Elder Roles

A Model for Authority, Clarity, *and* Decision Making

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The cultural mandate carries a command: fill the earth and subdue it, exercise dominion over God's creation (Gen. 1:26-28; cf. Gen 2:15). As the mandate is applied, creation is harmoniously regulated and arranged. Chaos shrinks; order and clarity expand. From the organization of Israel, to the tabernacle and temple, to the practical logistics of the early church, our Creator resolutely reminds us that he is a God of order, not disorder (1 Cor. 14:33). An ordered church in the hands of humble leaders resonates deeply within God's people, and this is right, an ordered church harmonizes with the deep purposes and character of God.

God's order is defined through roles. In fact, *roles are the lifeblood of healthy teams*. Where they are present and clear, the union pulses with life. It works this way across the creation order. If a marriage endures, it's typically because the words "husband" and "wife" have clear meaning to the couple. In music, the British Invasion would have stalled on the beach if the Beatles had all played the same instrument. Whether it's the Temptations, the Stones, or the Red Hot Chili Peppers, there's just no rock without roles.

A fruitful elder team must have clear roles. This paper offers elders some guidance for understanding the work of organizational governance and, in particular, their roles within the work of governance. To accomplish this, we must examine the nature of governance and how it functions in and through leadership team meetings. Like most writing on governance and meetings, this work is drawn from common grace principles of order that I believe fit well within the guardrails of Scripture. I'm also guided by the time-tested truth that local church polity is largely sustained not by elders who possess pristine clarity on their roles but by those who are humble and demonstrate large-souled patience and forbearance with one another. Apart from these qualities, the efforts leaders make to clarify roles will go nowhere.

But, with the goal of magnifying God's orderly character, my hope is that each leadership team approaches this tool with a willingness to humbly self-evaluate their roles and responsibilities. When roles are clear, this helps us to govern gently and wisely so that meetings become more fruitful, churches multiply, and believers become more mature.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES[1]

JESUS
Responsibility: Heads, rules, and reigns over the church's members and mission.
Key Passages: Exod. 3:14; Ps. 97:9; Matt. 28:17–20

PASTORS/ELDERS
Responsibilities: Governance and ministry

The elders are authorized by Christ and govern the church on his behalf (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2). Elders exercise a biblical and church-authorized warrant to (1) define the local church's particular application of the Great Commission—it's vision and mission (Matt. 28:16–20), (2) to hold the local church and one another accountable ethically, legally, and spiritually (1 Tim. 3:1-7), and (3) to reproduce other elders (2 Tim. 2:2). This means that the elders govern mission integrity and even evaluate the performance of the senior pastor.

As stewards authorized by Christ, elders serve *on behalf of the church*. Local church members are *stakeholders*, or those not present at elder meetings who nevertheless share an interest in the ongoing health of the church.[2] Elders owe a duty of stewardship to God and to these members who do not have a voice at leadership meetings though they are clearly invested in the church and its future (1 Cor. 4:1–2; Titus 1:7).[3]

Unlike conventional non-profit board members, an elder's role involves both *governance and ministry* (Acts 6:4; 1 Tim. 4; 2 Tim. 4:5). Careful distinctions between these two responsibilities must be observed for an elder board to govern effectively and for an elder to serve fruitfully.

Let's start with governance. *Governance is the proper application of power and policies for the mission.*[4] The locus for elder governance (that is, the place from where governance is exercised) is elders' meeting. Elders can only govern as they meet together.[5]

How does governance happen here? The two levers of elder governance—the means by which governance takes place—are: (1) the decisions made, and (2) the policies enacted in the meetings.

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[1] Aspects of this document were shaped by the writings of John Carver and John Kaiser.

[2] To name someone as a stakeholder is not to infer that they possess authority over those who lead. It is simply to orient the elders to the reality that, when they meet, they represent the interests of two parties: God and the church.

[3] The wisest pluralities recognize that the congregation should have a voice of some kind (see the congregational role below). Some attribute *authority* to the congregation, others see the congregation only in a role of *influence*. Some make the congregational role narrow, and others broaden it. In the congregational model advocated by Mark Dever, for instance, the congregation is given a role to affirm a church's doctrine and leadership, to resolve disputes between Christians, and to participate in matters of church discipline (See Mark Dever, *A Display of God's Glory* [Washington, D.C.: 9 Marks], 49–57). In any case, the wisest pluralities recognize the congregation's voice has a place and importance.

[4] Here "mission" is used in the broadest sense to include all ministry, management, and functions of the church.

[5] "Pastoral leadership by a council of elders obviously requires elders to meet together regularly. As such, meetings are an indispensable feature of the elder's work. Meetings have an important function that cannot be replaced by anything else. Unfortunately, many elders do not understand the full significance of their meetings, nor do they understand the impact their meetings have on themselves or their congregation" (Alexander Strauch, *Meetings That Work* [Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 2001], 7).

Consider the following example. John has been an elder at Community Church for three years. Recently, the Community Church elders decided to start small groups in the church and tasked the senior pastor to inform the church of the elders' decision and teach on the importance of community life. This means that John does not possess the latitude or authority to leak this decision or recruit leaders to an opposing view. The elders made a governance decision together, and the senior pastor was authorized to determine how best to inform the church. The decision of the elders does not authorize each elder to create his own communication plan. Rather, elder governance means that the elders make a decision together and only those so authorized by the board—typically the senior leader—may communicate and implement it; the chain of communication must not be broken.

John cannot claim that he has authority as an elder to circulate the information through the church or to advocate for his own preferences. His authority to govern is bound by the team and to their context of meeting together. That's what shared leadership entails. On this particular decision, John does not possess the liberty to act outside of the elders' meeting. Once the church is informed, John and the other elders should advocate persuasively and in a unified manner on the importance of small groups. They may even lead small groups as a part of their ministry work.

Don't miss these central points: When we are clear that *elders' meetings are the exclusive locus for elder governance*, it ties the exercise of authority to plurality (shared leadership), not to random or individual acts by an elder outside of the meeting. In fact, this approach serves in at least three vital ways:

- It brings clarity to where and how governance happens.
- It distinguishes governance from ministry work.
- It yokes the exercise of authority to an accountable structure and protects the church from "domineering" exercises of authority. (1 Peter 5:2-3)

Having already stated that elders govern through decisions and policies, let's now explore how we might define the scope of their activity. I've found the PODS acrostic to be helpful. Elders are responsible for…

- **Progress**—In view here is personal and doctrinal progress (1 Tim. 4:15-16) and eldership development. Elders need to help one another grow in godliness, doctrine and gospel application. They should also recruit elders, monitor the effectiveness of the elder board (distinguishing between governance and management), measure elder growth, evaluate elder performance, and ensure the church stays on mission. Elders must ask, *Are we growing and reproducing*?

- **Oversight**—Elders monitor the biblical use of power and authority, assure the church's financial integrity, give ministry oversight, and provide shepherding care. Elders must ask, *Is the church flourishing pastorally and financially*?

- **Direction**—Elders look forward. They determine the mission, vision, and core values of the organization as a whole. They must think strategically, discussing and debating their dreams. Elders must ask, *What does it look like to win? Have we defined our particular mission? Are we thinking strategically about the future?*

- **Supporting the Senior Leader**—The elders authorize the senior leader's role, support his leadership, care for his soul, release his strengths, and hold him accountable, watching his life, doctrine, and ministry. Elders must ask, *Is the lead pastor's life, marriage, and ministry healthy and fruitful*?

Unlike most non-profit organizations, the church is not governed exclusively through by-laws, where roles are defined by an organizational constitution or governing board. In such a case, non-profits enjoy the luxury of clear divisions between governance and management. In the body of Christ, eldership is defined first by Scripture which does not recognize this customary division of responsibilities. In the New Testament, elders exercised governance while also remaining embedded in features of management, such as shepherding (Acts 20: 28; 1 Peter 5: 2). The blending of two functions in one elder imposes a higher need for clarity on which hat to put on.

Ministry—a component of management for the purposes of this paper—includes *everything an elder does as part of his shepherding and leadership role outside of the elders' meetings.* If governance happens when elders gather in a meeting, *ministry* is what happens when the elders operate in their various and sundry ways throughout the church. It is distinguished from management because the element of shepherding does not fit comfortably under corporate terminology. The levers for ministry are care, discipleship, and mission. Since ministry is a category more familiar to the reader, little more needs to be said.

Here's a final review of the elders' governance role:

- First, an elder does not govern alone; governance happens in plurality.

- Second, an elder does not govern outside of the elders meetings; shepherding and leadership outside of meetings is ministry, not governance

- Third, an elder does not speak on behalf of the elders outside of a governance meeting unless (or until) he is authorized to do so. Decisions made by the elders should typically include some clarification about who speaks on behalf of the elders or whether all of the elders may speak freely about the matter.

- Fourth, any direction for the church from the elders typically flows through the senior leader.

- Fifth, an elder does not direct staff unless authorized to do so by the eldership.

- Sixth, the elders govern through decisions and policies that aim to define responsibility, delegate authority, and determine accountability. When considering the scope of governance, think PODS: progress, oversight, direction, and supporting the senior leader.

- Seventh, the elders carry a unique responsibility for the lead pastor that includes supplying care for his soul, releasing him in his strengths, and holding him accountable.

These seven practices help to maintain the borders between governance and management.

SENIOR/LEAD PASTOR

Responsibilities: A senior leader has five key leadership responsibilities. He is the…

- Custodian of the Plurality—He is responsible to see that the pastors are cared for.
- Catalyst of Progress—He is responsible for the elders' development.
- Curator of Culture—He protects the church's unique vision and mission.
- Captain of Communication—He is the leadership's voice to the church and community.
- Liaison for Partnerships—He represents the church to its network or denomination.

You can find these responsibilities explained in chapter 3 of my book, *The Plurality Principal.*

Elders authorize both the role and the responsibilities of the senior leader. The most effective elder teams seek to bring clarity for him in three areas:

- *The Rules:* What are the specific boundaries he needs to observe?
- *The Score:* What standards does he use to track and measure progress?
- *The Win:* What does it look like to have success in his role?

The elders define these three components by providing the senior leader his (1) job description and (2) rules and policies that provide boundaries, track progress, and clarify what it means to win. In a reasonably healthy church, the senior leader has shown that he is qualified and fit for his role, demonstrating this through personal integrity, godly character, leadership skill, and communication gifts. As a result, the senior leader is trusted and given broad authority to lead and exercise his gifts. He may be trusted to direct support staff without elder involvement, or he may be given authority to propose a preaching calendar or discipleship plan.

Whatever specifics of this trust relationship, a wise elder board understands that creativity and leadership gifts must be supported and protected if the senior leader is going to flourish. Elders should avoid a permit-to-lead orientation that says, "Stop until we say go," and endorse a release-to-lead philosophy that says, "Go until we say stop!" Another way to say this is that the team should not prescribe duties for the senior leader but rather proscribe: *if it is not denied, it can be done.*

Remember, elders manage within a tension; this is an arrangement where elders both grant the senior leader his authority *while also being led by him.* The most effective elders and senior pastors are the ones who recognize early that God has placed them in a context where switching hats graciously and seamlessly is essential to the unity and progress of the church. The ability to shift roles fluidly under this arrangement requires ongoing growth in humility and trust.

Here is one important consideration for church planters turned senior leaders: You inhabit a delicate tension. You wear a governance hat that is equal to the other elders, but, as the founder of the church, you most likely feel a unique sense of responsibility. As planter, you've shouldered a broad range of duties since the church's inception and now you feel an undeniable stake in the church's direction. But you must also accept that the church's future health is directly tied to your willingness to share power with others. In other words, you must establish a plurality.

Certainly, your sense of responsibility as planter-turned-lead-pastor must be understood and appreciated by the emerging elders. But as the church grows, a maturing eldership will often narrow a senior leader's range of duties in a way that's consistent with the church's growing size

and the leader's capacity and strengths.[6] Supervision of staff, counseling, hospital visits, and pastoral contacts are often delegated to others so that the senior leader can give himself to prayer, preaching, and visionary leadership.

With growth comes your need for growing specialization. Though you may have once carried the pastoral responsibilities alone, you must now grow aware of your limitations and seek out opportunities to share responsibility with others. Nonetheless, the governing authority and cooperative ministry of the elder team must remain a priority both for you and for the plurality as a whole.

ELDER BOARD CHAIRMAN
Responsibility: Organizes the work of the elders.

If governance is exercised primarily through elders' meetings, the elder board chairman is responsible for ensuring those meetings run efficiently and effectively. "The role of the facilitator," says Alexander Strauch, "*is crucial* to productive meetings" (emphasis mine).[7] This means:

- Working with the elders to define what overseeing the senior leader's progress, parameters, goals, and support look like.
- Collaborating with the senior leader in creating the elder meeting agenda.
- Leading the elders meetings.
- Guiding the elders in policy development.
- Coordinating the approval of the budget.
- Organizing the necessary care and compensation for the senior pastor.
- Acting as the communication point between the eldership and the senior leader.[8]

The elder board chairman has no authority outside of the elders' meetings except the authority to conduct business with the senior leader in keeping with the responsibilities above.[9]

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[6] See Timothy Keller, "Leadership and Church Size Dynamics: How Strategy Changes with Growth" (New York: Redeemer City to City, 2010), accessed online at https://seniorpastorcentral.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Tim-Keller-Size-Dynamics.pdf.

[7] Alexander Strauch, *Meetings That Work* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 2001), 57. While Strauch is misguided, in my opinion, in his advocacy for a regular rotation in the meeting facilitation, he still upholds the strategic significance of the elder board chairman role.

[8] This list is simply a recommended catalog of duties based upon best practices.

[9] It should be recognized that the elder board chairman may need from time to time to communicate and coordinate with certain staff members (when coordinating budget approval, for instance). But when this becomes necessary, his lanes of authority remain narrow and do not preempt the senior pastor's role.

STAFF
Responsibility: Management

Let's return to our distinction between governance and management. *Governance* is the proper application of power and policies for the sake of mission. *Management*, on the other hand, is the administration of delegated power for the sake of mission. Governance is about *identifying and protecting the mission*. It answers the questions, "Why do we exist, and what should we do in response?" Management is about *effectively executing the mission*. It answers the questions, "How, when, and by what means will we accomplish the mission?"

The staff includes anyone outside of the elders (full-time, part-time, or volunteer) who leads or manages a department or team. They exist to convert vision into action. Strauch says, "While the board protects the ministry with excellence and the pastor orchestrates the ministry with excellence, the primary function of staff is excellence in execution.[10] They are called to mobilize the church to do the work of the ministry (Eph. 4:11–13). In a robust ministry model, the staff answers to the senior leader or executive pastor, not to the elder board. Where the lanes of responsibility and accountability are clearly defined, security blossoms and an ecosystem of collaboration is catalyzed.

In an era where leadership is often prescribed as the answer to every church deficiency, a wise senior leader recognizes the irreplaceable role of ministry-multiplying managers who can love people while they create and sustain the systems necessary for operational excellence.

CHURCH MEMBERS
Responsibility: Ministry

> "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, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge." (Ephesians 4:11–13)

If this model is operating according to plan, the results are a church mobilized for ministry. Congregations gladly gather for meetings and scatter for ministry because they are equipped by trusted leaders. Because the church's interests are well-represented in elders' meetings, the sheep flourish. Care and mission is not the purview of paid professionals but the privilege of the people. The result is the multiplication of disciples and churches (Matt. 28:16–20; 2 Tim. 2:2) and enduring fruit that glorifies Jesus (John 15:8).
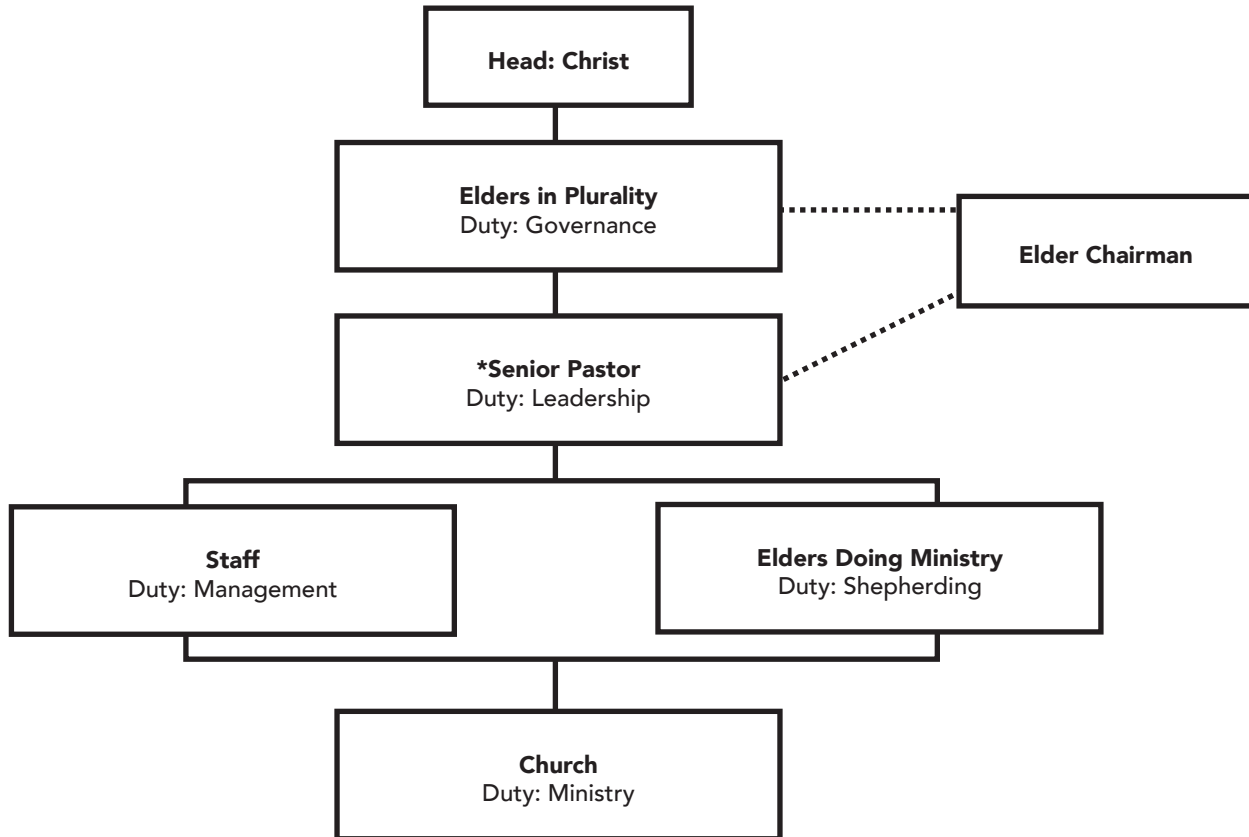
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[10]John Kaiser, *Winning on Purpose* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 119.

FLOW CHART

While no diagram fully captures the complexity and overlap of church roles and responsibilities, this chart is offered as a visual portrayal of what I have outlined above. To facilitate elder deliberation around the content of this paper, the Roles Checklist for Elders has been developed.

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                    │    Head: Christ     │
                    └─────────────────────┘

        ┌─────────────────────────┐
        │   Elders in Plurality   │· · · · · · · ┌──────────────────┐
        │    Duty: Governance     │              │  Elder Chairman  │
        └─────────────────────────┘              └──────────────────┘
        ┌─────────────────────────┐         · · ·
        │     *Senior Pastor      │· · · · ·
        │    Duty: Leadership     │
        └─────────────────────────┘

  ┌─────────────────┐         ┌──────────────────────────┐
  │      Staff      │         │   Elders Doing Ministry  │
  │ Duty: Management│         │    Duty: Shepherding     │
  └─────────────────┘         └──────────────────────────┘

              ┌─────────────────────┐
              │       Church        │
              │   Duty: Ministry    │
              └─────────────────────┘
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* While the Senior Pastor is portrayed in the flow chart as being under the elders, it is also important to remember that his role operates as *"first among equals"* where he is authorized to actually lead the elders.

THE RACI TOOL

DEFINITIONS AND RULES

The RACI tool is a simple tool for mapping power and responsibility by thinking through specific tasks and assigning who is responsible (R), accountable (A), and who should be consulted (C) and informed (I).

RULES FOR USING THE RACI MATRIX

1. **Only one person can be responsible (R) or accountable (A).** It is essential that only one person be assigned the R and A roles. Having more than one person responsible for the same task increases ambiguity and the chances of the work not being performed. It could also lead to duplication of work or waste of effort.

2. **The responsible (R) and accountable (A) roles are necessary.** The consult (C) or inform (I) roles are not mandatory for every activity. Some activities may not require them at all. But the R and A roles must be assigned. Even if a volunteer group or computer system is performing the tasks automatically, someone must be made accountable to see that the work gets done.

3. **There must be a two-way channel of communication with a consultant.** And this two-way communication must take place before an action is taken. Those in the C role may be stakeholders or subject-matter experts consulted to cross-examine or improve a decision. In either case, adequate follow-up must be done, and there is minimum time lag to complete the communication and consider feedback.

4. **Communication with an informed (I) party is only one-way.** This communication informs stakeholders (or others) that a decision or action is imminent and has been taken.

5. **When the eldership is accountable, this means action for leaders.** Typically, the Board Chair and the Senior Leader are vitally involved in supplying information, stewarding processes, and shepherding tasks to ensure the elders can make informed decisions.

- **Staff size may make a difference with regard to who is responsible.**

A SAMPLE RACI

This sample assumes a church of four hundred people with a full-time senior pastor, a staff pastor, a worship leader, an administrative assistant, and a part-time leader (or competent volunteers) working on finances. It also assumes three-to-five elders. Finally, the sample assumes engagement with the church on major decisions but is not intended to advocate a particular polity position.

Legal & Financial Accountability	Eldership	Senior Pastor	Elder-Chairman	Staff	Church	NOTES
Development of annual budget	C	A	C	R	C	There are situations where members could or should be consulted on budget plans.
Approval of annual budget	A	C	R		I	
Approval of real estate (lease or own) transactions or mergers	A		R	C		
Appointment of external auditors	A	C	C	R		
Approval of Bylaws (Changes to and adoption of Articles of Incorporation or Bylaws)	A	R	C	C	I	
Approval of doctrinal changes in the church's Statement of Faith	A	R	C	C	C/I	
Establishment of policies and procedures necessary to govern the affairs of the organization in consonance with the laws and regulations described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue Code	A	R	C	C		
Borrowing money and making and issuing bonds, notes, contracts, and other evidence of indebtedness	A	C	C	R		
Opening or closing bank/investment Accounts	C	A	I	R		
Advising or revising check signatories for the church's financial institutions	A	C	I	R		
Selecting or removing the Senior Pastor	A	I	R	C	I	
Approval of the annual salary and benefits of the Senior Pastor	C	I	R&A	I		
Handling charges, discipline or removal of Elders	A	R	C	I	I	

SHEPHERDING LEADERSHIP						
Developing a care plan for the church	A	R	C	C	I	
Planning the church's preaching diet	C	R&A	C	C		
Appointing elders	A	C	R	I	C/I	
Caring for and developing the eldership	C	R&A	C			
Managing staff	C	R&A	I	C		
Appointing of small group/ministry team leaders	A	R	I	C		
Starting new ministries	A	C	I	R		
Removal of small group/ministry leaders	A	R	C	C		
Determining staff salaries and benefits	C	A	C/I	I		
Approving staff raises	C	A	C/I	I		
Disciplining or removing staff	C	R&A	C	I		
MISSION LEADERSHIP						
Creating the church's strategic framework (mission, vision, values, and plan)	A	R	C	C	I	
Developing and approving the church's local mission plan	A	R	C	C	I	
Approving church planters	A	R	C	C	I	
Managing local outreach	C	A	I	R		
Approving social media and online content	C	A	I	R		
Networking and coordinating with partner organizations	A	R	C	I	I	