

Principles every elder should ponder



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Group dynamics

There must be strong and steady relationships among the elders founded upon:

- accurate self-knowledge and estimation;
- knowledge of each other,
- mutual recognition of each other's spiritual gifts and roles in the fellowship, and mutual encouragement in them; and
- mutual trust.

Accurate self-knowledge and estimation is a component of personal Christian maturity which ought to characterize all who are called to eldership. Without this, the functioning of the eldership can be expected to suffer, either because the individual is not doing the things within the group and the church which he ought to do, or because he is over-reaching himself and trying to do things to which he ought not to aspire.

Similarly, the necessary personal maturity of the elder should include a sympathetic understanding and appreciation of colleagues. It is important that elders (and I would recommend their wives) should give time, despite the press of other things, to prayer, fellowship and relaxation together, without the impediment of any agenda. The purpose is to build the bonds of love which should be evident to the congregation and which will survive the inevitable strains which responsibility imposes in an imperfect world.

Thirdly, each elder, and the group as a whole, should develop an objective assessment and recognition of the gifts and optimum roles of each member of the group. This done, each elder should feel free and should be encouraged to exercise these gifts and roles without constraint.

Fourthly, and flowing to a great extent from the first three, the elders need actively to build trust between each other in the fulfilling of their individual roles. Where elders have confidence in each other, both as to when they may take immediate action and as to matters which should be reserved for discussion, unnecessary inaction by committee will be avoided and the trumpet will give a more certain sound. This trust is dependent on having mature elders who know themselves and each other, and who recognize and encourage each other's gifts.

Leadership of the elders

Even where the principle of variety of gifts is held, its practical implications for the functioning of the eldership group can fail to be recognized. Just as the congregation is a group which needs leadership, so the elders themselves form a group which itself needs leadership if it is to function properly.

Failure to recognize the need for an individual or individuals to give a lead to the eldership can result in a form of paralysis within the group, so that it cannot perform its enabling function towards the congregation as a whole, because initiative within the elders is stifled or impaired and the group cannot command the confidence of the congregation.

In the most stable group of elders, roles will still change slowly over time as the circumstances of individual elders and the congregation change. If the eldership is to function effectively, this fact must be recognized and faced openly so that the group can adapt to the change.

Principles of collective behaviour

Some important principles of behaviour need to be observed. The first may be expressed as consensus on major issues and agreement to differ on minor ones. It is not practicable to suppose that upon major matters affecting the

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life and work of the congregation an eldership could proceed other than on the principle of substantial agreement, if not unanimity. Persistent disagreement in such matters would be bound to be debilitating to the elders and to threaten the credibility of their leadership.

In such matters, it is important that each elder should conduct himself within the group with integrity: He must make clear to his colleagues his position and any reservations which he may have; and avoid any secret politicking with individual colleagues, or any appearance of it. Openness must be the watchword.

In lesser matters, it should be possible for individuals to allow their preferences to be overridden by the majority without feeling that some great personal or theological cause has been sacrificed. Nor should this impair the effectiveness and credibility of the group. But such a principle does call for discretion on the part of the elder concerned. There are strict limits within which it is possible on major and minor matters for the elder to make public his dissent, especially if it is in a manner which casts doubt on the wisdom of colleagues. Plural eldership implies collective responsibility, which in turn implies solidarity with fellow-elders even when they are taking a course with which the individual may personally disagree.

Discretion in respect of personal and pastoral confidences is also essential. Such confidences can be expected to be shared between elders so that they will be better

placed to pray and if necessary to agree on pastoral action. But the information simply cannot be for wider consumption, and to break such confidences is a serious indiscretion which calls into question both the elders' credibility and the suitability for eldership of the person concerned.

In this context, it is appropriate to refer to the difficult position in which elders' wives find themselves. It is desirable that they should, so far as possible, share, at least in a passive way, in their husbands' work and there will be many matters of elders' business to which they will inevitably become privy. This however places upon them a considerable burden of discretion, which is why their credentials are relevant in the selection of elders. But there will be some matters, particularly pastoral confidences which ought not to be shared by elders even with their wives if the elders' claims to leadership of the congregation are not to be put at risk.

How eldership is to be practised individually and how corporate government and leadership are to be made effective in practice are the critical factors. A passionate belief in the principle of plural government and leadership and ministry in the church is not enough for spiritual growth.

A Noble Task is an excellent treatment of the entire ministry of eldership. It would be useful as a tool in the training of new or existing elders. Call our office if you'd like a copy.