

**Elder Board Manual**

**Living Hope Church**

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# Elder Board Manual

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This document is intended to clarify the role and expectations of elder at LHC. The job description in our Bylaws details the basic legal and administrative expectations and this manual helps to further define the spiritual role and expectations of the elder.

## **Contents**

- Elders In Scripture
  - Role of Elder in the Old Testament
  - What This Means for Us
  - Role of Elder in the New Testament
  - What This Means for Us
- Qualities of the Elder at LHC
  - Spiritual Integrity
  - Proven and Growing Spiritual Maturity
  - Holistic Christian Life
  - Discernment
  - Good Stewards of their Lives
  - Grace and Teamwork
  - Supports the Mission of the Church and Staff
- Summary

# Elders in Scripture

## *Role of Elder in the Old Testament*

Moses often made mention of, and made use of, what the Old Testament calls the elders of the people. Through their wanderings in the desert, the elders were crucial components in the life and worship of God's people. They were, by in large, the leaders of their various tribes and family groups. As such, much of their job was almost legal in nature, resolving the various issues and complaints among the people. (Exodus 24:14; Numbers 11:16; Deut 21:18-21)

They were also necessary as communicators for Moses. Often, instead of calling together the entire nation to pass on what God had said, Moses summoned the elders, and it was their job to faithfully communicate God's word to the rest of the people. (Exodus 19:7; Numbers 11:24-25; Deut 31:28)

Elders also played an important role in the spiritual disciplines of the people. Much of the worship in the Old Testament centered on the sacrifices and the lifestyle devotion they represented. To make a sacrifice was to atone for sins and dedicate yourself and those you represent to God. So the act of making the sacrifice was both a privilege and a responsibility that represented their understanding of sin, atonement, forgiveness, discipleship and worship. (Deut 21:1-9; Exodus 4:27-31; Exodus 12:21-28)

Later in the life of God's people, the prophet Jeremiah reinforces what we see with Moses. Jeremiah lives at a time when the culture and worship of God's people is only a shadow of what it once was and what God intended it to be. They are pressed on every side and they are crumbling from within. And at a point when Jeremiah is being persecuted by the priests, a fascinating conversation takes place in which the elders of the people take over. As the story is told, before Jeremiah could be put to death, elders of the people step forward, recite the Word of the Lord, apply it to Jeremiah's situation, and spare him from capital punishment. Even at this dark hour where the religious establishment of the day could not be trusted, the elders of the people were discerning and brave. (Jeremiah 26:16-24)

## *What This Means for Us*

Elders are peacemakers. It is not uncommon for people to approach elders with concerns or issues they have with the church at large or with the pastor specifically, and a temptation we face is to treat those conversations with the wrong kind of indulgence which can lead to gossip and even division. Instead of letting frustrations fester, the elder ought to seek a healthy path of resolution or clarification, and in certain circumstances they ought to take that person directly to the pastor in order to deal with the grievance.

Elders are communicators of unified church vision. Uniformity of thought is neither expected nor encouraged among the elders, but the right place for discussion and disagreement is in the board meeting or in conversation with the pastor. We aim for open discussion and unanimous decisions when the board meets, but it is expected that the elders are able to communicate with one voice to the congregation.

Elders are leaders in discipleship and worship. Becoming an elder at LHC is, as it was with Moses' elders, both a privilege and a responsibility. The congregation and the rest of the leaders can rightly expect an elder to be actively engaged in the life of the church – even engaged in specific ministries. As they are, the elders are visible examples of healthy discipleship and church engagement.

## ***Role of Elder in the New Testament***

Though this topic is expansive, a handful of big-ideas can give us a good understanding of who elders were in the life of the New Testament church. There are several titles used for the various leaders in the church, including “elder,” “overseer,” “deacon,” and “presbyter.” For our purposes, we will focus primarily on the use of “elder” with the one exception that seems to be the place where this kind of church leadership was birthed.

Deacons first show up in the life of the church in Acts 6 when it became obvious that there were too many needs and too many people for the apostles to take care of by themselves. In order to free the apostles to preach and teach, deacons were selected to help take care of other needs among the people. What is probably the most striking thing about this appointment is the seeming contrast between the need and the qualifications. The need was distributing food to Greek widows; the qualifications were men of good integrity full of the Spirit and wisdom. Why weren’t the qualifications something like, guys with trucks, free weekends, and a desire to serve? It is because they recognized all service in the church as being Christ’s service to people.

As Acts progresses, Paul planted churches where the gospel had never before been preached. Because his job was to plant and begin, he had to train and leave behind spiritual overseers who would then take over the health and growth of the church. So, when Paul would prepare to leave he would appoint elders to take over the spiritual care of the congregation. (Acts 14:23)

Further in Acts, we see these elders directly engaged in the doctrinal and ecclesiological questions of the church. They were not simple place-fillers for the apostles between their visits to certain cities and churches, they took an active role in wrestling with and answering some of the most pressing questions for their churches. In the context of the Council at Jerusalem in Acts 15, they displayed a discerning grasp of both their culture and their doctrine.

Later, in the epistles, we see a glimpse of how the role of elder had grown and was being lived out among the various churches. Elders were spiritual mentors for younger generations, and elders were expected to be solid prayer support for the church. (1 Timothy 4:14; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:5)

Paul even lists qualifications for elders in contrast to the shoddy lifestyles and sloppy thinking of others in their culture. Elders stand out in their integrity and clarity of mind. (Titus 1)

And then in dramatic fashion, elders represent the church in worship. In John’s Revelation one of the groups of heavenly beings that show up over and over is the 24 Elders. Though there is a little controversy over who or what they represent, I believe the best interpretation is that they represent the body of believers – the church. In heaven they worship God. I find it instructive that the heavenly role of elders is worship. Could it be because one of the expectations of elders on earth is to represent and lead the church in worship? (Revelation 4:4-10 and following)

## ***What This Means for Us***

The elder’s work is always spiritual work. Elders sometimes work in the kitchen or sit in a board room, and sometimes they visit hospitals or pray with people in moments of crisis, but all of it is Christ’s

service to people. If elders are Christ's hands and voice among His people, then we ought to strive to let everything we do and say be faithful to Him.

Elders are aware of the health of the congregation, the culture around them, and their core beliefs. As seen in dramatic fashion in Acts 15, elders ought to be ready to be called upon to handle some thorny issues. Though it is often easier to handle those issues through our personal or political views, elders ought to have the mind of Christ instead. This may take some work, but it is one of the clear roles of the elder.

Elders are not perfect, but they are people of integrity. It is not just a jaded world around us that looks on the lives of professed believers to check for failings – the people in the pews around us often look to the congregational leaders to be people of spiritual and lifestyle integrity. Though in many cases it is wrong and unhealthy for congregants to look to elders and pastors for their spiritual stability, we have the responsibility to do what we can to keep our brothers and sisters in Christ from stumbling.

Elders are spiritual leaders for the people, not political representatives of the people. Though it is common to view a position on the board as being representative of a certain ministry or group of people in the church, that idea has more to do with our political system than Scripture. Elders are appointed in Scripture, not to tell Moses or Paul what the people think ought to be done, but to help Moses and Paul lead the people in what God wants done. Scripturally, elders are Christ's ambassadors to the people, not the peoples' ambassadors to the pastor.

And ultimately, elders are leaders in worship. Their involvement in the life of the church and in worship helps to encourage an atmosphere of engagement when we gather together. An absent elder – either physically or spiritually – cannot be an effective elder in the long run.

## **Qualities of the Elder at LHC**

Trying to be faithful to the Scriptural witness and the shepherding of the local congregation, here are what we believe to be the qualities of the elder at LHC.

### ***Spiritual Integrity***

The goal of discipleship in this life is not necessarily perfection, but an orientation of life. If our attention and priorities are on ungodly things, people, attitudes and priorities, our lifestyles and spirituality will necessarily follow. However, if our lives are oriented toward Christ and His kingdom, we are promised that the fruit of the Spirit will follow. We do not want to build a façade of plastic perfection for people to aspire to. We want to live lives of faithfulness and devotion to Christ in all seasons of life.

### ***Proven and Growing Spiritual Maturity***

Because the role of elder sometimes includes sensitive or difficult issues, it is not a role for a brand new Christian. Though they may be people of personal integrity, eldership requires a certain degree of spiritual depth and discernment that can only come as a result of time with Christ. The vetting process for elder nominations is intended in part to recognize those who have a track record of spiritual maturity and are known to have a right orientation in their lives toward Christ.

### ***Holistic Christian Life***

One of the ubiquitous character traits in our current culture is compartmentalization. In other words, people like to put their spiritual lives in one compartment, their family in another, their job in another, and so on. They turn into psychological cubicle farms in which no cube communicates with or informs the others. The elder at LHC is a radical break in that trend in that Christ is Lord of their life. They are not Christians on Sunday and laborers on Monday through Friday – they are followers of Jesus wherever they go and in every situation. In this way, the elder at LHC is radically counter-cultural and a needed breath of fresh air.

### ***Discernment***

As elders are overseers of the spiritual health of LHC, it is incumbent upon them to be discerning. Attentiveness to others and their needs, and awareness of where people need guidance, correction or encouragement are all appropriate roles for the elder. This kind of discernment becomes a part of how elders help make decisions about LHC and how they interact with the pastoral staff and congregation.

### ***Good Stewards of their Lives***

Again, while not expecting perfection, it is incumbent upon the elder at LHC to have their personal affairs in right priority before God. Among other things, this means they are financial supporters of the church and our missions work. It means their personal and family lives are centered on God. It is also important that an elder not have any financial or legal entanglements that might negatively affect their spiritual and administrative roles at LHC.

### ***Grace and Teamwork***

It is important for the elders and pastors at LHC to show a good degree of Christian maturity when dealing with the business and people of the church. They need to be able to deal with sensitive information with care and discretion, and need to be able to handle disagreement with honesty and kindness. And when decisions are made, it is important that they support the board's decisions even if they personally disagree. If they do not feel they are able to serve this way with others, they should not serve as elders.

### ***Supports the Mission of the Church and Staff***

In doing this, not only does the elder present a supportive voice for the direction of the church, but they are able to wisely and in an informed way speak into the ministry of the church. As seen in the scriptural examples, elders do not sit on the sidelines of the church life, but are active and Christlike leaders among the congregation.

In addition, it is important that elders are able to handle disagreements with the pastor and staff in appropriate ways. These ways include:

- They are peacemakers when they are confronted with conflict
- They avoid gossip when people complain about church direction or decisions
- They speak with the pastor regarding concerns with the staff
- In extreme cases of dissention, they follow the guidelines laid out in the LHC Bylaws

## Summary

In brief, the spiritual role of an elder at LHC looks like this.

**It is the role of elder to be the representatives of Christ to the congregation.**

**Therefore, an elder is expected to...**

- Be active in their own growth in Christ as an example to others.
- Be able to wisely discern the cultures around them in light of the truth and grace of Christ.

*1 Peter 5:1-3; 2, 3 John*

**It is the role of elder to care for the spiritual health of the congregation.**

**Therefore, an elder is expected to...**

- Be involved with the activities and services of the church to a degree that allows them to be in touch with the spiritual health of the congregation and/or groups within the congregation.
- Be deliberate about the employment of their gifts and calling within the congregation.

*Jeremiah 26:16-24; Acts 15:36; James 1:27; Matt 25:36*

**It is the role of elder to work for the spiritual and numerical growth of the church.**

**Therefore, an elder is expected to...**

- Be proactive with new faces at church.
- Be a part of our visitor follow-up system in whatever ways they can.
- Be active in the process of discipleship both personally and with others in the congregation.

*Jeremiah 29:1; Titus 1:5, 7-9; Acts 6:1-7*

**It is the role of elder to pray.**

**Therefore, an elder is expected to...**

- Be on our Prayer Chain and Visitation email lists so they are aware of some of the pressing needs in the congregation.
- Be willing to be active in prayer within services if called upon.
- Be active in expanding their own life of prayer, to strengthen their walk with God.

*1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Timothy 4:14; James 5:14*



## **Pastor and Elder**

It is easy to be confused over the role of the pastor and pastoral staff versus the role of the elder board. And though it would be impractical (and probably impossible) to delineate those roles in great detail, it is extremely useful to discuss some basic principles.

### ***Vision***

The pastor and pastoral staff are entrusted with the fundamental vision and personality of ministry. This is why God called this pastor and this pastoral staff to this church for this time. The vocation of pastor necessarily includes the vision of ministry God has placed in their hearts, and it necessarily includes the personality (the gifts, strengths and weaknesses) of the pastor. As a result, it is only natural that over time churches begin to take on that vision and even that personality. Elders, then, become a part of keeping, clarifying and implementing the vision of the church.

### ***Hiring***

Because of the relationship between the pastor and the vision of the church, the primary hiring and firing responsibilities belong to the pastor. If the pastor is allowed to be the primary decision maker in interviewing, vetting and releasing pastors and employees, there is a better chance that the staff will have a coherent vision and ministry. The elder board should not only be left “in the loop” with hiring and firing, but should be in conversation with the pastor about why and how and who. And because elders often have a more intimate knowledge of certain ministries, their input is necessary when making staff decisions that will affect those areas of work.

The senior pastor is directly in charge of the pastoral and office staff, but the elder board remains informed about and involved in these personnel issues.

### ***Leadership***

It is incumbent upon the pastor to not become a spiritual or bureaucratic tyrant. The elders are in place to aid in the spiritual leadership of the church, be a crucial part of the decision making team, and to keep the pastor accountable to good business practices. Humility is a crucial Christian virtue, and ought to be displayed between pastor and elder board.

The elders are spiritual leaders alongside the pastor and staff within the vision of the church and under the leadership of proper spiritual authority.