

Being an elder: like being married to 6 at once



Trusting others to do what they are best at is a sign of maturity, trust and faith

Sometimes that's what being an elder is like!

In marriage we discover both the wonders of companionship and the bewilderment of how someone we thought we knew so well could be sooooo different! Over time and with an ever-adjusting recipe of love, persistence, forgiveness and adherence to Biblical truth, we discover paths that lead to higher heights. Elder groups can be like that.

There are obvious benefits to team leadership quite apart from mere compliance to the Biblical model. It's great to have equally dedicated people with whom to share the responsibilities of leading and shepherding. Its a huge asset to have the wisdom of diverse voices in times of confusion. And the partnership of gifts and personalities that differ enables a leadership team to be what no one person could ever be.

But as in marriage, plurality brings complexity too! Elders often differ over:

- Whether to be firm or gentle with a wayward person?
- Whether to be pro-active with problems or whether to give them more time?
- Whether to be trusting in delegating to a less experienced person or whether to hold a tight reign?
- Whether to change direction or to keep the current course?

Elder groups who work with partially or fully supported pastors or elders face some additional challenges. They function at a "ministry pace" that is very different from those who are self-supporting. The ministry of such workers is a great asset to the church, but elders must learn how to synchronize their time expectations with there full-time ministry partners.

Just as in the complexity of marriage, the list of

possibilities for divergence among elders is endless! It takes great commitment to your partnerships to "make them work well".

The basic Biblical principles relating to eldership are quite simple. Elders are to:

- Be men of spiritual character and maturity who are valued and respected by those who know them best.
- Be responsible to continue the work initiated by the apostles; of propagating the Gospel in their community and of leading and shepherding the church.

Although the principles in both marriage and eldership are quite straight forward, applying them proves to be more challenging. In our own marriage there have been many times when re-assessments and adjustments have been necessary. How long will we let the baby cry? How will we spend our free time? How will we maintain a united stand in parenting? How can we be a team in God's service when we seem so different?

Elders too must give attention to the question of how they can be an effective team? Every so often this matter must be addressed with honesty and high levels of trust in order to make any serious progress. As in marriage, the relationships in elder-groups are dynamic, changing, and periodically require time for re-evaluation.

Elders shouldn't all be responsible for everything. Many groups delegate specific responsibilities to certain elders who then have freedom to function in those spheres. For example, one elder may have a primary responsibility for the Sunday morning teaching, another for pastoral care and still another for communication links with the congregation. Elders' meetings can then focus on matters requiring everyone's attention and on prayer. Trusting others to do what they are best at is a sign of maturity, trust and faith.

Gord
Martin

Shepherding:

- Who is strong in public, small groups and one on one teaching? Let them do it and give them some space.
- Who works well in pastoral care, counselling and visitation, and takes time to do it? Free them to do it.
- Who can address unpleasant issues publicly in a manner that helps and heals? Value their unique strength.
- Who has a sensitive heart that addresses matters of worship in a helpful manner? Give them extra credit in those areas.

In Leading:

- Who is able to see the big picture, visualizing possibilities that others fail to see? Appreciate their faith.
- Who is able to think through the detail involved in a course of action? Without them nothing works well!
- Who is wise in perceiving how people

will be impacted by some proposed course of action? Listen to their voices.

- Who is peculiarly discerning in spiritual matters? Thank God for them.
- Who can best present direction to the congregation in a manner they will understand and respond to? Such a person is a great gift to the church.

We aren't all good at everything, we don't all have the same gifts or experience but we do need to learn to value each other's role on the team and to celebrate the differences. Clarifying roles and trusting each other is not only good in marriages but on elder teams as well. In cases where there are gifts missing, it's a mark of simple honesty to recognize it and do something about it. Barabus knew he didn't have all it took to get the task done at Antioch. Off he went to find Paul. Together they taught many for a whole year. It's the place where the disciples were first called Christians.

Good partnerships require clear roles, high levels of trust, deep commitment and periodic adjustments. Not only in marriage.