minister is responsible not to Session, but to Presbytery).

It should be noted that the Minister of any Congregation within the U.P.C.S.A is responsible for teaching and worship and, although he / she may be advised by Session, teaching and worship remain the prerogative of the Minister.

Each Session should provide counsel, encouragement and support to their Ministers. When Elders are Ministers to their Minister, good Ministers grow to be even better preachers, teachers, shepherds, and leaders. The best caregivers are Ministers who are cared for in their own inevitable moments of crisis and vulnerability. At these times, let the Elders take care!

Much has changed in Church and society. But the essentials remain. Under the watchful eye of the Elders, the Word is still preached, Sacraments are served, praise and prayer are offered to God, and the people are renewed for discipleship in the world. I pray it will always be so in the Uniting Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa by God's grace and through the Ministry of faithful Elders like you!



Looking ahead

The duties of Ministers and Elders, as we presently define them, are largely lived out within the Congregation and walls of our Churches. But what about the millions of people, perhaps now even the majority of people, within South Africa for whom Church is no longer important? Does an Elder have any the responsibility for them?

When people stop coming to church, then the church must go out to the people. While some have suggested that a new office of evangelist or missionary be created to lead the Church into mission in society—a change we certainly could consider—to be Reformed is to keep on reforming and to seek and welcome whatever new forms of Ministry best serve the Church and witness to God's saving grace in a changing world.

Growing churches in the twenty-first century have Elders and Ministers who are able and willing to share their faith, minister to people, and make disciples—not only at Church, but also in offices, market places and shopping malls.

Their mission is to understand our culture as well as they understand the Gospel, and find new and exciting way to connect one to the other. This generation of seekers has many questions for the Church and is rarely satisfied with doctrinaire or traditional answers.

The times call for Elders who can translate the Christian faith into new words and deeds of witness and into new forms of worship. Can we communicate with seekers without compromising the enduring insights of our tradition or the truth of the Gospel? That is a tall task! It will mean better training, more resources, and a commitment from Ministers, Presbyteries and the denomination to work together, to provide Elders with the knowledge and skills necessary for effective leadership, discipling, and pastoral care. It will mean raising up a new and hopeful vision of what Elders can be and do in the service of Christ's kingdom. With God's help, it can be done!

End Notes

Primary resources

1. *The Manual of Faith and Order*. (2007) U.P.C.S.A.
2. White, Robert 2007 *The Ministry of the Elder: Guiding and nurturing God's people*. Reformed Church in America.

Other resources

1. John T. McNeill, ed., Ford Lewis Battles, trans., Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vols. XX and XXI of The Library of Christian Classics, John Baillie, John T. McNeill, and Henry P. Van Dusen, eds. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953) pp. 1060-62.
2. Douglas Alan Walrath's perceptive analysis in *Frameworks: Patterns for Living and Believing Today* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1987).
3. Daniel J. Meeter, *Meeting Each Other in Doctrine, Liturgy & Government* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1993).

Resources (Continued)

4. L. Callahan, *Visiting in an Age of Mission: A Handbook for Person-to-Person Ministry* New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994.
5. L. Callahan, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church* San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1983.