

Elder Board Handbook

The Bridge Church

INTRODUCTION

This handbook serves as an orientation and overview of the board of elders at The Bridge Church. It is not exhaustive on every detail, but rather aims to clarify how the board of elders operates and functions. Some elements related to eldership are clearly mandated in Scripture (i.e.: qualifications of elders, plurality of elders, responsibilities of elders), but other elements are not mandated in Scripture (i.e.: size of the elder board, term of each elder, diversity of the elder board), but rather are determined by wisdom and contextualization.

WHAT IS AN ELDER?

The following definition of “elder” is found in the bylaws of The Bridge Church:

An elder is man who has been appointed by God to shepherd the local church, who meets the biblical qualifications of an elder (1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1), who has been gifted to teach the Scriptures, who possesses godly character, and who has been gifted to lead the affairs and direction of the local church. Throughout the New Testament, the terms “pastor,” “bishop,” and “elder” refer to the same office. We will use the term “elder” for the purpose of consistency.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF ELDERS

Prayer and Proclamation

It is the responsibility of the elders to be primarily devoted to the ministry of prayer and ministry of the word. Elders should guard themselves from distractions and diversions that would deter them from being fervent in the ministry prayer and the ministry of proclaiming the word of the gospel (“the word”—*logos: word of the gospel*).

*But we will devote ourselves to **prayer** and to the ministry of the **word**.*
Acts 6:4

Instruction and Equipping

It is the responsibility of the elders to instruct and equip the church for gospel ministry. Church members need to be taught, trained and prepared for the ministry God has called every all believers to complete.

*He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give **instruction** in sound doctrine and also to **rebuke** those who contradict it.*
Titus 1:9

*And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to **equip** the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.*
Ephesians 4:11-12

Rule and Oversight

It is the responsibility of the elders to rule and oversee and govern the church. This means they are to lead and direct the congregation and bear responsibility for the administration of the operations of the church.

*Let the elders who **rule** well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.*
1 Timothy 5:17

*Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.*
Acts 20:28

*So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising **oversight**, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.*
1 Peter 5:1-3

Care and Protection

It is the responsibility of the elders to care for the congregation in a similar way that a loving shepherd would watch over his flock. Elders are responsible to protect the sheep from a number of adversaries and enemies that would seek to harm their life.

*Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to **care** for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.*

Acts 20:28-30

*So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: **shepherd** the flock of God that is among you.*

1 Peter 5:1-3

Authority and Accountability

It is the responsibility of the elders to practice authority over the congregation and help the church obey and submit to their leadership. As leaders in a position of authority, elders will be held accountable before Christ for how they lead the church.

***Obey** your leaders and **submit** to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an **account**. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*

Hebrews 13:17

QUALIFICATIONS OF ELDERS

Every elder must meet the biblical qualifications. These qualifications are primarily found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. The vast majority of elder qualifications are about character rather than competency. The following is a list of qualifications found in the bylaws of The Bridge Church.

1. A man: elders must be men, not women. (for further explanation, read "Can Women Be Elders?")
2. Above reproach: in all matters of life, an elder embodies godly character and is free of any red flags that would give the church reservations for following his leadership.
3. A one-woman man: an elder must be living a life free of sexual impurity. If married, this man must be loyal and devoted to his wife.
4. Not arrogant.
5. Sober-minded.
6. Self-controlled and disciplined.
7. Respectable.
8. Upright and holy in character.
9. Hospitable.
10. Able to teach: an elder must possess the spiritual gift of teaching and be able to instruct the church on biblical matters.
11. Submissive to the teaching of the Word of God.
12. Not a drunkard: not prone to drunkenness or enslaved to alcohol.
13. Not violent but gentle.
14. Not quarrelsome.
15. Not greedy or a lover of money.
16. If a father, he must manage his household well with submissive and faithful children.
17. Not a recent convert.
18. Well thought of by outsiders and the unchurched.

VARIOUS ROLES AMONG THE ELDERS

When it comes to the variety of roles among the elder board, it is important to note that every elder possesses equality in essence. What that means is that each elder carries the same level of value and importance. There should be no level of superiority among the elder board. Each elder serves together and maintains equality in their essence.

Though each elder is equal in essence, it is important to note that all elders are not equal in their function. Another way to say it is that each elder has his own gifts and qualities he brings to the table. Alexander Strauch says it this way: "Although elders act jointly as a council and share equal authority and responsibility for the leadership of the church, all are not equal in their giftedness, biblical knowledge, leadership ability, experience, or dedication."¹

We also see this concept clearly in Paul's instructions to the Ephesians...

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.
Ephesians 4:11-12

What Paul means is that every elder will bear unique gifts in their service to the church. This is a good thing because a variety of gifts are necessary for the overall health of the church. Based on Paul's instruction, some elders will bear a more apostolic role. Some will be more prophetic. Some will be more evangelistic. Some will be more shepherding. Some will be more instructional in teaching. Since this is the case, each elder should learn how he is gifted for his unique leadership contribution.

First Among Equals

It's also helpful at this point to recognize the principle of "first among equals." What that principle means is that an elder board will likely have a specific elder responsible for spearheading the team of elders as the "first among equals" or the "leader among leaders." This does not mean the "first among equals" elder has a higher level of authority or gets to be the boss of the elders. Rather, it just means that the first among equals has a gift of leadership to help lead within the elder board.

D. A. Carson says this regarding a leader among elders...

¹ Alexander Strauch (2011-03-11). *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Kindle Locations 620-622). Lewis and Roth Publishers. Kindle Edition.

Where you have a group of elders, a group of pastors, a group of overseers, then inevitably, in the very nature of the case, some are going to be more senior than others, whether because they have been in the task longer, or because they are more experienced or they know more, or because they are better teachers of the Word of God.²

D. A. Carson

We also see this principle clearly among Jesus' team of apostles. Alexander Strauch says it this way...

Jesus chose twelve apostles, all of whom He empowered to preach and heal, but He singled out three for special attention— Peter, James, and John (“ first ones among equals”). Among the three, as well as among the Twelve, Peter stood out as the most prominent (“ first among equals”).³

Alexander Strauch

What all this means is that every elder board will have a variety of roles and functions, including a “first among equals,” in which each elder leads and contributes to the overall shepherding of the church.

NOTE: It is the intent and goal of The Bridge Church to have an elder board representative of a variety of gifts and functions as demonstrated in Ephesians 4:11-12 and encourage elders to serve in their gifting.

NOTE: It is the intent of The Bridge Church to have a “first among equals” serving on the board of elders. According to the bylaws, this role has the title of “Pastor of Teaching and Vision.”

² D. A. Carson, “Defining Elders,” <http://riversidecommunitychurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Carson-Defining-Elders.pdf>

³ Alexander Strauch (2011-03-11). *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Kindle Locations 620-622). Lewis and Roth Publishers. Kindle Edition.

DIVERSITY OF ELDERS

The elder board should not be dominated by one type of individual but rather a diversity of individuals. There is no precedent in Scripture that elders should make up the same strain of persons. For instance, there is no precedent to form an elder board that is comprised of a certain income group or educational level or generational category or ethnic group. Rather, the opposite is true. From the Scriptures we see that there is a beauty to an eldership that is diversified and representative of various classes, groups, and cultures.

We see this very clearly among Jesus' team of apostles. He could've selected a team of apostles that all shared the same status of wealth, education, class, and political ideology. However, Jesus's team of apostles constituted a very diverse group of individuals. One disciple was a former zealot—a radical who was determined to overthrow Roman rule. Another disciple was a tax collector—a traitor to the Jewish nation and in collusion with Rome. Several others were mere fishermen. This group constituted a unique diversity of various cultures and backgrounds, yet Jesus selected them all to lead the early church.

Additionally, we get a beautiful picture of diversity among church leadership in Acts 13:1-2. In this passage, Luke takes the time to demonstrate that the early church leaders in Antioch were of divergent backgrounds, cultures and nationalities. J. D. Greear says this...

Paul and Barnabas were Jews, of course, though neither of them were born in Israel. Manaen was from Herod's household, indicating a privileged Jewish upbringing. Simeon had the nickname "Niger" (which literally meant "black"), because he was from the region of Sub-Saharan Africa. Lucius was from Cyrene, modern-day Libya. In other words, of the five leaders mentioned, one is from the Middle East, one from Asia, one from the Mediterranean, and two are from Africa.⁴

J. D. Greear

Therefore, diversity among an elder board should be expected and intentional. The following are a few ways in which diversity can be intentionally pursued among an elder board.

Ethnic diversity

It is the biblical call of every church to be a reflection of the context in which it finds itself. The notion of a homogenous church is nowhere to be found in the Scriptures. Rather, the opposite is true—churches should be a reflection of the ethnic makeup of their context. Therefore, assuming a church is striving to reflect the ethnic makeup of their context, it would be understandable for the elder board to also reflect a similar makeup.

⁴ J. D. Greear, "Does Diversity in the Church Even Matter?" http://www.jdgreear.com/my_weblog/2014/12/does-diversity-in-the-church-even-matter.html

Generational diversity

Another way in which diversity can be pursued among and elder board is generational diversity. There is a large volume of experience that comes with various generations. Every generation brings certain perspectives to the table, and therefore it should be encouraged that generational diversity is present among the elder board.

Socio-economic diversity

Another way in which diversity can be pursued among the elder board is socio-economic diversity. If all the elders on the board fit into one income level, their insight and perspective to how they see their congregation is going to be a narrow window. Therefore, it should be encouraged that the elder board be representative of various socio-economic levels.

Vocational diversity

There is also great insight representative among church leadership when there is vocational diversity among the elder board. To have a wide array of vocational experiences—business, non-profit, healthcare, education, government, etc.—will be helpful because of the diverse knowledge and perspectives represented.

On this note, it is important to note that an elder board can be comprised of those who are employees of the church and those who are not employees of the church (lay elders or non-staff elders). The strength of having staff elders is that they are in the day-to-day grind and execution of the operations of the church. However, the beauty of having non-staff elders is that their wellbeing and future is not tied to their position or salary connected to the church. Intentionally pursuing a board that includes non-staff elders avoids the danger of all the elders making decisions based on their salary or benefits or future employment.

Educational Diversity

Another form of diversity that can be pursued is educational diversity. There is no basis for only selecting elders at the highest educational level. The primary qualifications for elders are character qualifications, not educational or competency qualifications. Therefore, educational diversity among the elder board should be encouraged and pursued.

NOTE: The intent and goal of The Bridge Church is to have an elder board representing each of these forms of diversity. Specifically, since we have a goal of being a church of 1/3 ethnic minority, we seek to have an elder board of 1/3 ethnic minority. Regarding generational diversity, we have a goal to see that at least one of our elders represents each of the following generations: 25-40 years of age, 40-55 years of age, 55+ years of age. Regarding socio-economic diversity, we have a goal to see that at least one of our elders represents each of the following social classes—lower class, middle class, and upper class. We also have goal to see vocational and educational diversity represented on the elder board.

NOTE: Regarding staff elders and non-staff elders, the current intent and goal of our elder board is to have at least two non-staff elders represented on the board with the possibility of being able to have a 50-50 split of staff and non-staff elders.

NUMBER OF ELDERS

There is no mandate in Scripture for the total number of elders required to be present on the elder board. The only biblical precedent for the number of elders is a plurality of elders. Therefore, each church should determine the total number of elders necessary in order to appropriately lead the congregation based on the unique size and needs of the congregation.

This means the size of the elder board should be conditioned by the size of the congregation. The number of elders should be the appropriate number necessary to adequately oversee, lead, care and instruct the church. Depending on the unique size of the congregation, the number of elders needs to be sufficient to execute the tasks and responsibilities of the elders. For instance, it would be insufficient to think an elder board of two elders could appropriately oversee and manage a congregation of 1,000 people. So, there is a caution that an elder board could be proportionately too small for the size of the church.

However, the opposite caution is true—an elder board could be proportionately too large for the size of the congregation. For instance, it would be unnecessary to have five elders overseeing a congregation of one hundred people. The only justification for that reason would be that the context of the church had an enormous need for pastoral care and leadership (perhaps the church has a high number of abuse cases, addiction cases, infidelity cases, etc.).

Additionally, it is important to recognize the principle that the larger the elder board is, the more challenging it is to appropriately oversee and manage the affairs of the church in a way that fosters functionality. If an elder board wants to strive for efficiency and functionality, it becomes increasingly harder to maintain that goal, as the board grows larger. Logistically, when an elder board gets too large, it actually prevents the elders from being able to meet and collaborate on issues pertinent to the health of the church.

Not only do larger elder boards create challenges for efficiency and functionality, they also create challenges for relational health. Since an elder board should strive for close relational proximity, the larger the board is the more unlikely it will be for elders and their families to actually share meaningful relationships and share partnership together in the ministry of leading and caring for the church.

Also, it is important to note that a large elder board creates more obstacles for unity and unanimity. Smaller elder boards foster the ability to have unity and reach points of unanimity because there is more time for each elder to share their unique insights in order to process matters together. However, the larger an elder board grows, the ability to have unanimity on most issues isn't possible. It forces the board to move forward on decisions even if there isn't 100% unanimity on various matters. Unanimity isn't a requirement for elder boards, but it is a benefit of smaller elder boards.

Lastly, for the sake of clarity, it will be helpful for every congregation to set a goal for how many elders is necessary to adequately shepherd the congregation. However, this goal should not be seen as a legalistic “quota” or requirement if a vacancy forms within the elder board. As vacancies form within the board, only qualified candidates who meet the biblical qualifications for eldership should be elected as elders. The board should appropriately caution any efforts of hurry or panic to nominate new elders.

NOTE: The current bylaws of The Bridge Church say, “A minimum of two elders is required to be on the elder board. It is up to the discretion of the elder board to determine the maximum number of elders (more than two) who should participate on the elder board for each term.”

NOTE: Based on the current size and needs of The Bridge Church, our goal is to have an elder board consisting of six elders. This number is a representative number of the size of our congregation and will foster an appropriate level of functionality and relational health. This number is subject to change as the size and needs of The Bridge Church change.

TERM OF ELDERS

The term of an elder means the duration and period of time for how long one serves in the office of an elder before cycling off the elder board. There is not a clear mandate or precedent in Scripture for the term of an elder. Every congregation must determine what is the most beneficial and helpful for their context.

For some elders in particular, it should be understood that a term is not helpful. For instance, the elder(s) who serve as the primary teaching elder(s) should not have a term because that would prevent them from exercising their primary function and role within the congregation. Also, if a current elder(s) fulfills a specific need or role among the elder board, then it would not be beneficial for that elder(s) to serve a term and be required to cycle off the elder board.

However, for other elders who do not serve a specific need or role within the elder board, assuming there are other elder candidates within the congregation who would be helpful to serve on the elder board, then it would be understandable for those elders to serve a term or have an expectation to cycle off the board at some point in the future.

NOTE: Currently, the bylaws of The Bridge Church state that the term for an elder is unlimited.