

# ***Eldership and Ombudsman***

## ***A discussion document for pastors and elders***

Interpersonal relationships in the church can be interesting. We strive for unity and harmony, for we know that is where the Lord commands his blessing (Psalm 133), but sometimes it doesn't work out that way. From time to time, in every church, there will be people who feel offended, aggrieved or miffed in some way, or they will observe things that ought to be addressed. Who do they turn to in such situations and how are these types of issues best processed? While the New Testament records a number of statements about processes for conflict resolution, and the importance of confronting inappropriate behavior, in the minds of many Christians the people in a local church to whom they turn are those appointed as elders. They are perceived as the ones responsible for dealing with shortcomings in the life of a church, and perhaps especially when the pastoral staff are viewed as the cause. In cases of serious misconduct the elders are obviously the ones who carry the can. However, in many instances issues of conflict or disagreement are relatively minor and when referred to, and engaged with by, elders can lead to confused lines of accountability – resulting in breaches of trust.

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I've been a pastor for more than 36 years, and in more recent years involved in consulting, teaching and mentoring pastors and church leaders. There is a frequent malaise that I've observed that causes tension amongst elderships, and especially between a group of elders and the (senior) pastor. Relationships become strained and the door for disunity cracks open, which has a deleterious effect upon the church as a whole. It occurs when members of an eldership assume, perhaps unintentionally, the function of *ombudsman*.

By definition, an ombudsman is someone charged with hearing, investigating and attempting to resolve complaints. They are theoretically impartial and are supposed to be objective. They can be as official as a government office, and they also operate in certain industries (such as insurance) as a place for appeal when consumers believe they are receiving a raw deal. In principle, the office of ombudsman is a great idea, especially as a foil against corrupt and bullying institutions. Indeed, some may even think it is a valuable role to establish in a local church, especially one where leadership is perceived to be strong.

It is not, I would contend, the function of those who assume the role of eldership!

In many churches there can be a pernicious and volatile change in culture amongst a leadership team that takes them by surprise. It often occurs when new people are invited to join a leadership team, or with new appointments of associate pastoral staff – especially when appointed from within the church. It can be especially painful when close friends of a senior pastor are recruited

by him/her to a role of leadership. Within a matter of months there can be an observable change in their loyalty and friendship, because they start to hear things that they didn't know before their appointment. Indeed, there is well warn caution for senior pastors employing close friends for this reason.

There are several predictable reasons why this malaise can occur. In the minds of many ordinary church members, newly appointed elders (and/or associate pastoral staff) are viewed as fair game for those wanting to express a complaint, either in general or perhaps with the senior pastor in particular. Complainants may feel they have not been adequately heard in the past, or their viewpoint ignored by those in leadership. With someone new coming onto the team there is a natural, perhaps understandable, opportunity for new "ears" to hear and potentially re-litigate their grievance. New appointees to leadership, who may have accepted nomination with a view to making a difference, can become unintentional "honey pots" around which "grizzly bees" are attracted. Without clear understanding of boundaries and the potential for this kind of scenario, more than a few new appointees have found themselves forming a jaundiced view of their senior pastor, whom they once respected and maybe thought "walked on water." Without perhaps appreciating all the issues traversed beforehand they become deeply disappointed at his/her clay feet and in some instances seek to become the champions of reform and correction.

Marshall Shelley, in his excellent book: *"Well-Intentioned Dragons"* (Bethany House Publishers, 1994) warn new pastors to be cautious of those who overly

ingratiate themselves upon commencement of their ministry. He suggests some may have a mischievous agenda hoping they can recruit a new pastor to their way of thinking by presenting themselves as “new best friends,” only to withdraw and turn on the new pastor a few months later when he/she doesn’t appear to be seeing things their way. I have experienced this over the years, and the same scenario can occur with new appointees to the office of eldership or associate staff positions.

The function of eldership is NOT an office of ombudsman in a local church. There are several reasons why I believe this is important to clarify.

*Firstly*, starting with Scripture, Paul was quite clear in his instruction to Timothy to “. . . *not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses* ” (1 Timothy 5:19). In other words, accusations against an elder or pastor must be serious and empirically verifiable before taken seriously. Apparently the idea of critiquing leaders in the church is not something new to our era. There were frivolous and vexatious niggles amongst the Ephesian church leaders, and such complaints were not to be entertained unless serious and attested.

To be sure, the very next verse warns that if there is substantive sin (one assumes this might be something continual and un-repented over, not just a minor mistake) then appropriate reproof is necessary before the church. However, the issue that can sometimes trip up an unsuspecting elder is the “entertaining” of illegitimate accusations. The very act of listening to and receiving the complaint can imply validation of its substance (to both the complainant and the elder), and the further investigation of such accusations certainly means the accusation has been entertained and found a home.

*Secondly*, the nature of pastoral leadership invariably confronts inappropriate behavior in the church. Indeed, so much of the New Testament had occasion to be recorded because there was so much poor behavior that conflicted with God’s ideal. Therefore, it should never be a surprise that at times there will be people with a miff or a grizzle. Sometimes the nature of pastoral ministry requires confrontation. Sometimes a good shepherd needs to stand in the way of a wolf. Often times leadership requires the overcoming of inertia, and in the process those sitting in resistant comfort become

annoyed at the idea of change. In fact, it could even be contended that without change in the church, and all the discomfort that it brings, there is an obvious absence of leadership – the status quo doesn’t require anything to happen!

Early in my Christian leadership experience I came across a little saying that has shaped my thinking around change management: *“Change means movement, and movement means friction, and friction means heat, and heat means conflict. You just can’t get a rocket off the ground discreetly and quietly.”*

All of this is to suggest that the presence of conflict or grizzles amidst the life of a church is perfectly normal and predictable. That is not to suggest license for rudeness or treating people inappropriately, but it does imply a lack of surprise when some don’t like or appreciate a good leader who is moving them out of their comfort zone. It might even be testament that a senior pastor is doing the right things, as Paul suggested to Timothy in his second letter: “. . . *correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction.*” (2 Timothy 4:2) Effective pastoral leadership is more than merely *encouragement* and tender care; there is also the uncomfortable injunction here to *correct* and *rebuke* as well, and that is not always welcome or appreciated.

The notion that when everything is done in a local church just the way God wants it, there will be perfect harmony and the absence of any conflict, is simply naïve and not at all consistent with New Testament experience. Even Jesus had his detractors, and look what they eventually did to him!

*Thirdly*, elders are actually not neutral. And neutrality is a critical component of an ombudsman’s function. To be an elder is NOT to stand aloof or independent from the pastoral staff, especially the senior pastor. The relationship is inherently close and inextricably connected, as described in John Carver’s *“Policy Governance Model.”* An individual elder, or a group of elders as a whole, does not stand on the sidelines of interpersonal relationships in the church, seeking to give independent advice. Elders are in the middle of the play and operate together as a tight team. In fact, for an elder(s) to accept the role of ombudsman is a bit like being in a member of our favourite sports team and playing a simultaneous role as referee. It is foul play!

In some churches there is also a practice (formal or informal) of elders representing different sections or lobby groups in the life of the congregation. Sometimes this is reinforced by distribution of representative portfolios. There is need for caution in this. Taking Carver's "Policy Governance Model" as a template, members of an Elder Board actually represent the vision of the church as a whole, not segments or ministry groups within that vision. In fact, Carver goes further and suggests that a Board primarily represents the owner(s) of the enterprise and is committed to ensuring that the owner's purposes, vision and aspirations are fulfilled – even at the cost of conflict with some of those they lead.

This of course begs the question: *Who are the owners of the church?* There are different answers, and nuances to those answers, to this kind of question. Some may perceive church ownership is represented by the members of the church, who appoint or elect the elders, as they are the stakeholders and therefore congruence of what they say must be duly taken: if they raise a concern it needs to be considered seriously. Others argue that ownership of the church rests unilaterally with God, not the members of the church. The church is the body of Christ, not the body of its constituent members. God owns the church, and that is whom elders are ultimately accountable to, despite varied political machinations by which they are appointed.

I am not suggesting that appointed leaders are unimpeachable and not able to be questioned or disagreed with. Heaven forbid! Regardless of agreed polity and processes for decision-making, members of a church most always feel free to discuss issues and ideas and even hold to a different opinion. The issue under discussion here is more about those grizzles and niggles when decisions have been made that some find contentious, resulting in criticism of a senior leader(s). The point is, an elder who hears or receives a complaint is not a neutral independent party. Elders work through issues together and are honour bound by the commitment to uphold caucus-made decisions. They are part of the tight team of leaders who represent the owner's ambition, and if Carver's model has any sway, they are collegial members with the senior pastor. They have a bias in loyalty, commitment and respect. That doesn't inherently mean they cannot disagree with other members of their tight team. By all means, enjoy robust debate and differing convictions within the context of a meeting. But it is critical that elders do not project to church members

autonomy and independence from the senior pastor and the rest of the elder team.

*Fourthly*, the position of eldership does not abrogate the advice Jesus gives concerning appropriate conflict resolution. Matthew 18:15-17 is generally regarded as the best model for dispute resolution. While it may not always equate with the types of issues elders are approached about, the principles apply. The person who is aggrieved is first to approach the person they believe is responsible, and to seek to sort things out one-on-one. They do not go to a third party and confess someone else's sin or misdemeanor. First course of action is to/with the person concerned. Only after that recourse has not altered or resolved is the matter taken further to a second party, and if still unresolved to the church.

Where does this apply to the church member approaching an elder over a grievance with, say, the senior pastor? It implies that the elder receiving such commentary should stop the supposed aggrieved party in their tracks, asking instead if they have been to the person concerned and talked it through with them. If they have not, the elder should stop the conversation and insist that this ought to be the course taken.

Of course, one of the easy excuses for an aggrieved person not following the process Jesus advised is that they do not believe they can "safely" approach a church leader. Maybe this is sometimes the case, but in my experience the veracity of such an assertion is rare. It is simply an easy claim to make, but may not in fact be valid or true. If there is any sense of validity to apparent imbalance of power (e.g. a church member approaching a senior pastor over an alleged grievance) it might be the place of an elder to broker a meeting. In other words, offering to go with a person to meet with the leader, or potentially setting something up whereby a meeting can occur. But this is a very different role to one of ombudsman, who seeks to investigate and potentially mediate a solution.

*Fifthly*, the toleration of gossip and slander in the life of a local church is extremely destructive. It plays into the hands of the evil one who wants nothing more than to see disunity and factionalism take root. And that is the nature of most grievances taken by church members to an elder! Gossip and slander were among the things Paul feared he would find when visiting the Corinthian church (2 Corinthians 12:20), and it is not something to be left

unchecked. Elders who listen to and accommodate gossip and slander, without allowing the target of such commentary the dignity of fair response before forming of an opinion, can be guilty of driving a wedge of disunity into the life of a church.

By all means there may be a case for establishing an appropriate disputes resolution process in the life of a local church. The concept behind an ombudsman is not inappropriate per se. Indeed, most employment contracts include a process by which disputes can be handled constructively. But such procedures call for wisdom and caution. Maybe it could be a role played by former elders or a retired pastor in the church – who understands the dynamics of leadership and what it is like *“herding cats.”*

In my view it is not automatically the purview of those currently called to the office of eldership, as their role is inextricably linked with senior leadership. While elders are typically the ones to whom a senior pastor is primarily accountable, the weighting on their role ought to be one of love and support and resourcing for achievement. They are not the “opposition party” to the leader or senior pastor, with the role of critiquing and *“keeping them honest!”*

Those with any experience in leading a local church will know how difficult it is to expect every church member will always behave correctly. Churches are made up of people (redeemed, yet still fallen) and at times they will not follow the rules. This has always been the case, and most likely will continue until the Lord comes again. People in the church will invariably “try it on” with an elder they know and think they can trust, hoping they can be recruited to their side of an issue.

Elders need to be wise and strategic. Those leaders who are effective will inevitably upset some people. While that is never one’s intent, it also ought not take us by surprise. That is not a license for being insensitive and cavalier, but wise elders will be able to bend and flex when they hear things they ought not hear. Graciousness and firmness is an art form that wisely guides the culture of a church, and most importantly shuts the door on the enemy who wants nothing more than to destroy the good things God is doing.



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