THE ROLE OF UNPAID ELDERS IN SOUTHERN BAPTIST

CHURCHES: A MIXED METHODS STUDY

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by

Scott Alan Rhodes

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APPROVAL SHEET

THE ROLE OF UNPAID ELDERS IN SOUTHERN BAPTIST

CHURCHES: A MIXED METHODS STUDY

Scott Alan Rhodes

Read and Approved by:

_____
Danny R. Bowen (Chair)

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Joseph C. Harrod

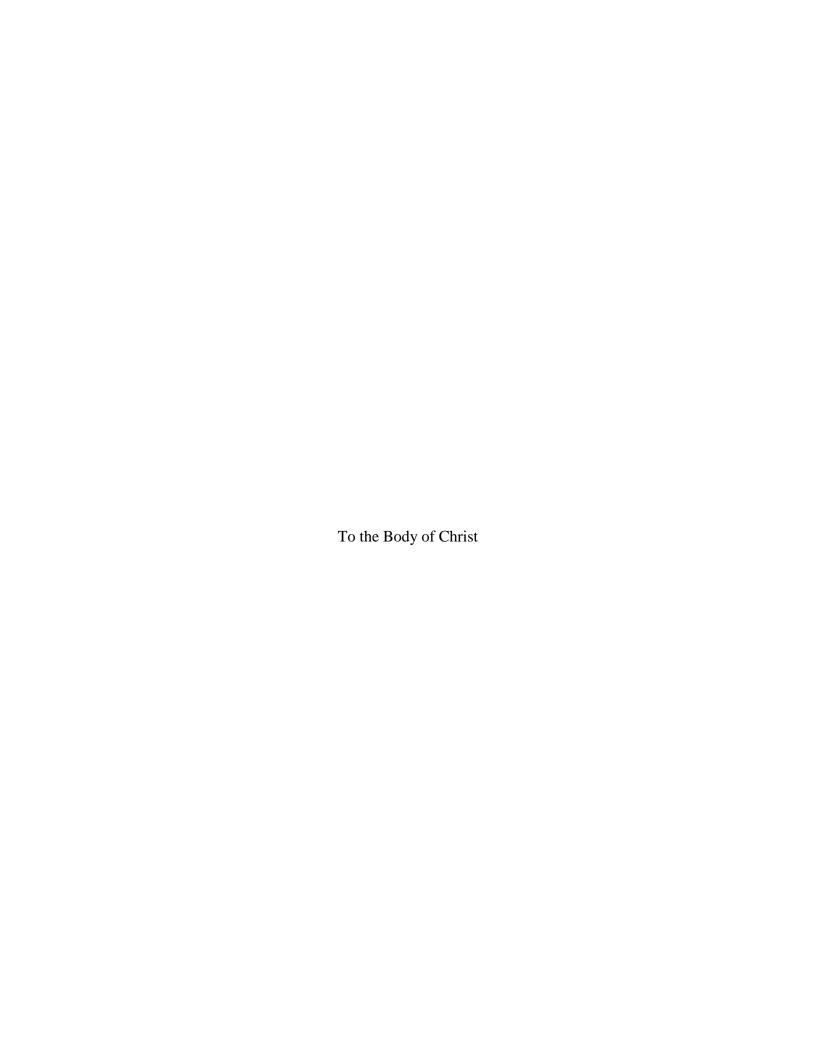_____
Dean C. Clark

Date_____

To the Body of Christ

TABLE OF CONTENTS

iv

LIST OF TABLES

Table   Page

LIST OF FIGURES

PREFACE

The research and writing of this thesis has been painstaking and humbling to be sure. However, it has also been incredibly educational. I am thankful for what I have learned on this journey but even more thankful for the people who have helped along the way. There is absolutely no chance that this work could have been done without them. Space does not allow me to thank everyone who has helped but I want to express gratitude to as many as I can.

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xi

your joy for life, your unconditional acceptance, and your "we got this" attitudes, have blessed me more than you can imagine. I must single out my research partner, Adam Mehaffey, from our cohort. Adam, thank you for all the times you bailed me out and for always being available to talk about ideas, strategies, and next steps. I greatly appreciate the incredible work you have done on this project.

I owe gratitude to my family as well. Mom thanks for sympathizing and keeping me encouraged every Friday morning. Kris, my love, I know you are so tired of having books from one end of the house to the other and of me being busy all the time. Thank you for being patient. Kris, Jonathan, and Jeremiah, thank you for making me laugh; you're the ones that keep me going. I am so proud of you three and cannot wait to spend some time with you.

Most of all, thank you Jesus. Your grace has brought me to this point. I pray that this study may be useful to your Church and so honor You.

<div align="right">Scott Rhodes</div>

Hewitt, Texas

December 2020

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"Biblical eldership is not a church board that conducts its business for two or three hours a month—it is a hard-working pastoral body!" says Alexander Strauch.[1] However, this (a governing board that only handles business) is how some elder bodies function or are perceived to function, by their churches.[2] Further, many Christians in congregational churches are not familiar with the idea of an elder body or elder council. Strauch opines that "the New Testament model of church eldership remains largely unknown to most Christians."[3] Such unfamiliarity with elder leadership is common among Baptist churches, which tend to be congregationally governed and led by a senior pastor.[4] This unfamiliarity means that churches wishing to adopt this practice may not have accurate ideas of the role of lay elders. Furthermore, the lay elders themselves may not know exactly what their role is, nor be equipped to perform their role.

Though contemporary Baptists are not accustomed to elder leadership, this has not always been the case. Mark Dever teaches that churches of the first two centuries

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[1] Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, rev. and expanded ed. (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), 167.

[2] Aubrey Malphurs, an influential Christian leader, teaches that church governing boards (whether they be made up of a plurality of elders or other church members) should function like a corporate board. From his perspective, the important things are that the board members are spiritually qualified and the board functions well. Aubry Malphurs, *Leading Leaders: Empowering Church Boards for Ministry Excellence*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005).

[3] Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 11.

[4] James Allen Fain III, "A Descriptive Analysis of the Relationship between Paradigms and Duties of Pastoral Ministry" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, 2010), 115. Fain surveyed 413 Southern Baptist Churches and found that 57 percent were congregationally governed.

were exclusively led by a plurality of elders.[5] He further teaches that this was a historically common practice among Baptists and at "the beginning of the twentieth century Baptists either had or advocated elders in local churches—and often a plurality of elders."[6] This was not the exclusive practice in Baptist life. However, it may have slightly been the majority view in the 1600s, although it declined over the next three centuries.[7]

The 1900s saw the development of different leadership models in Baptist life. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, most Baptist churches experienced single pastor leadership or pastor-deacon leadership within a congregational system of governance. However, the last two decades have seen a segment of Baptist churches move back towards a plurality of elders leadership model.[8] Commonly, in a church with multiple elders, one or more may be laymen. This means that they have little or no training in ministry and are likely to be unclear as to the specific task of an elder, as well as how to perform the tasks. Even if these men know what to do, they may not be equipped to do it due to their lack of training.

Statement of the Problem

To summarize the problem, leadership by a plurality of elders, although biblical, has not been commonly practiced in congregational churches (such as Baptist) for many decades. Therefore, churches contemplating adopting this practice may not have correct ideas about the role of lay elders. Furthermore, the lay elders themselves may not know exactly how they should serve, nor be equipped to perform their duties.

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[5] Mark Dever, "Elders and Deacons in History," in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 229.

[6] Dever, "Elders and Deacons," 238.

[7] Shawn D. Wright, "Baptists and a Plurality of Elders," in *Shepherding God's Flock: Biblical Leadership in the New Testament and Beyond*, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle and Thomas R. Schreiner (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2014), 255.

[8] Dever, "Elders and Deacons," 238.

Understanding this problem merits further insight into the history and functions of church elders.

Background

The term "elder" is used in both the Old and New Testaments. However, the New Testament meaning differs significantly from that found in the Old Testament. James M. Hamilton examines the meaning of the Old Testament terms for elder, relevant biblical passages that demonstrate the role elders played in the Old Testament, as well as passages pertaining to synagogue elders in first-century Palestine. He concludes that "the differences between Old and New Testament elders are too significant to permit the conclusion that the elders of the church were a natural development of the elders of Israel."[9]

The new covenant picture of elders is one of spiritual leadership. Beginning in the book of Acts, the New Testament essentially uses the terms elder (*presbyteros*) and overseer (*episkopos*) synonymously. For example, in Acts 20 Paul sent for the "elders" of the church in Ephesus to come to speak with him (v. 17). During his address, he says God has made them "overseers" of the flock (v. 28).[10] Further, both of these terms and the term more commonly used today, pastor, all describe aspects of the same office.[11]

As spiritual leaders of Christ's people, elders had to be uniquely qualified. The Bible relates these qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9. The qualifications indicate that elders should be mature Christians of noble character. Strauch summarizes

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[9] James. M. Hamilton Jr., "Did the Church Borrow Leadership Structures from the Old Testament or Synagogue?," in *Shepherding God's Flock: Biblical Leadership in the New Testament and Beyond*, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle and Thomas R. Schreiner (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2014), 14.

[10] For a detailed treatment of these terms and their equivalence see Benjamin L. Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church*, Studies in Biblical Literature 57, ed. Hemchand Gossai (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003).

[11] Gerald P. Cowen, *Who Rules the Church? Examining Congregational Leadership and Church Government*, (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2003), 13. Cowen explains that even though we use the term pastor as a title, in the New Testament it was probably meant to describe the function of the elders since it means shepherd.

as follows: "[The elder is] mature spiritually and morally as well as mature in his ability to teach the Word and manage his home. Men such as these are the ones God has chosen to shepherd His flock."[12]

Another relevant component of the scriptural portrayal of elders is evidence indicating that multiple elders simultaneously served individual churches. Benjamin L. Merkle writes,

> There is no example in the New Testament of one elder or pastor leading a congregation as the sole or primary leader. A plurality of elders were at the churches in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30); Antioch of Pisidia, Lystra, Iconium, and Derbe (Acts 14:23) Ephesus (Acts 20:17; I Tim 5:17); Philippi (Phil 1:1); the cities of Crete (Titus 1:5); the dispersion of which James wrote (Jas 1:1); the Roman provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (I Pet 1:1); and possibly at the church(es) to which Hebrews was written (Heb 13:7, 17, 24).[13]

The clear biblical image of elders/overseers is that they are spiritual leaders. They are men of high character and spiritual maturity, and they serve using a team leadership approach.[14] For a variety of reasons, more specific notions of elders and eldership may lack such clarity. This warrants an examination of why this lack of clarity may exist in some churches today.

The Gap in the Knowledge Base

Denominational Presbyterians (and other denominations following a Presbyterian polity) utilize a plurality of elders in church leadership. Their version of church government gives the final ruling authority to the elders.[15] Presbyterian polity also recognizes two types of elders, preaching elders and ruling elders. The preaching elders

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[12] Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1988), 204.

[13] Benjamin L. Merkle, "The Biblical Role of Elders," in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 285.

[14] The idea of team leadership, or plural elders in one church, is not undisputed and will be examined more in chap. 2.

[15] Nathan A. Finn, "The Rule of Elders: The Presbyterian Angle on Church Leadership," in Merkle and Schreiner, *Shepherding God's Flock*, 198.

tend to be paid ministers and ruling elders are more likely to be laymen.[16] This rendition of plural elder leadership had its beginnings in the 1500s and Presbyterians have practiced it up to the present.[17] Because they have maintained this model for so long, they have some specific tasks in mind for the lay elders which David Dickson tells us include church discipline, oversight of ordinances, oversight of morality in the congregation, visitation of the ill, and superintendence of religious training of the young, among other things.[18] However, Dickson also admits that there are no rigid rules for what elders should do. Each church, using ideas from other churches, should decide what serves the congregation best.[19]

For several reasons, Baptists may struggle more than their Presbyterian brothers to have a thorough understanding of elder roles. The first reason is the time gap. Baptists have only recently begun to return to a plural elder model of church leadership. While there is currently much information available to Baptists related to duties of senior pastors, there is approximately a hundred year gap with very little common knowledge, from practice or research, about elders.[20]

The second reason is related to generality in Scripture. Baptists do have some concept of elder duties. Merkle explains that "an elder has at least four duties. The elder is called to be (1) a leader, (2) a shepherd, (3) a teacher, and (4) an equipper."[21] These

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[16] Finn, "The Rule of Elders," 200.

[17] Finn, "The Rule of Elders," 204-07.

[18] David Dickson, *The Elder and His Work*, ed. George Kennedy McFarland and Philip Graham Ryken (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2004), 38.

[19] Dickson, *The Elder and His Work*, 39.

[20] Mark Dever has chronicled the fact that the practice of plural elder leadership was very rare in Baptist life for most of the twentieth century. Dever, "Elders and Deacons," 238.

[21] Benjamin L. Merkle, "The Biblical Role of Elders," in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 271.

duties are clear from scripture.[22] Table 1, shows eight functions of church elders that

Akin identifies from Scripture.[23]

Table 1. Scriptural functions of elders as summarized by Akin

Function of Elder	Scripture References
General oversight of the church and directing the church	Hebrews 13:17
Seek the mind of Christ for church matters	Ephesians 1:22, Colossians 1:18, 1 Peter 5:2
Teach and exhort in sound doctrine and refute false teaching	Ephesians 4:11, 1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:9
Give instruction for the maintenance of healthy relationships within the church	Galatians 6:1, 1Thessalonians 5:12, 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15
Provide at least basic oversight of the church's financial matters	Acts 11:30
Lead (with congregational input) the appointing of deacons	Acts 6:1-6
Lead by being an example to the church	Hebrews 13:7, 1 Peter 5:2-3
Lead in the exercise of church discipline	Galatians 6:1

Some of the duties, such as refuting false teaching, are specific. However,

others, such as "general oversight," are not very precise. Therefore, a lack of common

knowledge and practice, coupled with the generality of scriptural instruction, may leave

Baptist and other evangelical churches uncertain about a definitive elder-led model, what

the elders should do, or how to train the new elders.

Furthermore, the fact that vocational pastors have difficulty fulfilling their

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[22] For example, see Acts 15:6 and 22, 1 Pet 5:1-2, 1 Tim 3:2, and Eph 4:11-12 respectively.

[23] Daniel L. Akin, "The Single-Elder-Led Church The Bible's Witness to a Congregational/Single-Elder-Led Polity," in *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, ed. Chad Owen Brand, and R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2004), 50-51.

roles can be related to the struggle of lay elders. Many duties for senior pastors are recognized within Baptist life. These duties include shepherding, making disciples, leading, evangelizing, managing the affairs of the church, preaching, and teaching. Of course, these are exactly the things lay elders should be doing too. James Allen Fain found that among Southern Baptist churches, senior pastors have difficulty spending their time performing all the duties they ideally feel they should.[24] Research by Richard J. Krejcir supports this. He observes that "Some of these include misguided leadership notions from clergy, laity, and church leadership, as well as a lack of awareness of what are the true calls and duties of a pastor."[25] If vocational pastors struggle to know what to do and how to do it, it is reasonable to expect lay elders to have a similar challenge.[26]

Another factor plays a role in the confusion about how lay elders function: beliefs about leadership in general. From the Industrial Revolution until very late in the twentieth century, leadership was viewed in a very linear, top-down way.[27] The idea of shared leadership has only been studied academically since the 1990s; therefore, it is still a relatively new idea in organizations.[28] Due to the vertical leadership mindset, lay elders may find it difficult to function as a team of leaders. They may believe they need one person to be in charge. However, the biblical picture portrays more of a shared leadership

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[24] James Allen Fain III, "A Descriptive Analysis of the Relationship Between Paradigms and Duties of Pastoral Ministry" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, 2010), 121. Fain found that the time Southern Baptist pastors spent on the preaching ministry correlated with its importance. However, the time spent on other duties such as disciple-making, evangelism, soul care, and leading did not correlate with their importance.

[25] Richard J. Krejcir, "Statistics on Pastors: 2016 Update," accessed July 28, 2020, http://www.churchleadership.org/apps/articles/default.asp?blogid=4545&view=post&articleid=Statistics-on-Pastors-2016-Update&link=1&fldKeywords=&fldAuthor=&fldTopic=0.

[26] Jeramie Rinne also affirms this point of view. Jeramie Rinne, *Church Elders: How to Shepherd God's People Like Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 14.

[27] Craig L. Pearce and Jay A. Conger, "All Those Years Ago: The Historical Underpinnings of Shared Leadership," in *Shared Leadership: Reframing the Hows and Whys of Leadership*, ed. Craig L Pearce and Jay Alden Conger (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2003), 3-7.

[28] Pearce and Conger, "All Those Years Ago," 13.

model.[29] Strauch puts it this way, "There are sufficient New Testament examples and instructions to fully justify insistence on spiritual oversight by a plurality of elders."[30]

To summarize, the broad descriptions of elder responsibilities found in Scripture, the fact that trained vocational pastors struggle to fulfill their duties, and the fact that most Southern Baptist churches have not practiced shared leadership over the past century serve to demonstrate the lack of clarity regarding the role of lay elders in contemporary congregational churches.[31] In addition, there is very little empirical research describing the work of contemporary lay elders. This is the dilemma that the current research seeks to address.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this explanatory sequential mixed-methods study was to identify the specific roles of lay elders in Southern Baptist churches.[32] The reason for utilizing a mixed-methods design was to provide further explanation of data obtained through the quantitative portion of the research via the qualitative portion.[33] The quantitative portion essentially yielded only numbers. The qualitative results helped

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[29] Chapter 2 will examine this claim in more detail.

[30] Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 1988, 11.

[31] J. R. Briggs and Bob Hyatt also believe that few churches today develop elder responsibilities based largely on Scripture. They offer anecdotal evidence that elders simply behave according to what they observed growing up, what they observe in their current context, or what their denomination prescribes. J. R. Briggs and Bob Hyatt, *Eldership and the Mission of God: Equipping Teams for Faithful Church Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 39-40. Alexander Strauch offers further anecdotal evidence. Strauch has been in ministry for fifty-one years. Much of that time has been spent in a ministry that trains local church elders. His ministry is not limited to the Southern Baptist Convention. However, he maintains that most of the elders he meets see themselves as board members, as in a corporation, rather than a pastoral body. Alexander Strauch, telephone conversation with author, February 3, 2020.

[32] The research team was especially interested in evangelical churches with congregational polity. Ultimately, the study focused on Southern Baptist churches because they represent a diverse evangelical denomination with historically congregational government. Utilizing one denomination also fit within the time and resource constraints of the project.

[33] John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2018), 215. Mixed-method research utilizes both quantitative and qualitative inquiry. It began in the late 1980s and early 1990s and continues to grow as a methodology.

provide more insight into the numbers which yielded more complete answers to the research questions.[34]

Methodology

This study was performed in team fashion by two researchers. The quantitative segment of the study surveyed church elders to explain the roles of unpaid elders. The survey also gathered data about the competencies churches look for in lay elders and the boundaries elder teams utilize in making decisions. The research team developed the quantitative instrument and strived to verify that it was valid and reliable with the help of a panel of experts. The qualitative portion of the study attempted to illuminate the quantitative results through personal interviews with pastors and lay elders to gather more precise data about what lay elders do, how elder teams determine who has the power to make decisions, how churches select lay elders, and how churches have transitioned to plural elder leadership.

Research Questions

Because this is a mixed-methods study, there were two types of research questions.

Quantitative Questions

This study sought to answer these three quantitative questions.

1.   What are the distinct roles assumed by paid and unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches?

2.   What competencies do churches look for in unpaid elders?

3.   What are the formal and informal boundaries to decision making for elder teams?

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[34] This rationale coheres with Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod's description of when mixed-methods designs are appropriate. Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, 11th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2016), 312-13.

Qualitative Questions

   This study sought to answer these four qualitative questions.

1. How are unpaid elders engaged in teaching and shepherding the congregation?

2. How does the church select unpaid elders?

3. How have churches made the transition to plural elder leadership?[35]

4. How do the survey and interview analyses compare?

Definitions of Terms

   For this study, the following definitions applied:

Congregational. Refers to churches operating with a congregational polity.

Congregational polity. As defined by James Leo Garrett, it is

> That form of church governance in which final human authority rests with the local or particular congregation when it gathers for decision-making. This means that decisions about membership, leadership, doctrine, worship, conduct, missions, finances, property, relationships, and the like are to be made by the gathered congregation except when such decisions have been delegated by the congregation to individual members or groups of members.[36]

   Elder, *overseer, pastor*. These terms are synonymous and refer to men who lead a local church, preach and teach in the church, provide administrative oversight of the church, provide pastoral care to the church, and equip the congregation for ministry.[37]

   Elder led. Joshua Alan Remy says this term "refers to churches that have a plurality of elders but the congregation still votes at least on major issues."[38]

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[35] The idea behind this question is that for a church to make such a major change, it must have an end in mind; a target so to speak. Part of the ultimate target should be what the role of the elder body will be. The path a church takes through the transition should at least partially speak to the roles the elders will play.

[36] James Leo Garrett, Jr., "The Congregationally-Led Church: Congregational Polity," in Brand and Norman, *Perspectives on Church Government*, 124.

[37] Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer,* 2003. Merkle has demonstrated through careful exegesis of relevant New Testament passages that elder and overseer (also translated bishop) are synonymous. Further, Wilder and Jones explain that the word pastor became the title given to elders and overseers in the New Testament church. Michael S. Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones, *The God Who Goes before You: Pastoral Leadership As Christ-Centered Followership* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2018), 117. Also, Joshua Alan Remy, "Church Transition to Plurality of Elders: A Case Study" (EdD thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019), 6.

[38] Remy, "Church Transition," 49.

Elder ruled. Remy says this term refers to "congregations that elect or approve their elders and are then subject to their decisions with limited input."[39]

Evangelical. The National Association of Evangelicals working with LifeWay Research has developed a definition of evangelical for research purposes. Individuals who affirm each of the following four statements qualify as evangelical:[40] The statements are: the Bible is the highest authority for what I believe; it is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior; Jesus Christ's death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin; and only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's gift of eternal salvation.[41]

Governance, rule. These terms relate to decision making in the church. As per Garret, this includes decisions about membership, who can hold leadership positions, doctrine, worship, behavior, missional endeavors, financial matters, relationships, and so forth.[42]

Lay elder, unpaid elder. A man recognized by his church as an elder, but who is not a vocational minister. (Commonly the lay elder has little or no formal training in theology or ministry.)[43]

Leadership. In this study, leadership does not refer to the act of decision making or governing within the church. Borrowing from Wilder and Jones, here it refers

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[39] Remy, "Church Transition," 50.

[40] In LifeWay Research studies, individuals who answer "strongly agree" to all four of the statements qualify as evangelical.

[41] "NAE LifeWay Research Evangelical Beliefs Research Definition," LifeWay Research, accessed February 8, 2019, http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/NAE-LifeWay-Research-Evangelical-Beliefs-Research-Definition-Methodology-and-Use.pdf.

[42] Garret, "The Congregationally-Led Church," 124.

[43] This statement is not empirical, but anecdotal. Alexander Strauch says most of the lay elders he speaks to suffer tremendously from a lack of training. Alexander Strauch, telephone conversation with author, February 3, 2020. Further, for the purposes of this study, a man was considered a lay elder as long as he received no remuneration for serving his church, even if he had been ordained.

to church officers (elders and deacons) developing fellow laborers who are equipped and empowered to pursue shared goals for the church in submission to the Word of God.[44]

Senior pastor. The term frequently used to refer to the leader of a church who does most of the preaching and who supervises other staff members. The senior pastor is usually a vocational or bi-vocational minister. Commonly, the senior pastor has been trained in a Bible college or seminary.

Shared leadership. "A dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both."[45]

Assumptions

This study made the following assumptions. First, senior pastors and elders who completed the survey did not intentionally falsify any information. Second, the perceptions of the senior pastors and elders who complete the survey accurately reflected the reality of their experiences. Third, the senior pastors and elders who participated were biblically qualified for their offices. Fourth, the biblical teaching about elder duties is specific enough to be able to consider some elder practices as unbiblical.

Population

The population for the study was Southern Baptist churches in the United States that are led by a plurality of elders, at least one of whom is unpaid. Churches from the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) were chosen because the SBC historically has practiced congregational government.[46] Plus, as the largest evangelical denomination in

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[44] This is a very abridged version of Wilder and Jones' definition of leadership. Wilder and Jones, *The God Who Goes before You*, 25.

[45] Pearce and Conger, "All Those Years Ago," 1.

[46] "The Baptist Faith and Message, 2000," section 6, accessed October 24, 2020, https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/#vi-the-church.

the United States it provides a good representation of evangelicalism.[47]

Delimitations and Limitations

The study was delimited to a sample of pastors and lay elders from Southern Baptist Convention churches in the United States who operate with two or more elders, with at least one being a lay elder.[48] Further, since the study used an electronic survey, it was delimited to churches within the previous population who had access to electronic mail and the Internet. The study excluded churches that do not practice congregational polity and churches that do not utilize lay elders in leadership.

Limitations of Generalization

The sample consisted only of elders from SBC churches who are congregationally governed and led by a plurality of elders, some of whom are unpaid. Therefore, the usefulness of the study's quantitative results is limited to congregationally governed SBC churches with a plurality of elders, including some unpaid ones. The qualitative findings generalized only to those elders who participated in Phase 3 of the project. However, because the SBC represents such a wide variety of churches, non-Southern Baptists who are like-minded and similarly governed may also find the study helpful for their context.

Importance of the Study

Information regarding lay elders would be very useful to congregationally governed churches who have moved to plural elder leadership or are considering doing so. Strauch informs us that elders should not serve a church in a way similar to how an

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[47] Pew Research Center, "7 Facts About Southern Baptists," accessed October 24, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/07/7-facts-about-southern-baptists/.

[48] Further information on the appropriateness of the Southern Baptist Convention to draw a sample from will be presented in chap. 3.

executive board serves a corporation, nor are they to be an advisory board to the pastor, nor a governing body of the church. However, lay elders do play these roles in many contemporary churches.[49] As previously noted, some Southern Baptist churches have recently moved to this type of leadership and others may be considering this model. All three types of churches, those with elders who are operating in an unbiblical way, those new to elder leadership, and those considering elder leadership, need to avoid the mistake Strauch notes. Since we are a century removed from elder leadership being common practice, it would be helpful for churches in these three categories to be able to access data regarding what elders do in other like-minded churches, how elder teams operate, as well as what competencies to look for in elder candidates.

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[49] Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 1988, 69.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Because the Bible is the rule of faith for doctrine and practice, any investigation into how the church should be governed and who should govern it ought to begin with Scripture. Therefore, the first task of this chapter will be to examine New Testament texts that involve elders. After that, the review will present scholarly material related to church governance as well as questions about eldership because the way a church chooses to practice governance is directly related to if and how the church deploys elders.[1] Finally, the chapter will overview literature related to what contemporary churches are doing to transition to elder leadership which also speaks to the church's utilization of elders. Given the scriptural data and the body of literature related to polity and elder roles, the object of the review is to show that Southern Baptist churches adopting plural elder leadership will benefit from empirical data related to the tasks of contemporary unpaid elders.

New Testament Teaching Regarding Elders

English translations of the Bible use the term "elder" in both the Old and New Testaments.[2] This section will focus on what the New Testament teaches about elders.

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[1] Benjamin Merkle relates "Church government is important . . . because outward structures directly affect who can be a leader in the church, what the leader does, and to whom each leader is accountable." Benjamin Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2008), 21.

[2] Merkle notes that while there are similarities between New Testament elders and the elders of the Old Testament, the Sanhedrin, and the synagogue, the differences are great enough to conclude that elders in the Christian community are a distinctive entity. This study will only explore New Testament elders. Benjamin L. Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church*, Studies in Biblical Literature vol. 57, ed. Hemchand Gossai (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003), 55. See also Alastair Campbell, "The Elders of the Jerusalem Church," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 44, no. 2 (October 1993): 513, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23966340, and A. E. Harvey, "Elders," *Journal of Theological Studies* 25, no. 2 (October 1974): 328.

"Elder" in English translations is from the Greek *presbyteros*. The New Testament uses the term elder (and elders) to refer to several different categories of people.[3] Pertinent to the current study, in the New International Version of Scripture elder (or elders) refers twenty-nine times specifically to an office of leadership, or the men who held that office, in the early churches.

Related Terms

Before examining further the biblical evidence concerning elders, it is worthwhile to note that Scripture uses two other terms quite similarly. The term *episkopos* (overseer) also refers to leaders in the early church. Overseer appears four times in singular form and twice in the plural in the NIV. The terms refer to leaders in local churches each time except one.[4] The Greek word *poimein*, or shepherd (pastor), refers to a position of church leadership in Ephesians 4:11. The fact that these words apply to church leaders raises the question of whether they apply to separate positions of leadership or the same position. Scholars are not in agreement with the answer to this question. In fact, David Mappes claims the relationship between these words might be "the most debated aspect of church polity."[5]

Authors writing about church leadership or church government frequently address the question in their works. For example, Michael S. Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones state the term "elder" refers to the maturity requirement of the leader, whereas "overseer" refers to the function the leader performs. Wilder and Jones continue that the

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[3] "Elder" and "elders" refer to something other than local church leaders in the following ways. "Elder" appears twice in the Johannine epistles where John refers to himself as "the elder" (2 John 1:1 and 3 John 1:1). Peter refers to himself as a "fellow elder" (1 Pet 5:1). "Elders" occurs 32 times in the gospels and Acts in reference to the Jewish elders. It occurs 18 times in Revelation referring to the 24 elders in heaven.

[4] 1 Pet 2:25 refers to Jesus as the "Shepherd and Overseer of your souls."

[5] David Mappes, "The New Testament Elder, Overseer, and Pastor," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154, no. 614 (April 1997): 164, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001027539.

word "pastor" became the title due to the shepherd-like way these men led.[6] Similarly,

Paul Winslow and Doorman Followwill have written a very pragmatic book regarding the

job of elders and pastors. In distinguishing elders from deacons, they too see the words

"elder," "overseer," and "shepherd" ("pastor") as referring to the same office. Their view

is also that elder relates to the maturity of the man, overseer to his main task, and

shepherd describes how he carries it out.[7]

Further, in the course of addressing church government, Gerald P. Cowan

examines these terms and concludes that they all refer to the same office.[8] Daniel L.

Akin, also writing on polity, states that elder, bishop, and pastor are synonymous.[9] Roger

Beckwith seeks to explain the role of ordained ministers in the Anglican Church as well

as their origin. He believes that during the time the New Testament was written, elder and

overseer described the same people.[10]

Other scholars devote entire works to the relationship of these expressions. For

example, Mappes takes up the issue specifically and concludes that the three expressions

presbyteros, *episkopos*, and *poimein* "are different names for those who occupy the same

office."[11] Benjamin Merkle thoroughly examines elder and overseer with the sole

intention of demonstrating that the New Testament uses them to refer to the same

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[6] Michael S. Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones, *The God Who Goes before You: Pastoral Leadership As Christ-Centered Followership* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2018), 117-18, 177.

[7] Paul Winslow and Dorman Followwill, *Christ in Church Leadership: A Handbook for Elders and Pastors* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 2001), 76.

[8] Gerald P. Cowen, *Who Rules the Church? Examining Congregational Leadership and Church Government* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2003), 13.

[9] Daniel L. Akin, "The Single-Elder-Led Church The Bible's Witness to a Congregational/Single-Elder-Led Polity," in *Perspectives on Church Government: 5 Views of Church Polity*, ed. Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2004), 29.

[10] Roger Beckwith, *Elders in Every City: The Origin and Role of Ordained Ministry* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2003), 11.

[11] Mappes, "The New Testament Elder," 169.

office.[12] He begins by examining the uses of these terms in Jewish and Greco-Roman literature, arguing that there is not enough evidence to conclude anything but that the Christian advent of these offices was unique.[13] Next, Merkle assesses the works of multiple scholars, Paul's writings, Acts, 1 Peter, Hebrews, and James to demonstrate that the church in the first century was organized sufficiently to have offices.[14] Finally, he analyzes key passages in Acts and the Pastoral Epistles to show that elder and overseer do refer to the same office and the men who occupied it.[15]

The argument of these authors is compelling enough that for this study, the New Testament terms elder, overseer, and pastor will be considered to refer to the same office.[16] Also, the biblical qualifications for an office are related to the tasks of that office. Therefore, what the Bible teaches about the qualifications and duties associated with each of these expressions will be germane to this research. Passages in Acts, several of Paul's epistles, James, and 1 Peter are especially helpful in understanding the place of elders in the early church.

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[12] Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer*, 2.

[13] Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer*, 65.

[14] Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer*, 119.

[15] Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer*, 160.

[16] For further study of these terms, including alternative views on the relationship between elder, overseer, and pastor, see the following: John M. Andrewartha, "Elder, Bishop, Pastor: A Descriptive Study of the Terms and Their Implications for a Contemporary Ecclesiology" (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1989). Alastair Campbell, "The Elders of the Jerusalem Church," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 44, no. 2 (October 1993): 511-28, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23966340. Gordon Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, New International Bible Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984). Ed Glasscock, "The Biblical Concept of Elder," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144, no. 573 (January 1987): 66–78. http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.sbts.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0000973600. A. E. Harvey, "Elders," *Journal of Theological Studies* 25, no. 2 (October 1974): 318-32. Rod Parrott, "New Testament Elders in Their Context," *Impact* 4 (1980): 27–37, http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.sbts.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0000788879. Frances M. Young, "On Episkopos and Presbyteros," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 45, no. 1 (April 1994): 142–48, http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.sbts.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0000880403.

Elders in Acts

The book of Acts mentions elders several times. Acts 11:27-30 describes a scene in the church at Antioch. Prophets from Jerusalem were ministering there, and one predicted a famine. The church decided to take up an offering for famine relief and send it back to the church in Jerusalem. Barnabas and Saul took this offering "to the elders." According to David G. Peterson, this likely took place about AD 48 and is the first mention of the elders as "those responsible for these and other matters in the early churches."[17] It seems that elders were operating in Jerusalem early in the life of the church and as Peterson points out they had some responsibility in fiscal matters.[18]

The utilization of elders continued in the early church beyond Jerusalem as the story of Paul's first missionary journey portrays. Acts 14:23 is part of Luke's narrative of Paul and Barnabas's first missionary journey.[19] The two disciples had been planting churches in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch and verse 23 relates, "When they had appointed elders in every church and prayed with fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed." The passage does not describe specific functions of the new elders however it does provide further evidence that elder leadership was already present in the New Testament churches early in the Christian era.[20]

As the narrative of Acts continues, there is a practical example of elders serving to oversee church doctrine. Acts 15:1-35 records the Jerusalem Council. Men from Judea were teaching the church in Antioch that Gentile Christians had to follow the Mosaic laws, specifically circumcision, to be saved. Paul and Barnabas tried to correct these men who refused to capitulate. The church wanted clarification from the leaders in

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[17] David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 358-59.

[18] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 359.

[19] Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 481.

[20] Bock, *Acts*, 483.

Jerusalem, so according to verse two they sent a delegation that included Paul and Barnabas "to go up to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem concerning this controversy." Verse six explains, "then the apostles and the elders assembled to consider this matter." The assembly concluded that the Gentile Christians did not have to undergo circumcision to follow Christ. The Jerusalem church sent a letter to the church in Antioch relaying the doctrinal decision. Verse 23 cites the "apostles and elders" as the authors of the letter. In this controversy, Darrel L. Bock claims the decision was so important, the apostles and elders had to adjudicate the matter.[21] In other words, this account shows a plurality of elders involved in protecting the church doctrinally.

A final passage from this book, Acts 20:13-38, reveals some of Paul's thinking related to elders. Paul journeyed to Jerusalem and stopped in Miletus. From there, he sent word for the elders in Ephesus to meet him in Miletus. Upon their arrival, Paul reminded them of his ministry in Ephesus, told them he was on his way to an uncertain future in Jerusalem, and gave them some ministry instructions. In verse 28 he said to the Ephesian elders, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God."

This passage contains several details that are relevant to the current study. First, Peterson informs readers that the usage of elder, overseer, and shepherd in the same story suggests that this interchange of terminology was familiar to Luke's readers and needed no explanation.[22] Second, he states it is important to notice that there was a team of presbyter-bishops who shared the responsibility of pastoral leadership in this church.[23] Third, the elders must take care of themselves first so that they can care for the church.[24]

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[21] Bock, *Acts*, 495.

[22] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 563.

[23] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 563. I would point out that even though there are multiple elders here, it is not clear if they each led a house church, if they led house churches in teams, or if they met in one large building and led together. The paper will address the plurality question below.

[24] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 568.

Fourth, ultimately, the Holy Spirit is responsible for placing elders in the church.[25] Fifth, elders are supposed to shepherd the church.[26]

The book of Acts has revealed valuable information regarding elders in the first century. Perhaps the next richest sources of relevant teaching are the Pastoral Epistles of 1 Timothy and Titus.[27] Here Paul focuses on qualifications for elders which are directly related to their functions.

Elders in the Pastoral Epistles

The Pastoral Epistles furnish ample information concerning the requirements one must meet to be considered for the position of elder; namely mature Christian character. In chapter two of 1 Timothy, Paul gives his younger designee instructions about worship in the household of God. In chapter three, Paul turns to instructions about the character that is required of those who will lead the household of God.[28] 1 Timothy 3:1-7 offers a composite picture of the kind of man an elder should be. However, it is important to understand that it is not meant to be a comprehensive list of qualities, but an overarching description of the maturity level of a potential elder.[29]

First Timothy 3:2 lists seven character descriptions of what an elder "must

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[25] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 568.

[26] Peterson explains that although the NIV starts a new sentence with "Be shepherds of. . .," this clause actually amplifies the command to keep watch over themselves and the flock. He suggests it would read better, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to shepherd the church of God." Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 569.

[27] The Pastoral Epistles refer to 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus. This section utilizes material from 1 Timothy and Titus. Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 69-90. Yarbrough addresses the scholarly debate over the authorship of the Pastoral Epistles. Since the 1800s many scholars have believed they were written pseudonymously. He argues for accepting the traditional view, which was dominant for most of church history, based on historical, critical, hermeneutical, and missiological reasons. Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer*, 136, also refutes historical, polemical, ecclesiastical, philological, and theological arguments against Pauline authorship. This paper will accept the pro-Pauline argument and refer to the author of these letters as the apostle Paul.

[28] Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy*, 189.

[29] Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy*, 190.

be."[30] Robert W. Yarbrough explains each of these. The potential overseer should be "above reproach," which means he must have very high integrity and character. Second, he has to be "faithful to his wife" which means he is committed to love and fidelity towards her. Next, the overseer is required to be "temperate," which is not referring to alcohol because Paul will address that in verse 3; rather, it refers to taking one's calling and duties seriously. Further, the man needs to be "self-controlled" which refers to control of desires, but also to one's mind in general and he should be "respectable," meaning others should esteem him because of his qualities and behaviors. Also, the potential overseer must be "hospitable" meaning he should be caring for others, regardless of status, both inside and outside the church. Finally, he has to be "able to teach." In Paul's mind, teaching and pastoral oversight are the two most vital skills needed to shepherd a congregation.[31]

As expressed in the above list, Scripture assumes that overseers are male. Yarbrough says that this is explicit in the Greek.[32] In the present socio-cultural context this is a controversial topic. Yet a plain reading of the passage patently assumes that men will hold this office.[33]

In verse 3, Paul lists four disqualifiers for overseers which Yarbrough expounds. He should be "not given to drunkenness," because intoxication has no place in

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[30] The NIV's "must be" translates the Greek *dei*. Yarbough points out that *dei* is an important word in the Pastoral Epistles. Paul uses it to convey qualities that God expects spiritual leaders to possess. Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy*, 193-95.

[31] Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy*, 195-97.

[32] Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy*, 195.

[33] Wayne Grudem summarizes the arguments common to this controversy. Some objections to excluding women from eldership include: the passages that place solely men in positions of church leadership apply only to a specific historical setting; the prohibitions for female leadership existed because women in the first century were uneducated; 1 Cor 11:5 allows women to prophecy in church; and the Old Testament records females in positions of governmental and spiritual leadership. Grudem counters these objections with the idea of creation order (1 Tim 2:11-14), the clear language of 1 Tim 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9, the connection between family and church, the model of the apostles, and the picture of male teaching and leadership through the whole biblical narrative. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 937-44.

an overseer's life. Second, he has to be "not violent but gentle." Here Paul is not looking for wimpy-ness but for someone big enough not to react too quickly and too aggressively. Third, the overseer must be "not quarrelsome." This probably goes along with not being violent. The same word is translated "peaceable" in Titus 3:2. Fourth, the man is "not a lover of money." "Greed is inconsistent with pure zeal for God, the saving gospel message, and the care of souls that should be the heartbeat of the overseer's inner life and therefore evident in his attitude toward income and spending."[34]

In verses 4-5 Paul states, "He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)" Yarbrough points out something that is incredibly instructive to understanding how overseers lead. The word translated "take care of" is "*epimeleomai*," and it only occurs here and in Luke 10:34-35.[35] In the Lukan occurrence, the Good Samaritan "took care of" the beaten man because he had compassion on him. The implications are that a potential overseer who has compassion for his family that leads him to care tenderly for them can be trusted to care for a congregation in the same way. Conversely, a man who does not care for his family in that manner is not suited to lead the church.[36]

Verses six and seven finish the disqualifiers given for potential overseers. Paul says they must not be young in the faith or they might become conceited. Then, in verse seven, he moves to the perception of how the world views the elder and states he must have a good reputation with outsiders.

Two more passages in 1 Timothy provide insight into the role of elders. In 1 Timothy 4:14 Paul tells Timothy, "Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through

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[34] Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy*, 197-98.

[35] Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy*, 201.

[36] Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy*, 201.

a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you." Although this verse is more about Timothy's ministry than about elders, it does suggest that elders had a leadership role in spiritual ceremonies.

First Timothy 5 also provides insight into Paul's view of elders. This discussion follows Yarbrough.[37] There is a chiasm in verses 1-20 of chapter 5 like this:

A   Verse one discusses elders referring to older men (which includes the subset of older leaders, A')

B   Verse two discusses older and younger women, a significant subset of which is…

B'   Widows in verses 3-16

A'   Elders in leadership in verses 17-20

The "B" part of the chapter discusses necessary benevolence ministry which will require pastoral leadership so Paul turns back to elder men, but now he is talking about those who are leaders. He advises Timothy like this:

> The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For Scripture says, "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages." Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that others may take warning.[38]

There are some difficulties here. The first is the notion that verse 17 speaks of two kinds of elders, ruling and teaching.[39] The second is Paul's citation of "the worker deserves his wages," as Scripture.[40] However, this latter problem does not influence what

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[37] Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy*, 286.

[38] First Timothy 5:17-20.

[39] The section on elder roles (below) will examine the view that 1 Tim 5:17 refers to two different categories of elders. See Rodney J. Decker, "Polity and the Elder Issue," *Grace Theological Journal* 9, no. 2 (January 1988): 275-77, https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/gtj/09-2_257.pdf.

[40] The problem put forth is that there was no New Testament canon during Paul's lifetime so if he really wrote the Pastoral Epistles he could not refer to Luke's gospel as Scripture. However, recent scholarship demonstrates that Paul very likely considered some documents that were already circulating during his life as "Scripture-like." Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy*, 290.

we can learn about elders.

There are also lessons to be gleaned here. Paul includes a directing function, preaching, and teaching as duties of elders.[41] The ones who do these things well are worthy of double honor, whether that be respect, remuneration, or both.[42] Further, elders receive protection from false or frivolous accusations by the requirement that only accusations by two or more witnesses get attention. Finally, though it is not clear in the NIV, modern commentators take verse 20 to mean that elders who are guilty of wrongdoing should be censured publicly before the church as a deterrent to their peers.[43]

Paul's letter to Titus also provides instruction about elder qualifications that is similar (but not identical) to his message to Timothy. Titus 1:5 says, "The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you." We cannot know exactly what Titus needed to straighten out on Crete, but at least part of his task was to make sure that each town had elders to lead. Paul spends the next four verses instructing Titus what kind of men to appoint. As with the passage in 1 Timothy, the description is not meant to be comprehensive.[44]

Yarbrough provides insight regarding the qualities Paul suggests elders must have.[45] First, verse six says the elder should be "blameless" which is crucial since Paul repeats it later. First Corinthians 1:18 helps us understand this term; being "in Christ" makes one blameless. Colossians 1:22 also aids in understanding that Paul is saying pastoral candidates should demonstrate healthy signs of the presence of God's grace that

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[41] The Greek does not include "the affairs of the church" after "direct," but the word indicates leading. Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy*, 287. See also Cowen, *Who Rules the Church*, 11.

[42] Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy*, 288.

[43] Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy*, 292.

[44] Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy*, 479.

[45] Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy*, 479-88.

changes them in godly directions.

Paul continues in verse 6 and expresses a part of what is involved in being blameless. He says the elder must be a "man of one woman." The ESV and NASB translate this as "the husband of one wife." This could be taken to mean that the man cannot be polygamous or that he cannot be divorced and remarried. Newer translations such as the 2001 NIV say "faithful to his wife." Yarbrough says the gist of this is that Paul requires the candidate to be related to God in such a way that his relationship to his wife is pure and loving.[46]

Paul ends verse 6 saying elders' children should believe and not be open to charges of being "wild and disobedient." That is to say, they are faithful and not undergoing any formal disciplinary proceedings. Further, "wild" speaks of debauchery and "disobedient" is very serious and does not simply refer to typical youthful disorder. Paul is not expecting parents or children to be perfect.[47]

Verse 7 refers to the leaders as overseers which Yarbrough sees as "a near" synonym for elder in verse 6. Since an overseer manages God's household, he must be blameless. Some things would disqualify a man, and Paul lists a representative sample of those things which is similar to 1 Timothy 3:3. Here Paul includes three qualities he does not express to Timothy. One, the elder should not be overbearing, which Yarbrough concludes means not to be arrogant.[48] Two, he should not be quick-tempered, which is a matter of common sense because one cannot shepherd people if one is mad all the time. Third, the man must not have his heart set on dishonest gain which would belie a lack of contentedness which Paul sees as necessary to pastoral care.

Transitioning to positive requirements, Paul lists six character traits in verse 8

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[46] Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy*, 480-81.

[47] Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy*, 481-82.

[48] Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy*, 483-84.

that Titus should look for in potential overseers which are not listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. The man should love what is good because a pastor should want good to flourish. He should be upright which translates *dikaios*. This often means a righteous status, but the sense here of human, ethical goodness is reasonable too. Next, he should be holy, which overlaps with upright. Finally, the elder has to be disciplined. The sense here is self-controlled, and it may carry a sexual connotation.[49]

This section ends with verse nine where Paul summarizes what a pastor must do. He has to hold fast to the message, that is to true teaching of the faith. This will allow him to encourage the church and refute those who teach falsely.

Acts and the Pastoral Epistles provide a great deal of information about the character qualities of first-century elders as well as teaching that these men were responsible for tasks such as overseeing, teaching, preaching, leading, and caring for needs. Several more New Testament passages are helpful, although they provide a smaller quantity of information. These include the Pauline epistle of Ephesians, the book of James, and Peter's first epistle.[50]

Elders in Ephesians

Other clues exist concerning the early church's elders and their roles in the Pauline epistles. In Ephesians 4:11-13, as Paul is teaching the Ephesian Christians about unity in the church he tells them,

> It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

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[49] Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy*, 487.

[50] Some scholars have studied passages that speak to church leaders without using the terms elder, overseer, or pastor, and applied the teaching to that office. I am not discounting their work, but choose to present only the passages definitively addressed to elders/overseers/pastors. For example, see Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 161-80, 265-73. Also, Philippians 1:1 addresses overseers, but does not expand on their role beyond what we can learn from the passages discussed.

Ralph P. Martin notes that in the Greek, the phrase "pastors and teachers" has one definite article applying to both words.[51] He says this insinuates that there were two functions allocated to the same individuals.[52] Further, he says the primary task of these individuals is found in Acts 20:28 (shepherd the flock).[53] These men were congregational leaders in churches that had been started by the preaching of the apostles and others. As evidenced by Acts 14:23, these men were elders.[54] Thus, Martin is saying that elders had the dual function of pastoring (shepherding) and teaching. The rest of the passage clearly indicates that they were to teach God's people to do good works that would result in the church becoming spiritually mature and unified.

Elders in James

The book of James also mentions elders and although the mention is brief, it aids in understanding the role elders played. In the NIV James 5:13-16 is a single paragraph near the end of the letter and, according to James Adamson, James closes the letter as he started by returning to the idea of suffering.[55] This paragraph focuses on prayer as a response to afflictions. Verse 14 says that a sick person should "call the elders of the church to pray over him." Adamson notes that the term elders refers to a group of leaders and not simply men of advanced age.[56] Further, he notes that this is an early use of the word church; maybe even earlier than that in Acts 5:11.[57] The practice of Jewish

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[51] Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians*, in vol. 11 of *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. Clifton Allen (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), 156.

[52] Martin, *Ephesians*, 156.

[53] Martin, *Ephesians*, 156.

[54] Martin, *Ephesians*, 156.

[55] James Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 196.

[56] Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, 197.

[57] Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, 197.

elders visiting the sick was already established so this is not a new concept.[58] Adamson

explains that these are significant facts because they demonstrate that the organized

church, even in its primitive form, utilized elder leadership including pastoral care as an

expected elder duty.[59]

Elders in 1 Peter

        The apostle Peter reinforces the biblical teaching presented thus far. In 1 Peter

5:1-4, he briefly addresses elders.[60] Peter is writing to Christians who had been scattered

throughout the Roman provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (see

verse 1). Predominantly, his message is for the church, but he does address specific

groups such as wives and husbands in chapter 3. Peter H. Davids explains that 5:1-5 falls

between two paragraphs concerned with suffering because it is important for church

leadership to be able to guide people through such times.[61]

        Verse 1 begins with an address to the elders (*presbyteros*) and Peter calls

himself a fellow elder (*sympresbyteros*). This is not an attempt by Peter to "pull rank" to

use a colloquialism. Rather, it is a way for him to show empathy with the leaders in the

work they are responsible for.[62] In verse 2 he tells them to shepherd (*poimainō*) God's

flock.[63] Davids points out that here as well as Acts 20:28-29 shepherding is connected to

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[58] Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, 197.

[59] Adamson, *The Epistle of James*, 197.

[60] Petrine authorship is disputed. Possibly, Peter authorized Silvanus to write it for him. Davids says that one cannot prove Peter wrote the book or that he did not write the book. This paper will follow church tradition and refer to Peter as the author. Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter,* The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 6-7.

[61] Davids, *First Epistle of Peter*, 174.

[62] Davids, *First Epistle of Peter*, 176.

[63] Reading Peter's admonition to these elders, one cannot help but think of John 21:16 where the risen Lord tells Peter to shepherd (*poimainō)* his sheep. Peter having faithfully done so now passes that task on to others in the growing church.

watching over which demonstrates that one of the elder's jobs is oversight.[64] Then Peter tells elders how they are to serve; voluntarily, not for gain, and by being an example rather than a domineering leader. Finally, the author encourages the elders that their service will result in an eternal reward when Jesus returns.

Summary

This brief survey of New Testament passages has revealed a few general things about elders in the early church. First, the terms elder, overseer, and pastor referred to the same office in the first century. Second, men who served as elders had to bear mature Christian character. Third, in general, the elders' duties focused on teaching, shepherding, and overseeing their congregations. Table 2 offers a concise view of the biblical duties of elders based on the texts discussed.

The New Testament survey portrays first-century churches practicing elder leadership. It also teaches a mix of both general and specific pastoral duties for these men. The modern church contains an even greater diversity of elder duties that is revealed in a variety of church polities.

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[64] Davids. *First Epistle of Peter*, 178.

Table 2. Specific duties of elders found in the New Testament

Duty	Scripture	Distinctive idea
Received money	Acts 11:30	Handled money on behalf of the church
Received delegation from Antioch church and heard testimony from Paul and Barnabbas	Acts 15:4	
Met with apostles to consider the matter of Gentile circumcision	Acts 15:6	Involved in adjudicating decisions
Helped choose men to send back to Antioch	Acts 15:22	
Must have helped write the letter to Antioch	Acts 15:23-29	
Keep watch over yourselves	Acts 20:28	
Keep watch over the flock	Acts 20:28	
Be shepherds of the church	Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2	
Be on guard (against false teachers)	Acts 20:31	
Prepare God's people for works of service	Ephesians 4:11-12	
Be able to teach	1 Timothy 3:2	
Laid hands on Timothy	1 Timothy 4:14	Elders led in spiritual ceremonies
Direct the affairs of the church	1 Timothy 5:17	Lead, care for, manage
Preach	1 Timothy 5:17	
Teach	1 Timothy 5:17	
Implied that elders will lead benevolence ministry	1 Timothy 5:1-20	
Manage God's household	Titus 1:7	Steward
Encourage with sound doctrine	Titus 1:9	
Refute unsound doctrine	Titus 1:9	
Pray for the sick in person	James 5:14	
Be an example to the flock	1 Peter 5:4	

Matters of Polity

As mentioned in chapter 1, the concept of who leads a church is a matter of

polity. Daniel Evans and Joseph Godwin Jr. briefly summarize the development of

church governance across church history. They conclude that originally churches were governed through elder authority and usually there were multiple elders per church. Over time, church rule developed into an episcopal hierarchy that included bishops who oversaw other bishops. The Reformation brought the idea of local church autonomy back into focus. As a result, leadership in local churches once again became the job of a plurality of elders. Within the last one hundred years, the church has largely moved to a system of leadership by a single elder (senior pastor). Evans and Godwin point out that this modern church structure resembles corporate or civil governance, not scriptural governance.[65]

Daniel L. Akin explains that in reality the Bible does not give a precise manual on how churches must be ordered, yet it does demonstrate patterns and principles that guided the early churches.[66] Practically speaking, there are five general types of church government: Episcopal; Presbyterian; Congregational; Erastian; and minimalist. He continues that each of these has some basis in biblical teaching.[67] One may question why polity matters if the Scriptures do not command a specific paradigm. Benjamin L. Merkle offers valuable insight. First, patterning our churches after the picture of the church portrayed in the New Testament reveals confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture. Second, the model of church government directly affects who is qualified to lead the church, what the leaders do, and to whom leaders are answerable.[68]

Given the historical changes, reviewing several models of polity provides perspective of the concept. This section explores scholarship related to polity. Attention

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[65] Daniel Evans and Joseph Godwin Jr., *Elder Governance: Insights into Making the Transition* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2011), 29.

[66] Akin, "The Single-Elder-Led Church," 31-32.

[67] Akin, "The Single-Elder-Led Church," 29-30.

[68] Benjamin L. Merkle, *Why Elders? A Biblical and Practical Guide for Church Members* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2009), 9-10.

to Erastian, minimalist, and episcopal models will be brief. Presbyterian polity warrants a more detailed look because it relies heavily on a form of plural elder leadership.[69] Congregational polity will receive the most attention.

The research team chose to examine the role of unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches. The team chose the SBC due to specific interest in congregational churches led by a plurality of elders. Therefore, the brief survey that follows emphasizes literature that argues in favor of this model. However, this is clearly a secondary issue. Christians who choose to adhere to the other systems of church government are still brothers and sisters in Christ. Churches with different polities can still cooperate together for the sake of advancing the gospel. The author does not mean to disparage fellow Christians who adhere to other forms of polity.

Erastian

According to Slayden A. Yarbrough, an Erastian system, "describes a union of church and state in which the state is the dominant partner." [70] In this system, the state has establishes and enforces laws over the church.[71] The Lutheran state church of Germany follows this model as does the Church of England where it is combined with episcopy.[72] However, from their inception, Baptists have believed in religious liberty for theological and practical reasons; and continue to hold to this philosophy.[73]

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[69] The review will demonstrate the fault of the Presbyterian view of elder roles in that section.

[70] Slayden A. Yarbrough, "Church and State in Baptist History," *Baptist History and Heritage* 33, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 5. http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.sbts.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0000991450.

[71] Yarbrough, "Church and State," 5.

[72] Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Tommy Nelson, 1998), 907.

[73] Yarbrough, "Church and State," 7-10.

Minimalist

Millard J. Erickson explains the minimalist view of church polity. This model is also known as a nongovernmental style of church. Adherents of this concept include Quakers and the Plymouth Brethren. Essentially, these groups do not believe the church needs a governmental structure because the Holy Spirit individually guides each believer. Erickson points out that not only does this view disregard the biblical picture of the church; it also falsely assumes that every Christian will submit to the leading of the Spirit.[74]

Episcopal

According to Paul F. M. Zahl, "There is no one governing New Testament ecclesiology."[75] In fact, Zahl claims that he could make a biblical case for almost every manner of church polity. None the less, Zahl defines, explains, and defends the episcopalian model. He defines episcopy as, "the institution by which bishops (or *episkopois*) govern the visible church."[76] Adherents to the episcopal system believe that there are three levels for ordination, or setting apart, for leadership of the church. The first level is deacons (*diakonos*) who essentially help the elders and bishops. The second is elders (*presbyteros*) who oversee individual congregations, preach, pray, and administer the sacraments. The third is bishop (*episkipos*) who ordain elders and deacons as well as enact the rite of confirmation.[77] Interestingly, Zahl's defense of the episcopal system is based on history and pragmatism rather than Scripture.

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[74] Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 1002.

[75] Paul F. M. Zahl, "The Bishop-Led Church: The Episcopal or Anglican Polity Affirmed, Weighed, and Defended," in Brand and Norman, *Perspectives on Church Government*, 168.

[76] Zahl, "The Bishop-Led Church," 178.

[77] Zahl, "The Bishop-Led Church," 179-80.

Presbyterian

Nathan A. Finn gives a foundational description of Presbyterian church government. He explains that a Presbyterian polity is "that view of church government that places the final earthly ecclesiastical authority in the hands of groups of elders. The name 'Presbyterian' is taken from the Greek word *presbyteros*."[78] Presbyterian denominations adhere to this type of church governance and recognize a church's elders as the final authority; although, they do believe that authority is delegated to the elders from the congregations that select them.[79]

Robert L. Reymond provides an explanation and detailed biblical defense of Presbyterian Church Government. Reymond defines it quite simply as "governance by elders/overseers."[80] He explains that congregations select elders, but it is the Holy Spirit who is putting them in leadership so that they are functioning on the authority of Jesus. Therefore, the elder councils "rule and oversee" the congregations according to the dictums of God's word.[81] Further, Reymond relates that Presbyterians believe the New Testament outlines what they call "ecclesiastical connectionalism," which is government through a series of "graded courts."[82] As practiced by modern Presbyterians, the graded courts are the local session found in each church, regional presbyteries, and an overarching general assembly.[83]

Scripture demonstrates the idea of elder leadership in a local church.[84]

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[78] Nathan A. Finn, "The Rule of Elders: The Presbyterian Angle on Church Leadership," in *Shepherding God's Flock: Biblical Leadership in the New Testament and Beyond*, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle and Thomas R. Schreiner (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2014), 197-98.

[79] Finn, "The Rule of Elders," 207.

[80] Robert L. Reymond, "The Presbytery-Led Church: Presbyterian Church Government," in Brand and Norman, *Perspectives on Church Government*, 82.

[81] Reymond, "The Presbytery-Led Church," 83.

[82] Reymond, "The Presbytery-Led Church," 83.

[83] Reymond, "The Presbytery-Led Church," 83.

[84] For examples, see the section above on New Testament teaching about elders.

However, the idea of a hierarchical system of rule over multiple churches is not the way Baptists understand elder leadership. Reymond, however, uses three arguments to defend this system. First, he claims the description in Acts 13:1-3 of the many leaders worshipping and praying together in Antioch indicates the formation of a presbytery. Further, he says the description of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 is a picture of many different elders who served in churches throughout the city who have come together as a presbytery to deal with the matter of whether a Gentile who converted to Christianity had to be circumcised.[85]

Second, Reymond cites Jesus' prayer for visible Christian unity in John 17:20-21 as support for connectionalism. He claims that the idea of the autonomy of each local church, as practiced by many congregationalists, actually opposes the unity that Jesus desires for his church. He further mentions John 10:10-13; Romans 15:5-6; Galatians 3:28; 1 Corinthians 1:10-13; 12:12-13; Ephesians 2:14-16; 4:3-6; Philippians 2:2; and Colossians 3:12-14 as Scriptural examples of the importance of visible Christian unity.[86]

Third, Reymond explains that in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12, when Paul writes of spiritual gifts, he is adamant that they are used to promote interdependency and unity among the members of the church. Presbyterians believe this concept must also be applied to church government. "Hence, Presbyterians believe that only a visible form of connectionalism between local church bodies through graded courts such as their own does justice to the unity of the body of Christ and reflects the appropriate awareness of Christians' mutual need for and dependence upon each other."[87]

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[85] Reymond, "The Presbytery-Led Church," 83-4.

[86] Reymond, "The Presbytery-Led Church," 93.

[87] Reymond, "The Presbytery-Led Church," 95. For more insight into the Presbyterian understanding of church government, see John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2013), 1024-28. David W. Hall and Joseph H. Hall, eds., *Paradigms in Polity: Classic Readings in Reformed and Presbyterian Church Government* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 900-904. George W. Knight III, "Two Offices (Elders/Bishops and Deacons) and Two Orders of Elders (Preaching/Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders): A

Congregational

The final form of polity to examine is congregational.[88] As mentioned above, congregational governance considers the final earthly authority for a church to be the local congregation itself.[89] One form of congregationalism, to which some Baptist churches have shown interest in returning, includes leadership of the church by a group of elders (presbyters). [90] The section immediately above presented Presbyterianism as leadership by a group of elders who receive authority from the congregation, so a word of clarification is in order. Presbyterians believe the final earthly authority over a church rests with the elders, even though the church selects them. Southern Baptists (and other adherents to congregational polity) place final earthly authority with the local assembly meaning a congregational church could theoretically override decisions made by its elders.[91]

Congregational church government has played an important role in the history of the church since the reformation. In 1562 French Protestant Jean Morély published a major work in support of congregational government for the sake of returning the church to the model and the morality of the early church.[93] By the 1580s English Separatists were espousing a form of church polity wherein churches covenanted together to live

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New Testament Study," *Presbyterion* 11, no. 1 (April 1, 1985): 1–12.

[88] See the following for more complete study of congregational polity: Alan P. F. Sell, *Saints: Visible, Orderly, and Catholic: The Congregational Idea of the Church*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 7 (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986). Greg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 249-320. John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2019), 145-172. P. H. Mell, *Church Government* (Atlanta: Jas. P. Harrison and Company, 1878), 39-42.

[89] Page 10.

[90] Dever, "Elders and Deacons," 238.

[91] The section on elder roles below will offer more explanation in regard to some of the differences between Presbyterian government and Congregationalist government, especially in relation to the use of elders.

[93] Michael A. G. Haykin, "Some Historical Roots of Congregationalism," in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 29.

under Christ's rule but elected their own pastors and elders.[94] The Puritans and Separatists brought congregationalism to North America in the early 1600s.[95] Some variety of congregational polity is currently practiced in Baptist, Congregational, independent, and some types of Lutheran churches.[96]

Nowhere does the Bible command churches to function as a democracy. However, several evangelical authors have defended congregational polity for a variety of reasons. For example, James Leo Garrett, Jr. presents an apology for congregational church government without delving into issues of elders or deacons. His main ideas will serve to explain the biblical case for congregational polity. Garrett explores six New Testament passages that he believes have a direct relationship to church governance: Matthew 18:15-20; Acts 6:3; 13:2-3; 15:22; 1 Corinthians 5:2; 2 Corinthians 2:6.[97]

The passage from Matthew is about church discipline and portrays the church as the final authority in that process. In Act 6:3 the whole congregation is involved in choosing men to help take care of widows. Acts 13:2-3 portrays the congregation as corporately involved in hearing God set apart Paul and Barnabas for a specific mission. Acts 15:22 records the end of the Jerusalem council where the church chooses the men who will take a letter to the church at Antioch. First Corinthians 5:2 is another passage involving church discipline in which Paul shames the congregation for not taking action. Second Corinthians 2:6 also relates to church discipline and may portray the church deciding by majority rule. Garrett argues that these passages reveal that the early church utilized a congregational system to make decisions.[98]

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[94] Haykin, "Some Historical Roots," 33.

[95] Haykin, "Some Historical Roots," 34.

[96] John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2013), 1027. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 999.

[97] James Leo Garrett Jr., "The Congregationally-Led Church: Congregational Polity," in Brand and Norman, *Perspectives on Church Government*, 125-33.

[98] Garrett, "The Congregationally-Led Church," 131-38.

While Garrett makes a case strictly for congregational polity, Cowen defends single pastor leadership and congregational government in the local church. Cowen's argument is similar to Garrett's but he offers a few more biblical texts as evidence. He defines congregational government quite simply by saying, "The congregational form of government means that ultimate authority for governing the church resides in the members jointly. This authority comes from Christ who is the head of the body, and the entire body administers the church according to the patterns given in Scripture."[99] He adds that this does not mean the church has to vote on all decisions; rather, the congregation may delegate some things to groups or individuals.[100]

Cowen does not contend that the Bible mandates or even spells out a congregational form of authority. Instead, he provides the following six biblical principles that support it.[101] One, church discipline is a matter for the entire congregation as seen in Matthew 18:15-17, 1 Corinthians 5:4-5, 2 Corinthians 2:6, and 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15. Second, the election of officers recorded in Acts 1 and Acts 6:3 involved the entire congregation.[102] Third, the election of representatives and approving of missionaries seen in 1 Corinthians 16:4, Acts 14:27, and Acts 18:22-23 were choices made by the whole church. Fourth, Cowen argues that God gave all members of the body at least one spiritual gift (see 1 Cor 12:13), which implies that all members must have a responsibility in the ministry of the church.[103] Fifth, the Bible records saints judging personal and doctrinal disputes in 1 Corinthians 6:2-3, Acts 15, and Acts 21:22. Cowen

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[99] Cowen, *Who Rules the Church*, 85.

[100] Cowen, *Who Rules the Church*, 85.

[101] Cowen, *Who Rules the Church*, 86-91.

[102] One might take issue with the citation of Acts 1 as a principle for making decisions in a church since the ultimate choice was made by casting lots. However, the collective group did choose the candidates, plus this was prior to Pentecost, so the Holy Spirit did not yet indwell each believer.

[103] One might also take issue with this point because being involved with the ministry of the church is not the same as leading the church.

thinks this also indicates the whole church should be involved with governing. Sixth, Scripture teaches the priesthood of all believers in passages such as 1 Peter 2:5-9, 1 Timothy 2:5, 1 Corinthians 12:13, and John 11:13. The thinking is that because all believers have direct access to God, they should all participate in the government of the church.[104]

Using reasoning similar to that of Cowen and Garrett, Phil A. Newton and Matt Schmucker defend congregational government but with plural elder leadership. The first evidence they provide to defend congregational polity is that the Bible teaches that the church is the final authority in matters of discipline (Matt 18:15-20, 1 Cor 5). Second, several passages in Acts describe the church making decisions or being involved in decisions (Acts 6:1-6; 11:1-18, 22; 13:1-3; 15:6, 22). Newton and Schmucker conclude, "that the New Testament church was not a passive entity, watching apostles and elders from the sidelines. Members exercised authority through involvement in decision-making that affected the future of the church.[105]

Using arguments perhaps a bit more abstract than the authors above, Stephen J. Wellum and Kirk Wellum defend a system where Christ is Lord, elders have authority, and the final say of matters related to a local church belongs to the congregation itself.[106] They claim that the objective for any church should be faithfulness to the Bible concerning forms of leadership and church structure.[107] The Wellums argue that due to the church's nature as the new covenant people, there should be a new model for

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[104] Cowen, *Who Rules the Church*, 91.

[105] Phil A. Newton and Matt Schmucker, *Elders in the Life of the Church: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Ministry, 2014), 202.

[106] Stephen J. Wellum and Kirk Wellum, "The Biblical and Theological Case for Congregationalism," in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 49.

[107] Wellum and Wellum, "The Biblical and Theological Case," 47.

leadership and congregationalism is the model that fits best.[108]

Wellum and Wellum explain the church's nature and then provide five reasons, each supported by Scripture, which they believe explain why individual congregations are best suited to rule themselves. One, under the New Covenant, Christ is the head. Two, each church must govern itself, there is no central authority. Three, since all members of the church are regenerate and possess the Holy Spirit, the congregation must have the final say in its business. Fourth, an elder's authority is dependent upon his obedience to the word of God and his ability through this example to persuade the people. Fifth, Jesus, the church members, and the elders are three spheres among which church authority divides.[109]

Among evangelical churches in North America, congregationalism is common, but as noted above there are different ideas about the number of leaders who preside over the congregation. Proponents of single elder and plural elder models both use the Bible and pragmatic concerns to support their point of view. Examining several works from each viewpoint will illustrate the basic differences in the two.

Single elder. Akin asserts that the New Testament church essentially practiced congregational government. He considers elder and overseer as essentially synonymous and is adamant that elder and deacon were the only two offices in the early church. Further, while he allows that plural elders or single elders would both be acceptable scripturally; he defends the single elder model as preferable.[110] To defend the single elder model, he appeals to three things: the fact that Scripture does not specify a number of elders, the notion of pastor-teacher from Ephesians 4:11 as a singular leader, and the idea

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[108] Wellum and Wellum, "The Biblical and Theological Case," 49.

[109] Wellum and Wellum, "The Biblical and Theological Case," 47-78.

[110] Akin, "The Single Elder-led Church," 30.

that many leadership groups in Scripture had a man who was the primary leader.[111] Akin ends his argument with the idea that sometimes there may only be one man who is qualified or gifted to be an elder. In such cases, it must be acceptable.[112]

Gerald P. Cowen also defends a single elder system. He affirms that elders led the New Testament churches and that elder, overseer, and pastor refer to the same office. Although, he asserts that the term *pastor* was likely not meant as a title in Scripture but to describe what an elder does.[113] He espouses a three pronged argument in favor of single pastor leadership. One, there is no indication in the New Testament that overseers had authority over any churches but the one they led. Further, the church in Jerusalem had many house churches and many elders, but one cannot prove that each house church had more than one elder. Finally, Cowan believes that regardless of the number of elders in each city or each house church, one godly man always seems to have claimed the role of pastor. He supports this claim using the example of James in Acts 15, and the fact that the letters of Revelation 2-3 are written to the "angel" of each church, hinting at one pastor per church.[114]

Aubry Malphurs believes that in the first century, large cities such as Jerusalem, Rome, Ephesus, Laodicea, and likely Thessalonica met together as city-wide churches. However, he also believes that Christians in these cities met in house churches and that the elders were the pastors of these small house churches. His opinion is that each house church may have had zero, one, or several elders. He takes 1 Timothy 3:1-10

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[111] Akin, "The Single Elder-led Church,"57-59. Akin's examples of a leader over leaders are Moses, Peter, and James. Moses does not seem to be directly applicable since he was an Old Testament leader. Peter does not seem to be directly applicable since he was an apostle and the church has to function in a post-apostolic era. As other authors reviewed in the text have shown, James was not the solo, "buck stops here" leader that some have concluded from reading Acts 15.

[112] Akin, "The Single Elder-led Church,"59-60.

[113] Gerald P. Cowen, *Who Rules the Church? Examining Congregational Leadership and Church Government* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2003), 12-13.

[114] Cowen, *Who Rules the Church*, 14-16.

to indicate that the house churches in Ephesus likely each had one elder assisted by several deacons.[115]

Akin, Cowen, and Malphurs represent the scholarly arguments for single elder leadership. Several of the arguments are based on what the Bible does not say, rather than what it says. The scholarly arguments representative of those in favor of plural elder leadership provide further rebuttals to the single elder theorists.

Plural elder. Newton and Schmucker are proponents of plural elder leadership within the structure of healthy congregationalism.[116] They present scriptural and pragmatic lines of evidence for plural eldership. They point out (as do others) that the New Testament always uses the words elder, overseer, and pastor in the plural unless a particular man is being addressed.[117] They follow Murray by claiming that when the Bible says the churches at Philippi and Ephesus have multiple elders, this cannot refer to individual pastors at several churches within the cities. This is because each church is referred to in the singular, while elders are referred to in the plural.[118] Further, in Acts 20:17 Paul summons the "elders of the church" in Ephesus to meet him in Miletus. To argue that this refers to multiple men who each led a single house church is not justifiable by the text.[119]

On a practical level, they note that the needs of a congregation are so diverse that there needs to be a plurality of elders to meet those needs.[120] Plural elders meet the

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[115] Aubry Malphurs, *Leading Leaders: Empowering Church Boards for Ministry Excellence* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 34.

[116] Newton and Schmucker, *Elders in the Life*, 117.

[117] Newton and Schmucker, *Elders in the Life*, 50.

[118] Newton and Schmucker, *Elders in the Life*, 50. Here, the authors cite personal correspondence with scholar Bill Murray.

[119] Newton and Schmucker, *Elders in the Life*, 94.

[120] Newton and Schmucker, *Elders in the Life*, 99.

needs of the congregation, but they also meet one another's needs. Having a plurality of elders allows each man to use his gifts without being stretched beyond what he can bear.[121]

Some authors, such as Akin and Malphurs, are a bit ambivalent in that they defend single or plural eldership yet confess that the Bible allows either. Strauch is more forceful. Even though Strauch supports ultimate congregational authority, he contends "that church government by a plurality of elders can be honestly and reasonably demonstrated to be the teaching of the New Testament."[122] He begins his defense by commenting that the New Testament provides more teaching on elders than it does on the Lord's Supper, baptism, or even spiritual gifts. Then he cites a variety of New Testament passages which demonstrate that first-century churches "from Jerusalem to Rome" were led by a plurality of elders.[123] The next segment of his argument states that plural eldership is the church structure that fits best with the nature of the church as a community. Strauch's final point is that Titus 1:5 is an apostolic directive for elder leadership. Strauch believes that this directive is universally binding just like the instructions on elder qualifications.[124]

As Strauch defends plural elder leadership, he addresses three of the arguments for single elder leadership. In response to the claim that Timothy, Epaphras, and James represent local pastoral oversight by a solitary person he counters that Timothy and Epaphras were not so much local pastors as they were apostolic designees helping young churches. Further, he proclaims that James was an apostle who was a prominent leader

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[121] Newton and Schmucker, *Elders in the Life*, 53-4.

[122] Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 1995, 102. Also, on page 292 Strauch asserts that the elders are ultimately answerable to the congregation.

[123] Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 1995, 104.

[124] Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 1995, 102-16.

among other leaders in Jerusalem; not the lone leader of the Jerusalem church.[125]

The second case for singular elder leadership Strauch contradicts is the claim that in Revelation 1 John sees seven stars among seven lampstands. Proponents of a single elder structure claim that these stars represent the pastors of the seven churches. Strauch claims that verse 20 clearly identifies the stars as angels, not people. Therefore, there is no proof that the seven churches were led by individuals.[126]

Finally, Strauch refutes the claim that since Moses was the singular leader of God's people throughout the exodus and wilderness wandering, singular pastoral leadership is acceptable. His view is that pastoral leadership today is not analogous to Moses' position. He avers that "if anyone today is Moses, it is the Lord Jesus Christ."[127]

Merkle also adheres to the idea that Scripture mandates a plurality of elders in each church. He sees shared leadership as the biblical norm as evidenced by Old Testament elders, Jesus' choosing twelve apostles to lead the early church, and the selection of six men to help the apostles in Acts 6:1-6. Merkle goes on to cite several New Testament passages that refer to elders, overseers, or spiritual leaders in general in the plural form.[128] He provides a forceful summary of his case:

> The New Testament evidence indicates that every church had a plurality of elders. There is no example in the New Testament of one elder or pastor leading a congregation as the sole or primary leader. A plurality of elders were at the churches in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30); Antioch of Pisidia, Lystra, Iconium, and Derbe (Acts

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[125] Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 1995, 105. Strauch uses Acts 19:22, 1 Thess 3:2, 2 Tim 4:5, Phil 2:19, Col 1:7-8, Phlm 23, Gal 2:9, among other passages to argue his point.

[126] Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 1995. Interestingly, Strauch ignores Rev 2:1, 8, 12, 18 and Rev 3:1, 7, 14. In these verses Jesus tells John to write a letter to the angel (singular) at each church. Why would Jesus expect John to write a letter to a literal angel? It makes more sense for angel to be a symbol for the pastor of each church. For a synopsis of works contending that these passages demonstrate church leadership by a single pastor, see Robert A. Wring, "An Examination of the Practice of Elder Rule in Selected Southern Baptist Churches in the Light of New Testament Teaching" (PhD diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 2002), 218-23.

[127] Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 1995, 106.

[128] Benjamin L. Merkle, "The Biblical Role of Elders," in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 284-85.

14:23); Ephesus (Acts 20:17; 1 Tim 5:17); Philippi (Phil 1:1); the cities of Crete (Titus 1:5); the dispersion of which James wrote (Jas 1:1); the Roman provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Pet 1:1); and possibly at the church(es) to which Hebrews was written (Heb 13:7, 17, 24).[129]

Stephen J. Wellum and Kirk Wellum write to defend congregational church government as the biblical model. More specifically, they see the model as a plurality of elders, who are assisted by deacons, in leading a congregation who rules itself. They are very clear that Scripture teaches elder leadership within congregational rule and not elder rule without congregational input. To support this view they cite Acts 14:23, Acts 20:17, 1 Timothy 4:14, Titus 1:5, James 5:14, and 1 Peter 5:5.[130]

While this study focuses on congregationally governed churches, all churches, regardless of their governmental model, will function with one pastor or a plurality of pastors. Therefore, it is worth briefly noting that some authors defend the plurality question without regard to the governing structure. For example, based on evidence from both Paul's and Polycarp's letters to the church at Philippi, David M. Selby argues that ancient churches were led by a plurality of elders and deacons.[131] Paul addresses "overseers and deacons" in his letter, while Polycarp speaks to elders and deacons. Selby contends from textual and historical evidence that it is quite likely that from the time of Paul to the late second century when Polycarp wrote that a plurality of overseers and deacons led the Philippian church, but at some point during that time elder became the preferred title for that office.[132]

The Bible describes both general and specific duties for elders in local

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[129] Merkle, "The Biblical Role of Elders," 285.

[130] Wellum and Wellum, "The Biblical and Theological Case," 48.

[131] Andrew M. Selby, "Bishops, Elders, and Deacons in the Philippian Church: Evidence of Plurality from Paul and Polycarp," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 81. http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.sbts.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001898703.

[132] Selby, "Bishops, Elders, and Deacons," 93. For further study on elder plurality see: James R. White, "The Plural-Elder-Led Church Sufficient as Established—The Plurality of Elders as Christ's Ordained Means of Church Governance," in Brand and Norman, *Perspectives on Church Government*, 199-220.

churches. Also, a church's polity influences the role of its leaders. Further, a variety of modern scholars have continued to write about the tasks of church leadership. Some of these works are in response to the resurgence of interest in plural elder leadership among evangelical churches. Examining some of them will help develop the current view of elder functions.

Elder Roles

The biblical texts examined in the first section of this chapter revealed several duties for those in the office of elder. Protestant scholars largely agree that teaching and overseeing are paramount. Because these are broad ideas the study needs to examine what tasks teaching and overseeing might encompass. Since the Presbyterian model incorporates plural elder leadership the review will briefly include it to clarify how it differs from that of other denominations.

Presbyterian view

Finn relates that churches operating with a Presbyterian model have much in common with those that are congregational. Commonalities include the headship of Christ, rejection of episcopal authority over groups of churches, the priesthood of all believers, and the conviction that deacons and elders are the two offices in a local church. Where they differ is over the function of elders. Presbyterians believe there are two types of elders. The first type is teaching elders. These are vocational ministers whose role is to teach and preach. The second is ruling elders who are laymen. Their role is to govern. The distinction is based on what gifts the individuals possess.[133]

Presbyterian churches base their model on two main Scriptural passages, Ephesians 4:11-13 and 1 Timothy 5:17. The passage from 1 Timothy is especially important. It says, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor,

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[133] Nathan A. Finn, "The Rule of Elders," 199-200.

especially those who labor in preaching and teaching." Many Presbyterians take this verse to mean that elders rule and a subset of them also preaches and teaches.[134] Therefore, they typically have a pastor who does the preaching and other elders whose job is to rule the congregation.[135]

According to David Dickson, it is not possible to define the roles of Presbyterian elders in extremely specific ways because each elder and each church differs from all others. However, he does define some general duties that are expected of these men. He includes the following tasks. Along with the teaching elder, they perform discipline and govern the congregation spiritually. Also, they oversee the morality and religious practices of the congregants. Furthermore, they may do some pastoral care such as visiting the sick. They also oversee Christian education for the young people in the church. Finally, they lead members of the church to meet with others for prayer, Bible study, and fellowship.[136]

Reymond includes a list of duties for Presbyterian elders to practice based on Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2-3. First, elders must keep church members from going astray which means they need to be able to teach God's word. Second, they must pursue members who are going astray, which implies corrective teaching but also church discipline. Third, they have to protect the flock from "wolves," which implies careful screening of potential members along with training members to discern error. Fourth, elders must provide pastoral care.[137]

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[134] Rodney J. Decker provides an able defense of the more typical evangelical view of this verse. He teaches the concept of ruling elders and teaching elders did not come along until Calvin. Further, a better translation of the Greek should read "well-ruling elders," not the "good, ruling-elders." Therefore, "1 Tim 5:17 refers to elders who are ruling well-not to a class of "ruling elders." He concludes that the text simply demonstrates that one office of presbyter involved two kinds of labor, and that certain overseers were more successful in one kind than in the other. Rodney J. Decker, "Polity and the Elder Issue," *Grace Theological Journal* 9, no. 2 (January 1988): 275-77. https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/gtj/09-2_257.pdf.

[135] Nathan A. Finn, "The Rule of Elders," 201-3.

[136] David Dickson, *The Elder and His Work*, ed. George Kennedy McFarland and Philip Graham Ryken (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2004), 38-9.

[137] Robert L. Reymond, "The Presbytery-Led Church," 106.

Much of the Presbyterian view of what elders should do is biblical and could be practiced by most evangelicals. Yet, evangelicals disagree with the notion that there are two classes of elders based on functions (teaching and ruling). The balance of this section notes what some key evangelical leaders have written about elder roles for contemporary churches.

Other Protestant Views

Mark Dever, a Southern Baptist, has written about the idea of elders in several of his books. With Paul Alexander, he writes that elders cooperatively determine the church's spiritual direction, which the ministerial staff then executes.[138] The authors reveal more of what they believe elders should do as they discuss the agenda for elders' meetings. Without a doubt, they believe elders' tasks include member care which encompasses vetting incoming members, exercising church discipline, and providing pastoral care. A further task is administration, including handling major building issues and budget issues. Also, the elders administrate ministry and missions, which means envisioning and planning mission trips, making decisions about missionary support, considering ideas about new ministries, handling benevolence requests, determining staff changes, making constitutional revisions, setting agendas for member's meetings, developing evangelism strategies, and making deacons nominations. Finally, the authors emphasize the importance of elders carrying out thorough communication with deacons.[139]

Benjamin L. Merkle, also a Southern Baptist, has likewise written in multiple venues about elders. He lists the four broad jobs of an elder as leading, shepherding,

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[138] Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church: Building Your Ministry on the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 168.

[139] Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church*, 180-5.

teaching, and equipping.[140] He goes on to explain some specific duties within each of these four roles one may glean from Scripture.

Merkle notes that under the broad role of "leading," the elders lead the entire church (1 Tim 3:4-5 and 1 Tim 5:17). However, they must not lead forcibly, but humbly and by example (1 Pet 5:3). The elders must be servants to the congregation and perform their duties for God's glory (Mark 10:42-44 and 1 Cor 10:31).[141]

Shepherding, Merkle asserts, means the elders lead by caring for and protecting the congregation. To care for the congregation means to meet their spiritual and physical needs. Merkle points out that 1 Timothy 3:4-5 instructs elders to "care for" the church. The word in Greek for "care for" is only found in the New Testament here and in the story of the Good Samaritan to describe how the Samaritan aided the wounded man. This is the kind of care elders should bestow on their congregants. Protecting the church refers to guarding the church against those who would inflict spiritual harm (Acts 20:28-29).[142] Finally, Merkle adds that one predominant way elders shepherd the church is through prayer (Acts 6:4, Eph 6:12, 18).[143]

The teaching role is preeminent for elders. As teachers, they must be able to build up Christians through sound teaching but also to rebuke those who teach contrary to the truth of God's word (1 Tim 3:2, 1 Tim 5:17, Titus 1:9). Merkle explains that accurate biblical teaching is crucial because the church will cease to exist without it.[144]

Finally, Merkle expands on the job of elders as equippers. This idea of equipping is that elders must prepare new generations of elders to continue the ministry

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[140] Merkle, *Why Elders?,* 44.

[141] Merkle, *Why Elders?*, 44-45.

[142] Merkle, *Why Elders?*, 47.

[143] Merkle, *Why Elders?*, 48.

[144] Merkle, *Why Elders?*, 49-50.

in their churches or to go start new churches. Merkle supports this notion with 2 Timothy 2:2. Here, Paul charges Timothy to pass the gospel on to "faithful men," which Merkle takes to be elders. But the "faithful men" are supposed to themselves pass the gospel on. Merkle views this equipping role as the most neglected in the modern church and therefore one which needs to be expanded.[145]

Newton and Schmucker, also Southern Baptists, offer a very succinct list of the duties of elders. Utilizing 1 Timothy 5:17 and 1 Timothy 3:1-7 they cite "ruling" and "preaching and teaching" as the duties of elders.[146] They explain that ruling a church is not making demands on people or giving orders but caring for them as a father cares for his family. The overseers must make decisions based on what is best for the church. Further, this governing must be done under a congregational model.[147]

Newton and Schmucker feel that teaching and preaching are the most notable jobs of elders.[148] The main way that elders lead the church is by consistently providing the congregation with accurate scriptural teaching. This was true in the first century and it is true today if the church is going to be what God intends.[149]

Strauch, writing from a non-denominational point of view, emphasizes the fact that elders must be pastoral. They do not rule from a distance like a corporate board of executives. Rather, they are "hands-on" with the congregation. He writes "In biblical terminology, elders shepherd, oversee, lead, and care for the local church."[150] He then expands on the idea of elders as shepherds to explain what elders actually do.

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[145] Merkle, *Why Elders?*, 51.

[146] Newton and Schmucker, *Elders in the Life*, 116.

[147] Newton and Schmucker, *Elders in the Life*, 117.

[148] Ronnie G. Armstrong Sr. also believes teaching is the preeminent job for elders, even more important than overseeing and pastoral care. Ronnie G. Armstrong Sr., "The Primary Functions of the New Testament Elders," MST thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1995.

[149] Newton and Schmucker, *Elders in the Life*, 117-18.

[150] Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 1995, 16.

As shepherds, elders protect the flock, which means they shield them from false doctrine. Plus, they feed the flock, i.e., they accurately teach the people God's word. Further, they lead the flock which Strauch parses out as leading, directing, managing, and caring for God's people. Finally, the shepherd elders must take care of practical needs. This includes visiting the infirmed, comforting the grieving, praying for the congregation, visiting new members, and giving counsel.[151]

J. R. Briggs and Bob Hyatt also approach the subject from a non-denominational perspective. They believe elders have five primary functions. The first is oversight which they divide into spiritual oversight and organizational oversight.[152] Second, they note elders must shepherd which they portray as loving people through personal involvement and relationship building.[153] Briggs and Hyatt's next main duty for elders is that of a teacher. They write that elders must be able to formally present information and they must teach through the example of their lives.[154] Their fourth elder responsibility is to be an equipper. In their view, elders must equip members to fulfill ministry related tasks and then let those members do them.[155] Finally, Briggs and Hyatt insist that elders must be examples to the rest of the church, that is, they must faithfully live as Christians before others.[156]

Paul Winslow and Dorman Followwill discuss the job of elders from their perspective as elders serving in a Bible church.[157] Their fundamental assertion is that

[151] Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 1995, 16-29.

[152] J. R. Briggs and Bob Hyatt, *Eldership and the Mission of God: Equipping Teams for Faithful Church Leadership* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2015), 42.

[153] Briggs and Hyatt, *Eldership and the Mission of God*, 43-45.

[154] Briggs and Hyatt, *Eldership and the Mission of God*, 45-46.

[155] Briggs and Hyatt, *Eldership and the Mission of God*, 46-47.

[156] Briggs and Hyatt, *Eldership and the Mission of God*, 48-49.

[157] Paul Winslow and Dorman Followwill, *Christ in Church Leadership: A Handbook for Elders and Pastors* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 2001), 10.

elders should be servant leaders who are not seeking authority, status, or titles.[158] Similar to many other authors they assert that the terms elder, overseer, and pastor refer to the same men. They write that the word *elder* speaks to the spiritual maturity of the man, *overseer* speaks to his task, and *shepherd* (pastor) narrows down his functions which they list as "to heed, lead, and feed the local flock."[159] According to their interpretation of the relevant Scriptures, heeding, leading, and feeding fleshes out as overseeing and leading in their local congregation, preaching and teaching there, exhorting the body in proper doctrine while correcting those who oppose it, aiding the spiritually weak, and shepherding the members.[160]

Beckwith communicates an Anglican position. As mentioned earlier, even though he adheres to a modern Episcopal system of church government, he admits that in the first century, elders and overseers referred to the same office.[161] This allows him to utilize the biblical texts to determine the role of bishops and elders today (although he refers to elders as priests).[162] He states that the fundamental job of bishops and elders is teaching which, in his view, includes evangelism and pastoral care.[163]

Contemporary authors have set forth a variety of arguments in favor of plural elder leadership in congregational churches. Based on the needs of such churches and on biblical teaching they have also set forth a variety of duties elders should fulfill under scriptural categories such as teaching, shepherding, ruling, and overseeing. Much of this work has been concomitant to a renewed interest among evangelicals, including Southern

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[158] Winslow and Followwill, *Christ in Church Leadership*, 14-15.

[159] Winslow and Followwill, *Christ in Church Leadership*, 76.

[160] Winslow and Followwill, *Christ in Church Leadership*, 76.

[161] Beckwith, *Elders in Every City*, 11.

[162] Beckwith, *Elders in Every City*, 13.

[163] Beckwith, *Elders in Every City*, 81.

Baptists, in adopting plural elder leadership. A few scholars have shared ideas about making this transition; a transition that may be influenced by potential elder roles.

Transitioning to an Elder Led Polity

Plural elder leadership of congregations has been largely absent from evangelical churches in the United States for over a century. However, over the past ten to twenty years there has been a shift back towards this form of polity. Moving from congregational rule and single pastor leadership to plural elder leadership represents a significant change in thinking and practice for twenty-first-century church members. Change tends to be difficult for churches. Therefore, knowing how other churches have successfully made the transition should be helpful to churches who desire this change. Each of the works reviewed below takes time to instruct the reader from Scripture about elder polity, elder qualities, and elder functions. This highlights the importance of beginning with a proper understanding of biblical leadership and following that with practical actions.[164]

Joshua Allen Remy is a Southern Baptist pastor who has performed a qualitative case study of his church's successful passage to a plural elder system of polity, with the hope of providing an educational resource for other churches wishing to do the same.[165] Examining a selection of Remy's research questions and the answers he found will provide a framework that a pastor or leadership team could use to guide a church through this evolution.

Remy's first research question asked about the logistics of his church's

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[164] The researcher was part of a church as it went through this transition. The people had a great deal of trouble understanding the need for plural eldership. They kept asking, "What will the elders do?" Based on that experience, I am hypothesizing that a solid understanding of the role of unpaid elders will make it easier for churches to undergo this transition.

[165] Remy's dissertation is the first scholarly work related to the transition process of a church moving from single elder leadership to plural elder leadership. Joshua Alan Remy, "Church Transition to Plurality of Elders: A Case Study" (EdD thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019), 10.

transition. He found several helpful answers. The church took a suitable amount of time (20 months). The church developed an elder structure that people were willing to accept. Lastly, the leadership team used multiple forms of communication with the congregation.[166]

The second research question dealt with the factors that caused people to favor the change. The study found that congregational trust in the pastor and others leading the change was crucial. The second important factor was that leaders demonstrated that plural elder leadership is indeed a biblical concept.[167] On the other hand, the third research question asked what factors caused people to oppose change and found that tradition was the one significant answer.[168]

Remy's fourth research question dealt with the effectiveness for his church of the change methods utilized. He picked several practices that he gleaned from the literature on church change, enacted these practices in his setting, and then looked back to see which ones played a role in the successful transition. The successful practices were: spiritual health and prayer;[169] root the change in shared values; create a sense of need for the change; a diverse group of people should endorse the change; the church leadership should take humble and helpful actions to guide the congregation; good timing of the change; strategic planning; repeated and clear communication; maintain unity in the face of early obstacles.[170]

Finally, Remy includes a list of key principles from his study that might

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[166] Remy, "Church Transition," 107-12.

[167] Remy, "Church Transition," 116-19.

[168] Remy, "Church Transition," 123.

[169] Remy notes that a church cannot quickly build spiritual health to accompany a change. It must already exist. Remy, "Church Transition," 125.

[170] Remy, "Church Transition," 125-30. Remy included "reinforce new identity" on this list but was a bit ambiguous about how successful it was. Therefore, it is not included here.

generalize to other churches seeking to make this change. The first key principle is "understand the church." The second is "build on the Bible." Number three is "involve other people." The fourth is "plan and communicate intentionally." The last principle is "select the right elders."[171]

Newton and Schmucker are Southern Baptist ministers who have both helped to lead a church through the shift from congregational single elder leadership to congregational plural elder leadership. They offer helpful advice for the process. First, they warn that leaders should not attempt to rush this change. Rather, the pastor should take the church's current polity into account for it will influence how people respond. Also, he should work to earn the congregation's trust. He should make the idea a matter of prayer while carefully teaching the people about biblical eldership.[172]

Next, Newton and Schmucker encourage change leaders to consider the following groups of people: the congregation; the staff; the deacons; the potential elders; and the senior pastor. Each of these groups will react a certain way to the change and be affected differently by the change. One must take these things into account and patiently help them adapt to the change. The authors recommend the change be approached slowly rather than rapidly.[173]

Finally, they provide practical steps for accomplishing the metamorphosis. They divide the process into three phases, the evaluation phase, the presentation phase, and the implementation phase. During the evaluation phase, the pastor assesses the current polity and invites a core group of key leaders to study the matter with him. Then he takes the core group through a careful study of biblical leadership. Next, the pastor probes the leadership group to determine their current understanding and level of comfort

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[171] Remy, "Church Transition," 136-38.

[172] Newton and Schmucker, *Elders in the Life*, 165-69.

[173] Newton and Schmucker, *Elders in the Life*, 178-81.

with the concept of elder leadership. Lastly, the pastor provides the church with a summary of the study's findings.[174]

In the presentation phase, the pastor begins to preach the pertinent texts to the church. This time of exposition may last for weeks or months but should not be rushed. This should be done while nurturing discussion of the topic among the congregation. Give them the chance to ask questions and voice concerns. Also during the presentation phase, the pastor must teach carefully and thoroughly about the qualifications for elders.[175]

The implementation phase begins with prayer. The whole church should pray for God's leadership in selecting elders. At this point, the church nominates men to be elder candidates.[176] The next step is to screen the nominees very carefully for Christian character, doctrinal fidelity, and love for the church. The final part of the implementation phase is to install the new elders, involve them in ministry, and review teachings about elders annually with the congregation.[177]

Evans and Godwin experienced this transition at Patterson Park Church in Beavercreek, Ohio; one as a paid elder and one as an unpaid elder. They too offer helpful insights for others wishing to make this move. One important insight is that the current leadership of the church must be fully supportive of the idea to adopt plural elder leadership. One should not attempt to enact change without this support. Once the leadership is supportive, those leaders must begin communicating with the congregation in formal and informal ways about the biblical basis of elder leadership.[178]

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[174] Newton and Schmucker, *Elders in the Life*, 184-88.

[175] Newton and Schmucker, *Elders in the Life*, 188-91.

[176] Typically, in a congregational church the body would nominate elders, but in some cases the nominations may come from the pastor, the deacon board, or another leadership group depending on the local context.

[177] Newton and Schmucker, *Elders in the Life*, 184-96.

[178] Evans and Godwin, *Elder Government*, 63-64.

After the congregation is prepared to move forward, the change leaders should select a transition team. This team is responsible to make and recommend changes to the church's constitution, establish credentials and job descriptions for the elder position, and facilitate two way communication with the congregation about the entire process.[179] The plan the team develops needs to start with the end in mind and be a thorough blueprint for getting there.[180] Finally, Evans and Godwin advise leaders to pay attention to circumstances during the change process and not go slower or faster than conditions allow.[181]

Conclusion

The literature review has demonstrated abundant information regarding what the New Testament says about church government, who elders were, and what they did. There is also historical evidence that plural elder leadership in individual churches extended beyond the apostolic era into the second century before it gave way to hierarchical forms of church government.[182] Plural elder government reappeared after the Reformation only to dwindle again by the twentieth century. However, scholars have noted a shift by evangelical churches back towards this model in recent years.

However, even though much has been written about what elders should do non-Presbyterian evangelical churches have no recent history to draw on to know how to carry out this form of church leadership. Further, there is no empirical data on the functions lay elders are fulfilling in churches that have decided to adopt the ancient

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[179] Evans and Godwin, *Elder Government*, 64-65.

[180] Evans and Godwin, *Elder Government*, 74.

[181] Evans and Godwin, *Elder Government*, 78-79.

[182] Several of the authors examined in this review have demonstrated that the New Testament shares a picture of plural elder leadership in the early church. Zachariah Lee Vester has demonstrated that this model extended, via the apostolic successors, into the second century. Zachariah Lee Vester, "Patterns of Shared Leadership in the Apostolic Fathers" (EdD thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 249-50.

practice of plural elder leadership.

The current study sought to fill this gap by surveying pastors and lay elders from the Southern Baptist Convention who practice congregationally governed but plural elder-led polity. Specifically, the project aimed to discover what roles unpaid elders actually fulfill in their churches, what competencies churches look for in unpaid elders, and what barriers elder bodies face when making decisions. The next chapter will discuss the proposed methodology for obtaining answers to these questions.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN

Leadership by a plurality of elders, although biblical, has not been commonly practiced in Baptist churches for many decades. The related literature adequately describes the duties of elders based on biblical exegesis. However, the literature relates very little about the actual practices of lay elders in Southern Baptist life. The lack of literature on lay elder practices coupled with the fact that lay elders typically have no formal ministerial training may represent a difficulty for churches wishing to adopt a plural elder leadership model and for newly appointed lay elders.[1]

Purpose Statement

The purpose of the research was to identify the specific roles of lay elders in contemporary Southern Baptist churches.[2] The first part of the study involved obtaining quantitative data from a large sample of current elders. The second part of the research sought further illumination into the roles the elders perform by obtaining qualitative data from a smaller subset of the initial sample. Therefore, this was an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach.[3] Figure 1 illustrates an explanatory sequential design and has

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[1] Strauch provides anecdotal evidence that many unpaid elders lack training. Strauch, phone call to author, February 3, 2020. Further, not all vocational pastors have formal ministry training, but many do. For example in Fain's study 11 percent of pastors had been to Bible college, 6 percent had a master of theology degree, 42 percent had a master of divinity degree, and 17 percent had a doctor of philosophy degree. Fain, "A Descriptive Analysis," 116.

[2] The research team was especially interested in evangelical churches with congregational polity. Ultimately, the study focused on Southern Baptist churches because they represent a diverse evangelical denomination with historically congregational government. Utilizing one denomination also fit within the time and resource constraints of the project.

[3] John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2018), 77. Creswell and Plano Clark explain that the explanatory sequential design works well when one needs qualitative information to provide greater explanations for quantitative results. Further, the current study utilizes the follow-up explanations variant of the explanatory

been modified from Creswell and Plano Clark.[4] The research was performed jointly by two students in the Doctor of Education program at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. The project was guided by the following research questions.

Figure 1. Explanatory sequential design

Quantitative Questions

This study sought to answer these three quantitative questions.

1. What are the distinct roles assumed by paid and unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches?

2. What competencies do churches look for in unpaid elders?

3. What are the formal and informal boundaries to decision making for elder teams?

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sequential design as the priority is on the quantitative phase with the qualitative phase helping to explain it. Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting*, 82.

[4] Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting*, 85.

Qualitative Questions

This study sought to answer these four qualitative questions.

1.   How are unpaid elders engaged in teaching and shepherding the congregation?

2.   How does the church select unpaid elders?

3.   How have churches made the transition to plural elder leadership?

4.   How do the survey and interview analyses compare?

Design Overview

This study utilized an explanatory sequential mixed-method design to gather information about the roles of unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches. The intent was that this design would yield greater meaning to the data generated quantitatively as subjects can provide much more descriptive data in the qualitative portion.[5] Two researchers performed the study in team fashion. The focus of the thesis was on learning what roles lay elders play in shepherding and teaching their congregations.

The study took place in three phases. The first phase was identifying a sample of eligible churches. The second phase involved a quantitative survey of paid and unpaid elders from the eligible churches. The survey strived to determine the duties of the lay elders. The third phase was the qualitative portion of the study. In this phase, researchers identified participants from Phase 2 who were willing to provide further data and then interviewed some of those participants personally. It will help to elaborate on each phase of the design.

Quantitative Strand

The research team performed the quantitative portion of the project together. This portion sought answers to the quantitative research questions using an online survey.

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[5] Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, 11th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2016), 313.

Delimiting the population. The first purpose of the survey was to identify a sample of eligible churches from which to gather quantitative data. The research team obtained a list of churches from the Southern Baptist Convention's (SBC) online database.[6] This database consists of churches which, at some point, submitted an Annual Church Profile (ACP) to the convention. Completion of the ACP identifies these churches as cooperating members of the SBC. Searching the database yielded a list of 43,901 churches.[7] The researchers drew a random sample of 5,000 churches from this population and mined the internet for contact information for the sampled churches. This process yielded three types of contact information: (1) email addresses, (2) links to Facebook pages, and (3) contact forms on church websites.

Next, the team contacted each church inviting the senior pastor to complete the survey.[8] One of the early demographic questions in the survey, question 10, asked if the church utilized leadership by unpaid elders. If the answer to this question was negative, the survey redirected the respondent to stop participation. If the answer was positive, the survey allowed the pastor to answer the remaining questions. Three hundred-fifty-two pastors opened the survey but 97 of them declined to participate. Out of the remaining 255, 125 stated their church used lay elders and therefore went past question 10. One of these had to be dropped, leaving 124 qualifying churches.[9]

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[6] The original design was to obtain the list of churches and pastors based on the 2018 Annual Church Profile directly from Lifeway research. However, Lifeway would not provide this information due to privacy concerns and did not return follow up requests asking simply for the list of church names.

[7] The searchable feature on the SBC website returns 200 names of churches closest to the location one enters in the search field. The method the researchers used to draw the population was to search one state at a time beginning with the state's capital city and working counterclockwise from there until we covered the whole state.

[8] Our first choice was to have an email address to which we could send a nicely formatted cover letter. The text of this letter is in Appendix 1. However, if the only contact information we could find was through Facebook Messenger or a website contact form, we sent a condensed version of the letter through those media.

[9] The survey was completed, however on item 1 the respondent checked he did not wish to participate.

Once the research team had the cooperation of these 124 pastors, a follow up email thanked them for their participation and asked them to request that the lay elders in their church also complete the survey. This resulted in 22 more instruments completed for a total response rate of 146.[10]

Data collection. The purpose of the remainder of the instrument was to learn what duties unpaid elders were fulfilling in their churches, what competencies churches expect, and what were the barriers to decision-making. This information came from the results of the surveys provided by eligible participants. The balance of the survey consisted of closed-ended questions that gathered demographic data and information in accordance with the quantitative research questions. Additionally, there were some open-ended questions in each section so that participants could offer their own thoughts.[11] The surveys were completed over the Internet using Survey Monkey. Researchers compiled the data gleaned from the survey as it related to the roles of lay elders. The analysis also helped to identify a purposive sample of respondents for the qualitative phase of the research and to identify questions related to lay elders that warrant further investigation within the qualitative phase.[12]

The SBC website indicates that 47,456 churches submitted the 2018 ACP.[13] In 2010, Fain surveyed 413 SBC churches and found that 19 percent of them were elder-led.[14] If this ratio holds, approximately 9,016 churches may qualify for the current

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[10] Not all 45 questions were answered on each of the 146 surveys. Statistics were based on total answers for each question.

[11] Lesley Andres recommends that closed-ended questions be accompanied by open-ended questions so that participants have the opportunity to provide thorough and accurate answers. Lesley Andres, *Designing and Doing Survey Research* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012), 63.

[12] Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting*, 234.

[13] Southern Baptist Convention, "Fast Facts about the SBC," last updated September 12, 2019, http://www.sbc.net/BecomingSouthernBaptist/FastFacts.asp.

[14] James Allen Fain III, "A Descriptive Analysis of the Relationship between Paradigms and Duties of Pastoral Ministry" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010), 115.

research. Therefore, the study's goal was to collect data from at least 400 qualifying churches before the qualitative strand could begin.[15] Although this study's final population was 43,901 churches, the goal remained 400 returned surveys. Unfortunately, the ultimate response rate was 146, limiting the project's generalizability.

Qualitative Strand

After the research team analyzed the quantitative data, they each identified a purposive sample of potential interviewees for the qualitative phase.[16] Question 11 on the initial survey asked respondents if they were willing to be contacted for follow up questions. One hundred-nine individuals answered affirmatively and the purposive sample was selected from these. The researcher planned to interview at least ten people.[17] The objective was to interview the senior pastor and one unpaid elder from a given church, so the researcher selected six churches for this sample.

Several criteria guided selection of the current purposive sample. The first was to look for answers that suggested elders were either neglecting biblical duties or performing duties that might belong to the deacon body or the congregation. Next, the researcher sifted through answers to find any that indicated where the elders had too much decision-making power or where congregational governance seemed judiciously practiced. Further, answers that were especially thorough, confusing, or contradictory

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[15] L. R. Gay, Geoffrey E. Mills, and Peter Airasian. *Educational Research: Competencies for Analysis and Applications*, 8th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall, 2006), 139.

[16] Creswell and Plano Clark offer several suggestions for a good purposeful sample. They indicate choosing participants whose answers are more like answers from other groups, participants who have unusual scores, participants from groups whose scores are statistically different, and participants whose scores on significant predictors are different. (For example, in the current study researchers might look for elders whose duties do not fall in the norm for this survey.) Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting*, 234-36.

[17] The qualitative portion of this study seeks to understand how lay elders experience their role. In that sense it is much like a purely phenomenological study. Leedy and Ormrod say a typical sample size for a phenomenological study is 5 to 25 individuals. Based on that, the current research seeks a purposive sample of 10 to 20 people for the qualitative strand. Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research*, 255.

were identified for further inquiry. Finally, as an aid to generalizability, the researcher attempted to select churches from a variety of geographic regions.

The qualitative interviews consisted of open-ended questions designed to further explain the data gathered in the survey. The interview questions were scripted but the interviewer had the option to ask follow-up questions if they seemed necessary. Following the interviews, the researcher transcribed the data into word processing files and coded it so it could be organized and analyzed. Coding was done by using the comments feature in Microsoft Word to categorize specific pieces of interview data into themes. The project then extracted the themes and pasted them into a spreadsheet so they could be sorted, grouped, and quantified.

Interpretation

The final segment of the study design was an interpretive phase. The researcher drew conclusions about how the qualitative data further explained the quantitative results. Ultimately the researcher summarized the findings of both quantitative and qualitative strands of the study and described how they answer the research questions.

Population

The population for the study was comprised of Southern Baptist churches in the United States that are led by a plurality of elders that includes unpaid elders. At least three things about the Southern Baptist Convention make it a favorable population to study. First, it is large. The SBC is a voluntary affiliation of over 47,000 cooperating churches representing a membership of over 14.8 million people.[18] Second, it is diverse. Churches of all sizes and in all regions of the United States compose the SBC. Further, member churches represent a variety of ministry contexts, ethnic diversity, and worship

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[18] Southern Baptist Convention, "Fast Facts."

styles.[19] As well, about 57 percent of SBC churches have congregational polity and 19 percent practice plural elder leadership.[20] Finally, SBC doctrine coheres with the definition of evangelical provided in chapter 1.[21] Therefore, the SBC offers an excellent, large cross-section of churches nationwide from which to draw data. Third, most SBC churches complete an ACP each year which provides the convention with contact information and statistical data about the church.

Sample and Delimitations

The specific sample was delimited to a subset of the population consisting of senior pastors and lay elders serving churches in the Southern Baptist Convention who have plural elder leadership, congregational governance, and who are listed in the SBC website's searchable database. The study sought statistically significant results with a confidence level of 95 percent and a confidence interval of 5 percent. Finally, in Phase 3 of the study researchers delimited the qualitative interviews to a purposive sample of churches that completed the quantitative survey.

Limitations

The project faced limitations as well. The first limitation involved technology. Since the study used an electronic survey, it was limited to churches within the random sample with access to electronic mail and the Internet. The second limitation was that only eligible churches who agreed to participate in the survey were studied.

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[19] Southern Baptist Convention, "About Us," accessed December 28, 2019, http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/.

[20] Fain, "A Descriptive Analysis," 115. The other forms of polity identified by Fain include pastor-deacon, single pastor, elder ruled, and council. Fain does not provide specific definitions of congregational and elder-led. The plain sense of the words indicate definitions similar to those on page 10 of this work. I mention the statistic to emphasize the diversity of the denomination. Even though it is historically congregational, it is growing in the forms of congregational polity employed within the denomination.

[21] Southern Baptist Convention, "The Baptist Faith and Message, 2000," accessed October 27, 2019, https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000.

Limits of Generalization

The sample consisted only of elders from SBC churches who are congregationally governed and led by a plurality of elders including at least one unpaid elder. Therefore, the usefulness of the study's quantitative results is limited to congregationally governed SBC churches with a plurality of elders, at least one of whom is unpaid. The qualitative findings generalize only to those elders who participated in Phase 3 of the project. However, because the SBC represents such a wide variety of churches, non-Southern Baptists who are like-minded and similarly governed may also find the study helpful for their context.

Instrumentation

The researchers developed two instruments for this project. The first was a survey for the quantitative portion of the study. The second instrument was an interview script composed of mostly open-ended questions that researchers used in the qualitative portion of the project.

Quantitative Survey

The research team composed a survey consisting mostly of closed-ended questions designed to answer research questions 1 through 3. Researchers used the survey for Phases 1 and 2. Further, the survey results served to aid the team in selecting a purposive sample for Phase 3.

Design. The functional survey was web based. Lesley Andres notes that online surveys have drawbacks, including potential for coverage errors and the need for accurate e-mail addresses.[26] However, because the initial population was large the study benefited from the advantages of web surveys. These advantages include low cost, ability to collect

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[26] Andres, *Designing and Doing*, 50.

data quickly, the ability to follow up quickly by e-mail, and the ability to program the sequencing of questions.[27]

Content. The survey had several sections. The first part included questions asking for demographic information about the church and the participant. The second part asked if the participant was willing to provide a follow up interview and if so to give his personal contact information. The final three parts of the survey included questions directly related to Research Questions 1-3 respectively.

Administration. The researchers worked cooperatively to administer the survey. They designed an appropriate e-mail invitation (see appendix 1) which served as a cover letter to potential participants.[28] Next, they sent this e-mail to the churches in the random sample, asking that the senior pastor complete the survey. The team scheduled Survey Monkey to send a follow-up invitation to churches that did not respond in the first seven days. The SBC contains a large number of churches. However, the number of churches qualifying for this study was unclear. Therefore, the response rate was critical. So the researchers monitored response rates and when they leveled off, sent further reminders to churches that had not responded.[29]

Validation and reliability. Once the survey was written, the team asked a panel of experts who are familiar with both biblical eldership and survey research to examine the instrument and estimate its validity and reliability.[30] Once deemed

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[27] Andres, *Designing and Doing*, 50-52.

[28] Andres says the cover letter should introduce the research project to individuals, invite them to participate in the survey, and be designed to appeal to the target research sample. Andres, *Designing and Doing*, 133-34.

[29] Lesley Andres, *Designing and Doing Survey* Research (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012), 143-45. Each time Survey Monkey sent a reminder it created a nice spike in survey returns. The original survey went out June 15th. By the first week in July we were concerned that the response rate was low and so begin trying to reach pastors by telephone call. This did not prove fruitful at all. Therefore, we sent one more reminder the first full week of July and closed the survey to senior pastors on July 10. We allowed two more weeks for unpaid elders to take the survey.

[30] The expert panel included Dr. John Hammett, Dr. Benjamin Merkle, and Mr. Alexander Strauch.

acceptable by the panel, it was entered into the Survey Monkey program so that potential participants could have online access. Researchers did pilot test the instrument by asking a few individuals who are pastors in SBC churches to complete the survey.[31] When pilot results were satisfactory to the researchers and the panel of experts, the study proceeded.[32]

Qualitative Interviews

The purpose of the qualitative interviews was to shed further light on the quantitative data by answering Research Questions 4-7. Each researcher composed a script of open-ended interview questions based on the research questions. Researchers conducted interviews separately so that they could hear from a variety of subjects and each could use questions specific to his research questions. The interviews occurred over Zoom.[33]

Administration. Researchers took several steps to make the interview process convenient for the participants and to protect the data collection process. First, the researcher transmitted an e-mail asking the elder to participate in the interview portion of the study and if so, when a convenient time might be.[34] Once the respondent agreed to be interviewed and to an interview time, the researcher sent him a copy of the interview protocol accompanied by a Zoom invitation to meet at the agreed upon time. After the interview, the researcher sent the participant a thank-you e-mail that included the

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[31] Andres states that pilot testing is important to ensure the language level is right for the intended participants, to gage whether questions are understood as originally meant, to test different forms of a question, to test if question order is logical, and to test if skip instructions are right. Andres, *Designing and Doing*, 27.

[32] Researchers did have to make minor changes to the survey, mostly in format, before putting it to use. The final survey is in Appendix 2.

[33] Two interviews took place via telephone call because the Zoom connections failed.

[34] Near the end of the qualitative phase of the study, as the submission deadline approached, the researcher had to skip the initial email invitation and replace it with phone calls in an attempt to quickly find cooperating churches.

interview transcript and instructions for transcript verification. Later, he sent the subject the coding results of the interview asking him to verify it as well.

Validation and reliability. The qualitative interviews also needed assurance of validity. Creswell and Plano Clark identify threats to explanatory sequential studies that come from the design of the research and the interview process.[35] Therefore, researchers asked a panel of experts familiar with church elders and with mixed-methods research to examine the study methodology and the interview questions for validity and reliability.[36] Further, the researchers have employed member-checking, triangulation, and reporting disconfirming evidence as methods of improving validity.[37] Also, each participant received a copy of his interview and had the opportunity to make corrections within seven days. Finally, the researcher sent each participant a copy of the data extracted from his interview and asked him to look for mistakes or points of disagreement. Again, each interviewee had seven days to respond.

As a final check for validity and reliability, the researcher declares his bias as recommended by John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth.[38] The researcher is a student at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary as well as a member of an SBC church. Further, the researcher's church transitioned to a plural elder model of government several years ago and the researcher has mixed feelings about the transition process and the current duties of his church's elders.

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[35] Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting*, 252.

[36] The expert panel consisted of Dr. Brian Brabham, Dr. John Hammett. Each researcher also pilot tested his questions with a local lay elder before interviewing study subjects.

[37] Creswell and Plano Clark recommend these three techniques. Member-checking is simply taking key data back to several participants and asking if they seem accurate. Triangulation is looking at data from several sources or several people and building evidence for a theme from them. Reporting of disconfirming evidence helps validate the accuracy of data because real world evidence is expected to diverge. Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting*, 217.

[38] John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, Inc.), 261.

Procedural Overview

The research team submitted the methodology for this study to the ethics committee at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. They attempted no research with human subjects prior to receiving approval from the committee. According to the guidelines of the ethics committee, this study represented low risk to the well-being of participants. Accordingly, the institution's standard consent form for low risk studies accompanied the survey and the interviews.

Profile of the Current Study

Plural elder leadership in Baptist churches was not commonly practiced for most of the twentieth century. However, over the past ten to twenty years it has experienced a renewal. Because this practice is new to contemporary Baptists, unpaid elders may not be sure of the role they play. This study used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to learn how current lay elders are functioning in congregational churches. A quantitative survey asked which tasks lay elders are fulfilling and follow up qualitative interviews shed further light on the results.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to identify the specific roles of lay elders in contemporary Southern Baptist churches. To gather this information the study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. This chapter outlines the investigation then provides results from the quantitative and qualitative strands. Finally, it evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of the design.

Compilation Protocol

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. The quantitative portion was an online survey that sought to identify Southern Baptist churches with a plurality of elders, some of whom are unpaid. Churches fitting this category then answered questions regarding the lay elders' roles. The qualitative portion involved personal interviews with senior pastors and lay elders from qualifying churches. These interviews sought to gather more experiential information from practicing elders in hopes of learning three things: (1) what specific roles are these elders carrying out in their churches, (2) what are the details regarding how these churches choose elders, and (3) details about how the churches have transitioned to an elder led system.

Phase 1 Delimitations

The population for the study was Southern Baptist churches in the United States that are led by a plurality of elders, including at least one unpaid elder. The first delimitation was to use senior pastors and lay elders serving SBC churches who have plural elder leadership, congregational governance, and who are listed in the SBC website's searchable database as representative of this population. The SBC's website

stores a list of their churches in a searchable database. The research team searched this database state by state and from it pulled 43,901 church names. Using the Excel application, the team next listed this population in random order and chose the first 5,000 churches for the research sample. A thorough Internet search yielded electronic contact data for 3,272 of those churches.[1] The team then used these contacts to send 2,881 invitations (see appendix 1) asking the pastor at each church to take the survey.[2] The invitations included a World Wide Web link that gave the church access to the survey. The instrument was built, accessed, and completed through Survey Monkey.[3]

Three hundred-fifty-two churches opened the survey. However, question 1 asked the individual if he was willing to participate and 97 of the 352 declined. The remaining 255 participants gave demographic information in questions 2 through 9. Question 10 specifically asked if the church used unpaid elders. One hundred-thirty participants responded negatively and the survey directed them to stop at that point, leaving 125 qualifying responses.[4]

The 125 people still eligible moved to question 11 which asked if the individual was willing to take part in follow up interviews. If the respondent answered this in the affirmative, he was directed to question 12, which asked for his contact information. If he answered no to question 11, the instrument automatically skipped him

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[1] "Internet search" includes searching the SBC online database, using a general internet search engine (such as Google), searching online databases of state conventions and local associations, as well as searching Facebook. If necessary, researchers tried all these avenues to find data on a given church.

[2] The number of invitations sent is smaller than the number of contacts because Facebook Messenger limits the number of messages an individual can send in one day. The researchers would send as many as possible in one day and then would have to wait a day or two before sending more. Ultimately, there was not time to send all of them.

[3] Using Survey Monkey made it easy for anyone with web access to take the survey. It also allowed the utilization of skip logic and made it simple for researchers to send reminder emails and monitor daily response rates.

[4] Of these 125, 15 indicated they were pastors serving without pay. It is not clear if these 15 were lay elders completing the survey on behalf of the church or if they were senior pastors who served voluntarily.

to question 13. Of the 125 respondents who went past the demographic section, the researchers had to omit one because he actually checked that he did not wish to participate, even though he completed and returned the instrument.[5]

Next, the researchers contacted these 124 pastors through the email addresses they provided on the survey and asked them to invite their lay elders to complete the instrument. This yielded an additional 22 completed assessments. Therefore, the final total of useful surveys was 146.

Phase 2 Delimitations

Phase 2 of the project involved conducting interviews with a purposive sample from the churches that provided usable surveys.[6] Of the 124 qualifying churches, only 109 answered question 12 in the affirmative indicating a willingness to be contacted for follow up questioning. The researcher chose six of these pastors to interview based largely on their answers to questions 13-26, 27, 44, and 45.[7] Questions 13-26 asked about time spent on specific duties. Question 27 asked what biblical passages guided the assignment of duties. Questions 44 and 45 dealt with the decisions made by the church and the elder board respectively.

Several criteria guided the selection of this sample. The first criteria was to look for answers that suggested elders were either neglecting biblical duties or performing duties that might belong to the deacon body or the congregation. Also,

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[5] Of the 124 churches left in the survey, 2 of them indicated they took no congregational votes.

[6] The initial goal was to pick 6 churches, and from each church to interview the senior pastor and 1 unpaid elder. The invitation that was sent to each pastor explained this. The researcher also requested it during the interviews with the pastors. Ultimately, only two pastors eventually sent the researcher contact information for unpaid elders.

[7] Of the original 6 churches purposefully selected only 2 agreed to interviews. The researcher eventually had to list 20 churches and try to prioritize them according to how well they matched the desired purposes. He then contacted all 20 of these churches sequentially either by email or telephone before procuring cooperation from 6 within the time available for data collection. The initial protocol called for all pastors to be emailed first. However, many were not responding quickly and the project deadline was approaching, so the researcher attempted phone calls in hopes of reaching pastors faster.

answers indicating the elders had too much decision-making power were of interest, and conversely, churches that appeared solidly congregational were of interest. Further, answers that were especially thorough, confusing, or contradictory seemed to warrant further inquiry. Finally, as an aid to generalizability, the researcher attempted to find churches from across geographic regions that fell within the criteria.[8]

After identifying a church as fitting the purposeful sample, the researcher emailed or called the pastor and invited him to participate in an interview. If a pastor agreed to be interviewed, the researcher created a Zoom meeting and sent him the accompanying Zoom invitation. As part of the interview protocol the investigator asked the pastor to request one of his unpaid elders to complete an interview as well.[9] Interviews took place through the Zoom application which allowed the researcher to record the interview.[10] The researcher then transcribed each interview into a Microsoft Word document and used the comments feature to code each one.[11] He then pasted the themes into an Excel spreadsheet and sorted them according to which research question they helped answer.[12]

Findings

The survey and interviews yielded empirical data that help answer the research

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[8] The project used geographic regions defined by the Census Bureau. United States Census Bureau, "Census Regions and Divisions of the United States," accessed August 29, 2020. Due to the difficulty of finding pastors willing to interview, geographic coverage was not as thorough as originally desired.

[9] Eight men completed interviews. The discussion in chapters 4 and 5 identify the senior pastors as Pastor # (numbers 1-6 were used) and the unpaid elders as Elder # (numbers 1-2 were used). See table 16, page 87, for more information about these participants.

[10] Zoom failed for two of the interviews, Elder 1 and Pastor 4. These two were conducted by telephone call on "speaker" mode and recorded with a computer using the Microsoft voice recorder app.

[11] In an attempt to save time, the researcher used an online transcription service for the last two interviews.

[12] As part of the validation process, the transcripts as well as the coded data were sent back to the participants for verification of accuracy (see page 71).

questions. This section first presents results in order corresponding to the phases of the project, then examines how the results help answer the research questions.

Results from Quantitative Phase

      Demographics. Questions 2 through 5 gathered demographic information about the pastors, while questions 6 through 10 gathered descriptive information about the churches. Personal information about the participants reveals several things. First, table 3 shows proportionally the titles held by respondents. Second, the pastors represent a variety of time spent in the current position as displayed in table 4. Next, overall the pastors are well educated with 66.76 percent of them having a master's degree or higher.[13] Finally, almost 80 percent of participants have some level of formal ministry training. Table 5 displays the levels of education and training held by participants.[14]

Table 3. Respondents' current role

Title	Percent (%) of respondents
Pastor	45.19
Senior Pastor	31.11
Lead Pastor	23.70

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[13] In Fain's study, 65% of the pastors surveyed had a master's degree or higher. James Allen Fain III, "A Descriptive Analysis of the Relationship Between Paradigms and Duties of Pastoral Ministry" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, 2010), 116.

[14] Question 4 asked respondents to check the highest level of education they had completed, whether it was in ministry or not. Question 5 asked them to check all levels of formal ministry training they had. The choice "seminary certificate" refers to programs that some seminaries offer which allow individuals with a bachelor's degree to take some master's level courses without pursuing another degree.

Table 4. Length of respondent's current tenure

Time	Percent (%) of respondents
Less Than Five Years	39.04
5-10 years	26.03
11-15 years	18.49
16-20 years	4.79
Longer than 20 years	11.64

Table 5. Level of education and formal ministry training of respondents

Education completed	Percent (%) of respondents	Level of training	Percent (%) of respondents
High school diploma	8.97	No formal ministry training	21.92
Associates degree	6.21	Bible college	20.55
Bachelor's degree	22.07	Seminary certificate	4.79
Master's degree	40.69	Seminary degree	58.90
Doctoral degree	22.07	Other	13.70

Concerning information about the churches, the results reveal a wide range of church sizes by average worship attendance with a full 45 percent of the churches falling between 51 and 200 in worship. Table 6 displays the full range of church sizes. Also, the church settings varied with 34.48 percent in rural areas, 43.45 percent in suburban communities, and 22.07 percent in urban areas. Further, 80.69 percent of the churches function with a plurality of elders. Finally, all the churches the study is reporting on utilize unpaid elders since they are the focus of this research.

Table 6. Average worship attendance

Attendance	Percent (%) of respondents
50 or less	16.44
51-100	23.29
101-200	21.92
201-300	13.70
301-400	6.85
401-500	5.48
501 +	12.33

Roles of lay elders. Questions 13 through 27 asked about elder roles.[15] Thirteen through 25 dealt with the amount of time spent on specific duties. Most of the activities in these questions are mentioned in Scripture (see table 2), fall under a category mentioned in Scripture, or were suggested by the expert panel who evaluated the survey.[16] Table 7 portrays the results of this group of questions. For eleven of the thirteen tasks, over 75 percent of pastors reported lay elders spent less than five hours per week on that task. Exceptions were teaching in a group setting and overseeing a ministry area. Only five of the jobs were rated in the six to ten hours per week category by 15 percent (or more) of respondents. These hours were spent praying for the church, overseeing a ministry, preaching/preparing to preach, teaching/preparing to teach one-on-one, and teaching/preparing to teach a group. Few elders spend over ten hours a week on any single task. Preaching/preparing to preach is the largest with 7.26 percent of elders spending eleven to fifteen hours per week on that.

Item 26 was an open-ended question asking the participant to list duties performed by unpaid elders at his church which had not heretofore been mentioned.

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[15] Not every participant answered all of the questions. However, statistics for each question were calculated based on total responses for that question.

[16] Question 25 is somewhat of an exception. It asked for the amount of time spent managing church property. This was included as a potential indicator to see if elders were involved in non-pastoral duties.

Answers to this question revealed several themes including oversight/administration with nine mentions, pastoral care with eight, and strategy with seven as the top three. Table 8 catalogs the complete set of answers. The majority of the items involve ministering to people in some way. Possible exceptions might be oversight/administration, strategy/vision (seven mentions), production (five responses), and facilities maintenance (four responses).

Table 7. Time spent on specific duties by unpaid elders in surveyed churches

	Percent (%) of respondents for each choice			
Question	0-5 hours per week	6-10 hours per week	11-15 hours per week	More than 15 hours per week
Praying for congregants	82.11	15.45	2.44	0.00
Counseling congregants	93.50	5.69	0.81	0.00
Visiting congregants	89.52	8.06	0.81	1.61
Oversight of a ministry area	73.39	15.32	6.45	4.84
Evangelism	87.90	9.68	0.81	1.61
Community benevolence	87.90	9.68	1.61	0.81
Oversight of church finances	89.52	8.87	1.61	0.00
Preaching/preparation for preaching	75.00	15.32	7.26	2.42
Teaching/preparing to teach individuals	78.86	16.26	3.25	1.63
Teaching/preparing to teach groups	61.29	32.26	4.03	2.42
Elder meetings	98.39	1.61	0.00	0.00
Church business/member meetings	96.77	3.23	0.00	0.00
Managing church property	91.94	5.65	1.61	0.81

Basing the function of elders on what the Bible says helps to ensure that church leaders are doing what God wants them to do. Question 27 asked if the church used Scripture when defining elder roles and if so, which ones. Seventy-one participants said "yes," 69 skipped this question, 4 said "no," and 1 did not know. Not surprisingly, 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 were most commonly cited having 48 and 42 responses respectively. First Peter 5 was next with 29 mentions and Acts 20 followed with 20 responses. No other passage received more than ten responses. Table 9 lists the most frequently referenced passages.

Table 8. Duties performed by lay elders previously unmentioned in the survey

Theme	Number of answers containing theme	Percent (%) of total
Oversight/administration	9	16.36
Pastoral care	8	14.55
Strategy/vision	7	12.73
Staff accountability/support	6	10.91
Production	5	9.09
Facilities maintenance	4	7.27
Missions and outreach	4	7.27
Music/worship	3	5.45
Guest services	3	5.45
New member training	2	3.64
Church discipline	2	3.64
Bible study	1	1.82
Counseling	1	1.82
Total responses	55	100.00

Table 9. Scriptures used by churches to define elder roles

Passage (book and chapter)	Number of occurrences	Percent (%) of total cited
1 Timothy 3	48	20.08
Titus 1	42	17.57
1 Peter 5	29	12.13
Acts 20	20	8.37
Hebrews 13:17	10	4.18
1 Timothy 5	9	3.77
Ephesians 4:11-13	9	3.77
James 5	7	2.93
Acts 6	7	2.93
Acts 14:23	6	2.51
Other Passages	20	6.72

Competencies of lay elders. Questions 28 through 37 inquired about specific competencies the church expects her elders to possess. The assumption is that churches seek men whose abilities are suited to what their duties as elders will be. Questions 28 through 32 asked participants how much they agree that lay elders should possess financial management skills, biblical knowledge, evangelism skills, leadership skills, and teaching skills respectively. Questions 33 through 37 asked respondents to rate the importance, on a scale of 1 to 10, of lay elders possessing the skills of theological

acumen, business management acumen, governance skill, evangelistic skill, and teaching skill, respectively.[17] Tables 10 and 11 summarize the data collected for these questions.

In the first set of questions, 97.38 percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that elders should have biblical/theological knowledge, 95.16 percent agreed or strongly agreed they should possess strong leadership skills, and 88.62 percent agreed or strongly agreed they should have proficient teaching skills. Financial management skill was the least desired with 73.90 percent of pastors agreeing or strongly agreeing it is important for lay elders.

Table 10. Degree to which respondents agree that lay elders
should possess the skill in question

Competency	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Agree %	Strongly agree %	Total strongly agree and agree %
Biblical/theological knowledge	0.00	1.63	36.59	61.79	97.38
Strong leadership skills	0.00	4.84	63.71	31.45	95.16
Teaching skills	0.00	11.38	59.35	29.27	88.62
Skilled in evangelism	0.81	11.38	65.85	21.95	87.80
Financial management skills	0.81	25.81	58.87	14.52	73.39

In the second set of questions, theological acumen received an average rating of 8.0, and teaching skill had an average of 7.2. Business management acumen was lowest with an average rating of 5.4. Comparing the two sets of questions, they both reveal that respondents believe ability in teaching, biblical/theological knowledge, and leadership (governance) is important for lay elders. Also, they both indicate that respondents consider financial acumen the least important trait for lay elders. This

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[17] The competencies considered in this section correspond with duties suggested in Acts 11:30 (financial management), Titus 1:9 (Bible knowledge), 1 Tim 5:17 (leadership skills), and 1 Tim 3:2 (teaching skills). Due to the need to keep the survey as brief as possible, we are considering preaching ability as a subset of teaching skills.

prioritization is consistent with the biblical picture of elder leadership.[18]

Table 11. Importance of an elder possessing certain competencies

Competency	Average Rating
Theological Acumen	8.0
Business Management Acumen	5.4
Governance Skill	6.6
Evangelistic Skill	6.3
Teaching Skill	7.2

Note: The rating is based on a ten-point scale with 10 being the most important

Decision making boundaries. Questions 38 through 45 related to the church's boundaries on the decision-making role of elders. Question 38 asked if the subject agreed with the statement, "The paid elders and unpaid elders in our church have equal say in elder decisions." Almost twenty percent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement whereas 80.18 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. This result indicates that 8 out of 10 respondents believe that in their church, one group (either the paid elders or the unpaid) have greater say in decision making. The goal of questions 39 and 40 was to distinguish which group (if either) has greater say in decision making. Table 12 summarizes the results.

The first three questions in this section produced contradictory results. The results from question 38 established that paid and unpaid elders do not have equal say in decisions. However, about 80 percent disagree that the paid elders have a greater say and about 80 percent disagree that the unpaid elders have greater say.[19]

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[18] Passages about elder qualifications such as 1 Tim 3 and Titus 1 teach that overseers must be able to teach and must be sound doctrinally. Imperative passages such as Acts 20:28 and 1 Pet 5:2 relate that elders should shepherd (which implies leadership abilities) the church. However, the idea that elders manage finances is not found in the qualifications or in command forms, but simply in narrative such as Acts 11:30.

[19] The results from these three questions are confusing. Perhaps individuals were rushing and simply did not pay attention to the differences between the three questions. Maybe some thought that item 38 was asking their opinion while items 39 and 40 were asking about actual practice (or vise versa).

Question 41 asked if the church has policies that govern the decision making process of elders. The researchers were making an assumption that an elder board with boundaries is less likely to represent an elder rule model and more likely to represent an elder led system. About seventy-four percent (74.14) answered "yes," 25.00 percent answered "no," and 0.86 percent were unsure. Question 42 asked if the church's constitution contains restrictions on decision making for paid elders. Just over Fifty-four percent (54.39) of respondents said "yes," 42.98 percent said "no," and 2.63 percent did not know.

Table 12. Opinion on the weight given paid and unpaid elders in decisions

The paid elders in our church have greater say in elder decisions	Percentage (%) of respondents	The unpaid elders in our church have greater say in elder decisions	Percentage (%) of respondents
Strongly agree	4.55	Strongly Agree	3.54
Agree	15.54	Agree	12.39
Disagree	50.00	Disagree	51.33
Strongly disagree	30.00	Strongly Disagree	32.74

Questions 43-45 were open-ended questions that allowed the participants to share as much information as they wanted.[20] Number 43 asked participants to list the church's written policies governing elder decisions, 44 asked what decisions the church body votes on, and 45 asked what decisions are voted on by the elder body. Again, the assumption is that the more the church votes on the less likely that the polity is elder ruled. Only sixteen men answered question 43, with the most common response being that elder body votes must be unanimous. Table 13 shows all responses to this question.

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[20] Question 43 read, "If your church has written policies regarding the decision-making abilities of unpaid and paid elders, please briefly describe them below." Question 44 stated, "Please list the decisions that require a church vote." Question 45 said, "Please list the decisions delegated to the elder body."

Table 13. Written policies that govern decision making abilities of elders

Themes	Number of Occurrences
Unanimous vote required	5
Majority unpaid elders	3
Division of responsibility	3
Unpaid serve as checks and balances	2
Chairman responsibility	1
Unpaid discuss staff payment	1
Paid elder breaks ties	1

Ninety-five churches responded to question 44 which asked what the congregation still votes on. Of these replies, the top things churches vote on are budgets (48 responses), staffing (48 responses), finances (26 responses), elders (25 responses), membership (23 responses), and property (22 responses). Table 14 displays the entire set of themes associated with question 44.

Eighty-seven churches responded to question 45 which asked what the elders vote on. The most common answers were everything the church does not (27 responses), administrative issues (23 responses), financial matters within limits (22 responses), vision (19 responses), and personnel (18 responses). A few answers do indicate a high degree of decision making power granted to elder teams. For example, the following responses are in line with elder rule rather than elder leadership: "everything;" "virtually everything…sadly;" "all decisions;" "all decisions except calling the senior pastor;" "nothing will go to the church for a vote unless the elders agree;" "all;" "nearly all;" "most decisions." However, this is only eight out of 85 churches.

Some overlap exists between the two sets of answers, but generally speaking, the churches represented here still have congregational votes for major decisions. Table 15 provides the full list of items on which elders vote.

Table 14. Decisions granted to the church

Theme	Number of Occurrences
Budget	48
Staffing	48
Finances	26
Elders	25
Membership	23
Property	22
Changes to constitution/bylaws	11
Officers	10
Deacons	9
Debt	7
Elder discretion	5
Major changes	4
Dissolve/merge with another church	3
Time of worship	2
Doctrinal statement	2
Missions	2
Church calendar	1
Events other than worship	1
Creation of new ministries	1
Church does not vote	1
All	1

Table 15. Decisions granted to the elder body

Theme	Number of Occurrences
Everything else (not covered in question 43)	27
Administrative	23
Financial (usually with limits)	22
Vision	19
Personnel	18
Preaching/teaching	13
Pastoral care/member care	12
Selection/removal of elders	9
Day to day decisions	9
Church discipline	9
Ministry	8
Programming/schedule	8
Doctrine/theology	8
Spiritual decisions	7
Benevolence	5
Counseling	3
Construction	2
Building maintenance	2
Services	1
Who can teach	1
Evangelism	1

Results from Qualitative Phase

The qualitative phase utilized a purposive sample of six churches from the quantitative survey. From these six churches, the researcher interviewed six paid pastors and two unpaid elders. The first section of the interview gathered demographic information. The rest of the interview included a section on elder roles, one on elder selection, and one on transitioning to a plural elder leadership model. Slight variations between the interview for pastors and the interview for unpaid elders existed (see appendix 2). The researcher followed the interview protocol but also sometimes asked follow up questions to get clarifying information. Other than the demographic section, the researcher coded each interview to reveal themes related to each category of question.

Demographic information. The men interviewed represent small to medium sized churches in a variety of contexts and have varying levels of experience as portrayed in table 16. The sample represents, on average, 9 years of service in the current role, three of the four major geographic regions of the country, and a range of church sizes from 50 to 170 in average worship attendance.

Elder roles. Philosophically, every interviewee believed that the role of an unpaid elder was primarily that of a shepherd. They also believed that to a large extent their congregations viewed them that way. Another common theme was the idea that unpaid elders must preach, teach, and protect doctrine in doing so. These men also commonly indicated that the body of elders (paid and unpaid together) should practice shared leadership. Table 17 displays the most common themes that surfaced during the interviews regarding how these men conceptualize the role of unpaid elders.

The interview also asked about duties currently performed by unpaid elders in their churches. The most common specific duty in this sample was teaching. In each of the six churches, unpaid elders fill vital teaching ministries such as teaching Sunday

school, leading small groups, teaching on Wednesday nights, one on one discipleship,

occasionally preaching on Sunday mornings, and more.

Table 16. Demographic information for qualitative sample

	Title	Years in position	Average worship attendance	Church setting	Geographic region
Pastor 1	Senior pastor	8	50	Suburban	Midwest
Pastor 2	Pastor	27	60	Rural	South
Pastor 3	Pastor	10	80	Rural	South
Elder 1	Unpaid elder	2	60	Rural	South
Pastor 4	Pastor	1	65	Rural	Mountain
Elder 2	Unpaid elder	2	150	Suburban	South
Pastor 5	Senior pastor	20	170	Suburban	Mountain
Pastor 6	Lead pastor	2	150	Suburban	South

Table 17. Themes related to conceptual view of
unpaid elders in interviewed churches

Theme	Number of recurrences
Lay elders are shepherds	18
Preaching, teaching, guard doctrine are the most vital roles of elders	9
Paid and unpaid elders practice shared leadership	8
Churches function better/accomplish more with qualified lay elders	7
Prayer is crucial for lay elders	7
Lay elders are managers at least to some extent	6
In matters such as membership, church discipline, finances, who can lead, etc. the church exercises authority, not the elders	4
Lay elders are overseers	4

However, teaching is not the only ministry done by unpaid elders in these

churches. Some of these lay elders oversee entire ministries. For example, Unpaid elder 2

in this study oversees the music ministry at his church, essentially functioning as a staff

music minister would. Other duties discussed include counseling church members,

making hospital visits, training other Bible teachers within the church, training teachers serving in missions of the church, overseeing church finances, evangelism, and helping church members with physical needs such as procuring firewood for the winter. Table 18 lists the tasks most frequently mentioned in the interviews.

Table 18. Themes related to duties currently practiced by
unpaid elders in interviewed churches

Theme	Number of recurrences
Teaching in a venue other than Sunday school or small group	14
Teaching Sunday school or a small group	10
Pastoral care (counseling, visiting, meeting needs)	9
Preaching for senior pastor occasionally	8
Duties of lay elders are limited by their time constraints	8
Preaching outside the church	4
Teaching/discipling one-on-one	3

Elder selection. The middle of the interview asked about the church's method of selecting lay elders. Respondents related processes with similar components but done slightly differently. Each church required a congregational vote for the appointment of an elder. The overall process in each church contained most or all of these six steps: (1) select elder candidates, (2) ask candidates if they desire to serve, (3) vet candidates for biblical qualifications, (4) watch the candidate's life for a period of time, (5) give the congregation the opportunity to object to the candidate, (6) hold church vote on the candidate.[21] Table 19 demonstrates how frequently interviewees mentioned these ideas.

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[21] In some churches the pastor nominates candidates, in some the current elders do, and in others the church does. The step of watching the candidate's life can occur before, during, and after the vetting process and the goal is to see if the candidate is already fulfilling elder roles. If someone objects to a candidate, the pastor and/or current elders investigate to see if the objections are warranted.

Table 19. Themes related to elder selection in interviewed churches

Theme	Number of recurrences
Pastor and/or current elders nominate new elders	3
Church nominates new elders	2
Looking for men already displaying the gifts of an elder	7
Looking for biblically qualified men	8
Current elders vet candidates	2
There is a period during which the church and current elders are watching/examining candidates	3
Congregants can bring out concerns about the candidate	2
Church votes on the elder candidates	9

Note: These items are ordered according to the sequence of the process rather than frequency or responses

Transitioning to plural elder leadership. Four of the six pastors interviewed and one of the unpaid elders had been at their church during the transition to plural elder leadership and the interview asked them to describe how that change was navigated. As with elder selection, the men reported a process that was similar in each church. Each began with a pastor who saw a practical need for help with ministry but who was also convinced from personal Bible study that this was the leadership model portrayed in the New Testament. Next, the pastor began to teach the congregation from Scripture about elders. Sometimes this happened from the pulpit and sometimes additionally in other settings such as Sunday school. Eventually, the church adopted the practice. Table 20 shows the number of times pastors mentioned these steps as well as other related themes.

Table 20. Themes related to the process of transitioning to elder leadership in interviewed churches

Theme	Number of recurrences
Transition originated with the senior pastor	5
Bible was source of idea to transition	4
Church used Scripture to walk through transition	4
Pastor preached about elders from pulpit	5
Pastor taught/discussed about elders with church in other venues	4
Mark Dever's writings influenced the process	2
Do not rush the process	2

Research questions

This investigation endeavored to answer seven research questions. Analysis of the results of the quantitative survey and qualitative interviews provides answers for the study's sample. This represents empirical evidence for the current role of unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches.

Research question 1: What are the distinct roles assumed by paid and unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches?

Paid and unpaid elders do many of the same tasks but unpaid elders cannot spend nearly as much time on them. The tasks on which unpaid elders spend the most time are teaching groups such as Sunday school or small groups, teaching individuals, preaching, and overseeing specific ministry areas in the church (see table 7).[22] However, there are a great many other activities in which these men participate including administration, developing vision, facility maintenance, and more (see table 8).[23] Further, the unpaid elders may do less counseling and mentoring due to their lack of time and training.[24]

Research question 2: What competencies do churches look for in unpaid elders?

Theological knowledge and leadership skills are highly valued by churches for lay elders. These are followed closely by teaching skills and evangelism ability (see tables 10 and 11).[25]

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[22] Page 79.

[23] Page 80.

[24] Three of the paid pastors interviewed mentioned that they tried not to put their lay elders in counselling or care situations that they might not be equipped to handle. They did not want to set their men up for failure.

[25] Pages 82 and 83 respectively.

Research question 3: What are the formal and informal boundaries to decision making for elder teams?

Of the churches surveyed, 74.14 percent had policies that governed the decision making process of elders. For 54.39 percent of respondents, these restrictions were in the church's constitution. Ninety-five churches responded to question 44 which asked what the congregation still votes on. Forty-eight said the church votes on the budget, 48 answered staffing, 26 said finances, 25 said elders, and 23 said membership. These results suggest that many churches still vote on significant decisions, which represents a boundary to the elder's power to make decisions. The qualitative interviews support this as well.

Research question 4: How are unpaid elders engaged in teaching and shepherding the congregation?

The primary way that lay elders teach in the congregation is by teaching in group settings (table 7).[26] The qualitative interviews indicate this is often through the Sunday school or small group ministry but includes a variety of other settings (table 18).[27] Shepherding includes activities such as pastoral care, guarding doctrine, and praying for the congregation.

Research question 5: How does the church select unpaid elders?

The six churches surveyed related similar practices for selecting men to serve as unpaid elders. Generally, the pastor, elders, or church nominate candidates. The current elders see if the men are willing to serve and vet them if they are willing. During the vetting process, congregants can bring objections to the candidate, which the current elders then investigate. After the time of vetting and watching the man's life, the church votes to approve or disapprove his candidacy.

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[26] Page 79.

[27] Page 88.

Research question 6: How have churches made the transition to plural elder leadership?

Of the eight men surveyed, six of them had been a part of seeing his church through the transition from a former polity to a congregational polity led by a plurality of elders.[28] The processes through which each went were by no means identical yet they did exhibit significant similarities. For each the process began with the pastor who saw a pragmatic need for ministry help and was convicted by reading Scripture that plural eldership was the biblical model. In each case, the pastor followed this realization with preaching and/or teaching his church about biblical eldership. Other components during the period included times of discussion with the congregation and looking for men in the church who were already exhibiting the gifts and behaviors of an elder. Eventually, each leader was able to actualize the change within his flock sometimes including amendments to the church's constitution.

Research question 7: How do the survey and interview analyses compare?

The interview data enhance the survey results in that they provide details about how churches conceptualize elders and specific details about what unpaid elders do that were not available from the survey. However, the interviews do not shed further light on lay elder competencies or barriers to elder decision making.[29] The interviews also drew out subjective ideas that the survey did not. Among these are how thankful senior pastors are for their unpaid elders and the frustrations unpaid elders feel over their time limitations. Finally, the interviews gathered results about elder selection and transitioning to a plural elder model, which the survey did not address.

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[28] Pastor 6 was somewhat of an exception. His church was largely staff led before he became the pastor. There were men advising the former pastor who were called elders but some were not biblically qualified and they were not acting as shepherds for the most part. He led his church from that to operating with a true plurality of qualified elders.

[29] The other half of the research team has collected qualitative data on these topics.

Research Evaluation

This study was an explanatory, sequential mixed-methods design carried out by a team of two researchers. This is an established design that was well suited to the current research because it is straight forward and offers the chance for qualitative data to help explain the quantitative results.[30] However, all research has potential for error and this design showed strengths as well as weaknesses.

Strengths

One beneficial aspect of the study was the team approach which enabled the researchers to share tasks such as mining data, creating instruments, and seeking outside help in validating and pilot testing the instruments. Further, the use of Internet technology had several advantages. It allowed the researchers to send thousands of survey invitations for no cost. The fact that the survey was online meant members of the sample population did not have to deal with any paperwork or postage to complete and return the instrument. Internet technology also allowed the researcher to conduct and record interviews with pastors in distant locations with no travel time or expenses.

Challenges

Creswell and Plano Clark list several challenges to the explanatory sequential design, two of which were evident in this study. First, they say that the amount of time needed to perform both strands can be a problem.[31] This proved to be accurate for the research team. Additional data would have made the study more rigorous but time did not allow more to be collected.

The second relevant challenge Creswell and Plano Clark mention is the need to

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[30] John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2018), 77-81.

[31] Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting*, 81.

specify who can best provide explanatory information in the qualitative phase.[32] Much of the quantitative information was similar which made it hard to select pastors for follow-up interviews. Adding to this challenge was the fact that many of the pastors whose answers seemed the most interesting declined to be interviewed. This increased the difficulty in discerning who should be invited to follow up discussion.

The cooperation rate of 5.07 percent for the survey was a weak point as well.[33] Researchers sent 2881 electronic invitations to churches.[34] However, only 146 usable surveys came back. This is a very low cooperation rate which constitutes a non-response error. This error lowers the generalizability of the survey.[35] The project hoped to achieve a 95 percent confidence level with a five percent margin of error. Unfortunately, the cooperation rate produced an 8.11 percent margin of error.

A further weakness of this project was that the quantitative survey was delimited to churches who utilized the internet. This creates a possible coverage error if smaller churches or financially struggling churches are less likely to have internet access, then they have been excluded from the study which diminishes its generalizability.[36]

The survey also had a weakness. The expert panel advised that the survey was too long. In an attempt to streamline it, the current writer reconfigured the questions related to duties so they could be answered quickly. However, there should have been an answer choice for 0 time spent on each duty. As currently written, there is no way to

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[32] Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting*, 81.

[33] Cooperation rate is inferior to response rate but the response rate of this study cannot be determined because the number of eligible individuals in the sample is not known. See John Dixon and Clyde Tucker, "Survey Nonresponse," in *Handbook of Survey Research*, 2nd ed., ed. Peter V. Marsden and James D. Wright, (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing, 2010), 594-595.

[34] In hindsight, the research team should have taken into account that only about 19 percent of SBC churches have plural elder leadership (see Fain, A Descriptive Analysis, 115) and sent enough invitations to account for the fact that only that percentage of the sample would be eligible to complete the instrument.

[35] Lesley Andres, *Designing and Doing Survey Research* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012), 112-113.

[36] Andres, *Designing and Doing*, 109-110.

know if the given duty is performed infrequently or not done at all.

Finally, it is notable that this project took place in the spring and summer of 2020, the exact time frame during which the Covid-19 pandemic was wreaking havoc on the United States accompanied by high levels of social unrest. Many states were experiencing "shelter in place" during March, April, and May of 2020. This situation was not much better by June when the team launched the survey. This made the job of pastors incredibly stressful. These events might well have influenced the degree to which pastors could cooperate with researchers. In fact, during the qualitative interviews, without being prompted all eight men raised the issue of Covid regarding how it had changed their churches and made ministry more difficult. Anecdotally, several times the researcher had the experience of trying to call a pastor to invite him to take the survey and reaching an assistant who said something along the lines of people were all working from home and it was hard to know if messages were getting through.

Conclusion

As a mixed-methods design, this study had two distinct phases. The quantitative phase resulted in 146 usable surveys from churches that qualified as operating with a plurality of elders, some of whom were unpaid. The survey gathered data about the specific roles of unpaid elders in these churches, the competencies churches expect their lay elders to have, and the barriers to decision making faced by elders. The qualitative phase consisted of interviews with a purposive sample of survey respondents. The interviews obtained clarifying information about how lay elders accomplish their tasks of teaching and shepherding. The interviews also gathered information about how churches select unpaid elders and how they have transitioned to plural elder leadership.

The findings of the study represent verifiable data, as opposed to conjecture or anecdotal evidence, of the jobs done by lay elders in Southern Baptist churches. The

small number of surveys completed limits the generalizability of the study. However, it offers new evidence on which future research can build.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this explanatory sequential mixed-methods project was to uncover the roles currently filled by lay elders in Southern Baptist churches. Concomitantly, the study endeavored to discover the competencies churches expect their unpaid elders to have, plus any decision making barriers elders experience in their churches. The research team sent 2,881 survey invitations to a random sample of Southern Baptist Convention churches. This resulted in usable quantitative data from 146 returned surveys which yield an 8.11 percent margin of error at the 95 percent confidence level. From those, the present researcher obtained qualitative data through follow up interviews with six pastors and two unpaid elders from six churches.

The Bible portrays elders as shepherd type leaders. However, some Christians conceptualize plural elder leadership akin to a corporate executive board.[1] In fact, in 2002 Robert Wring cited three Baptist scholars who believed that Baptists were seeing a growth in elder ruled churches which would create conflict in the denomination over the next ten years.[2] Wring and the scholars he cited were concerned that churches would adopt plural elder leadership that would usurp the authority of the church body.[3]

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[1] For example see Aubry Malphurs, *Leading Leaders: Empowering Church Boards for Ministry Excellence* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 23-24. This type of authoritative view of the elder's job is also help by Presbyterians. For example, see Charles Hodge, "Warrant and Theory of Ruling Eldership," in *Order in the Offices: Essays Defining the Roles of Church Officers*, ed. Mark R. Brown (Duncanville, PA: Classic Presbyterian Government Resources, 1993), 67-79.

[2] Robert A. Wring, "An Examination of the Practice of Elder Rule in Selected Southern Baptist Churches in the Light of New Testament Teaching" (PhD diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 2002), 94-106.

[3] Chapter 1 of this thesis distinguished between elder led and elder ruled churches. Elder led churches have a plurality of elders but the congregation still votes at least on major issues. Elder ruled churches elect or approve their elders and are then subject to their decisions with limited input. This would be more similar to a corporate board and the Presbyterian model of polity. Wring's concern was that the

Concerning this predicted growth in plural elder leadership, Joshua Remy notes, "now almost two decades removed from those predictions, it is still unclear the scope of the trend in the SBC."[4] While there may not be hard data, there is a sense in Baptist life that more churches are using lay elders (whether elder ruled or elder led) as evidenced in the writings of practitioners such as Mark Dever and Phil A. Newton.[5] This notion also gains support by simply browsing church websites and noting that many of them include a list of elders on their leadership pages. However, there is little to no evidence demonstrating which type of role unpaid elders are fulfilling. Are they leading as servants or are they ruling their congregations? This project aimed to begin filling in that gap with data related to the roles unpaid elders are playing in SBC churches. The remainder of this chapter presents implications of the results along with suggestions for further research.

Research Implications

To determine the role lay elders are playing, this project first used a quantitative survey that asked how much time unpaid elders spent on specific duties, what competencies the church expected from them, and the role they played in church decisions. Next, the project employed qualitative interviews to clarify how elders were filling their duties but also to find out how churches selected elders and how they have

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elder ruled model would become common in Southern Baptist churches. Five of the six churches interviewed for this project are operating with an elder led model and find it to be very beneficial. The sixth according to the pastor, leans towards elder rule because the congregation is very young. The current researcher believes the elder led model is the more biblical.

[4] Joshua Alan Remy, "Church Transition to Plurality of Elders: A Case Study" (EdD thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019), 3.

[5] Mark Dever, "Elders and Deacons in History," in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 238. Also, Phil A. Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic and Professional, 2005), 56. The purpose of the current research was not to discover the percentage of Baptist churches with plural elder leadership. However, of the 233 unique churches that responded to the demographic portion of our survey, 99 (42.49 percent) said they had a plurality of elders.

transitioned to plural elder leadership. Both sets of data bring focus to the picture of what lay elders do.

Lay Elder Duties

As mentioned, some people fear plural elder leadership is too authoritative. Pastor 5 from the qualitative sample provides evidence that such elder boards do exist. He said that a church in his area has, "a plurality of elders but the senior pastor, just to overstate it a little, he's a bit like the Pope and then he's got elders who are like Cardinals. They're just a group of guys who don't do the shepherding thing. They're who he runs things by and he makes decisions with them."[6] However, the current results indicate that most elders in this sample do not function that way.

Regarding unpaid elder tasks, the first thing that is very clear from looking at the answers to survey questions 13-25 is that unpaid elders do not have large amounts of time to give. This is expected since they are not vocational ministers.[7] On average, 85.08 percent of respondents said that the lay elders spend 0 to 5 hours a week on any given duty. Questions 21 and 22 are notable deviations from this pattern as shown in table 21. The data indicate that lay elders spend more time on teaching duties than on others. According to Strauch, and others, it is crucial for elders to be apt Bible teachers as Paul instructed in 1 Timothy 3:2.[8]

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[6] Pastor 5, interview by author, Zoom video conference, September 1, 2020.

[7] The time limitations of unpaid elders came up as a theme seven times during the eight interviews. Elder 1 spoke very transparently about how difficult it was to do everything he thought an elder should do because his occupation demanded so much of his time.

[8] Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, rev. and expanded ed. (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), 22-24. Also, Benjamin L. Merkle, "The Biblical Role of Elders," in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 271.

Table 21. Time spent teaching compared to the average time of all duties

Question	Percentage of respondents who answered 0-5 hours/week %
Average of questions 13-25	85.05
21. Teaching/preparing to teach individuals	78.86
22. Teaching/preparing to teach groups	61.29

Scripturally, it is very clear that elders must be teachers. First Timothy 3:2 states that overseers must be "able to teach" and according to Titus 1:9 this includes refuting those who teach unsound doctrine. This is one of the main ways shepherds protect the flock. Benjamin L. Merkle notes how crucial it is that elders teach and protect the congregation from spiritual harm.[9]

Teaching and protecting the church through accurate doctrine were also major ideas in the qualitative data, appearing 34 times in the coded themes. For comparison sake, the idea of elders as managers came up 6 times. Demonstrating how seriously he takes the idea of protecting the church doctrinally, Elder 2 who is the worship leader at his church, said in describing his role, "I ensure that all the songs we bring before the congregation are doctrinally rich and sound."[10] Given the emphasis placed on teaching and protecting doctrine by the apostle Paul and by contemporary scholars, it is a positive finding that both the quantitative and qualitative results evidence teaching to be a paramount duty of the elders in this study.

Further, according to survey results praying for congregants, preaching, and overseeing a ministry area also receive more time on task than the remaining duties, although not as much as teaching. Table 22 compares how the percentage of respondents

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[9] Benjamin L. Merkle, *Why Elders? A Biblical and Practical Guide for Church Members* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2009), 47. Also, see pages 49-52 of this thesis for a summary of several authors who place teaching and protecting doctrine as high priorities for elders.

[10] Elder 2, interview by author, Zoom video conference, September 1, 2020.

who chose 0 to 5 hours for these duties compared to the average for all duties.

Scripturally, preaching is another important job of elders (1 Tim 5:17). Overseeing a

ministry area fits well under Paul's wording that elders "direct the affairs of the church"

(1 Tim 5:17) as long as overseeing involves caring leadership and not micromanagement.

James 5:14 indicates elders should pray for ill church members. Other than that, there is

not a specific passage teaching that elders should pray for church members. However,

Jeramie Rinne states, "shepherding like Jesus means praying like Jesus."[11] Further,

Alexander Strauch believes it is vital for elders to spend time praying for the church and

her members.[12]

Table 22. Time spent praying, preaching, and overseeing
a ministry compared to the average of all duties

Question	Percentage of respondents who answered 0-5 hours/week %
Average of questions 13-25	85.05
13. Praying for congregants	82.11
16. Overseeing a ministry area	73.39
20. Preaching/preparing to preach	75.00

The qualitative results further support the findings summarized in table 22.

Prayer as a theme appeared 6 times during interview coding even though it was not a

specific question. Elder 1 insisted, "My personal feeling is the biggest two requirements

for the elder [are] study of the word and prayer for his flock. Those two items ought to be

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[11] Jeramie Rinne, *Church Elders: How to Shepherd God's People Like Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 109.

[12] Alexander Strauch, telephone conversation with author, February 3, 2020. Mr. Strauch was on the expert panel that evaluated the survey for reliability and he suggested the addition of this question due to the importance of prayer in church leadership and his suspicion that some elder boards do not take enough time to pray for their churches. Prayer also fits within Akin's category of seeking the mind of Christ for the church which he assigns to elders. Daniel L. Akin, "The Single-Elder-Led Church The Bible's Witness to a Congregational/Single-Elder-Led Polity," in *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, ed. Chad Owen Brand, and R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2004), 50.

the major focus of an elder."[13] Also, Pastor 4 meets with his unpaid elders at 5:30 every

Wednesday morning to pray for the congregation. He exulted, "I think it really drives

myself and the other elders to get to know the lives and situations of each of the members

because we want to be specific about how we are praying and we want to really come

along beside and shepherd them through it. So it's been a really awesome time."[14]

Further, the jobs of overseeing a ministry and preaching show up in the

interviews too. At the church where Elder 2 and Pastor 6 serve, every lay elder oversees a

ministry area which means they plan it, staff it, protect it, and help carry it out. Finally, at

each of the six churches, the unpaid elders preach in the Sunday service at least two or

three times a year. In three of the churches, the unpaid elders also preach in various

contexts outside their home church.

Respondents listed several tasks the survey did not ask about (table 8).[15] The

majority of duties mentioned in these answers easily fit within scriptural categories for

elders. However, administration, strategy, and facilities maintenance are possible

exceptions.[16] Facilities maintenance seems to fit better with diaconal service.[17] Strategy

could be a problem if the elders are formulating strategy about which the church at large

has no say. Administration is a vague term that could fall under biblical duties or could

be more in line with corporate board leadership, depending on what the respondent was

specifically referring to. While these responses indicate some unpaid elders may spend

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[13] Elder 1, interview with author, telephone call, August 28, 2020.

[14] Pastor 4, interview with author, telephone call, August 31, 2020.

[15] Page 80.

[16] Note that the survey did ask about "managing church property" in question 25. Several participants also included "facilities maintenance" as duties not asked about. Question 25 was intentionally included to see if elders were doing something that might be more in line with duties of deacons.

[17] Merkle says that "deacons are needed in the church to provide logistical and material support so that the elders can concentrate their efforts on the Word of God and prayer," Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic and Professional, 2008), 238. See the bottom of page 110 to the top of 111 below for a fuller explanation of this idea.

time on chores that are not precisely biblical, the overall picture of elders painted by the survey is that they act as shepherds fulfilling scriptural responsibilities with the limited time available to them. This picture is overwhelmingly enhanced by the interview data.

All eight of the men who interviewed were adamant that they, and for the most part their churches, viewed paid and unpaid elders as shepherds. This coheres with Scripture as well as authors such as Merkle, Rinne, and Strauch who assert that elders, both paid and unpaid, must be shepherds to their congregations.[18] As a theme, shepherding came up 21 times during interview coding. The first non-demographic question on the survey asked the men to explain the role of lay elders at their churches. Pastor 6 relayed, "we would say elders are pastors, overseers, shepherds. All those words, at [church name] we would say are really one and the same. And we would say that elders are leaders who serve through oversight and shepherding." He described oversight as having a big picture view and using it to protect the church. Then he said, "shepherding where you're really down in the midst of the flock relationally, you know, whether it be like a one on one relationship counseling or if you're with a smaller group or whatever it may be."

Scriptural Basis for Duties

Since the Bible portrays elders as shepherds if a church develops its concept of elders and elder roles from Scripture the result should be men who lead as servants instead of autocrats. Both phases of this study asked if Scripture had a part in defining the office of elder within the participating church. Question 27 on the survey asked if the church used the Bible to define elder roles and if so what passages. Four men (2.76 percent) said no, one (0.69 percent) did not know, 69 (47.59 percent) skipped the question, and 71 (48.97 percent) said yes. The people who skipped the question represent

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[18] For example, see Merkle, *40 Questions*, 44, Rinne, *Church Elders*, 32-33, and Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 16.

a large portion of the sample but there is no way to know why they left the question

blank. The men answering affirmatively also represent a large segment of the sample

which indicates that at the minimum almost half the churches applied the Bible to

develop their elder ministries.

The qualitative data supports the idea that churches are using God's word to

define elder duties. When the interviewer asked Pastor 1 if he had intentionally used

Scripture to develop elder duties for his church he replied, "Absolutely. I don't know

another means of truth apart from the revelation of God to direct the affairs of his

church." This is emblematic of the attitude expressed by all interviewees. Elder

competencies were the next concept the survey explored.

Elder Competencies

The competencies a church expects her elders to possess relate to what they

want him to do. If they want a manager and decision maker they should look for someone

with greater administrative and governing skills. If they want men who can teach, guard

doctrine, and take care of people they will look for men whose skills lean towards

theology and teaching. Tables 10 and 11 above provide evidence that churches value

elders who are well versed in knowledge of the Bible and theology, have strong

leadership skills, and good teaching skills. This is not to say that churches believe

governance and financial skills are unimportant, but primarily they want men who can

handle God's word and lead, which coheres with the precedent literature around

eldership.[19] The final part of the survey related to elder decision making.

Elder Decision Making

Elders are leaders and inherent in the job of any leader are aspects of

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[19] For example, see Benjamin L. Merkle, *Forty Questions about Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic and Professional, 2008), 89-93. Also, Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 22-28.

managing, administrating, and making decisions. In the church though, the leaders do not have the kind of power to make and carry out decisions that a corporate leader would. Phil A. Newton and Matt Schmucker point out that elder leadership should operate in the context of "healthy congregationalism."[20] Stephen J. Wellum and Kirk Wellum explain that within such a paradigm, a variety of decisions may be allotted to the elder body but the ultimate authority is always in the hands of the congregation.[21] Therefore, at least to some extent, the model is reflected in the division of decision making powers.

Data from questions 44-45 of the survey help address this issue. Table 14 above shows what the churches vote on.[22] The decisions most commonly given to the church are budget, staffing, finances, membership, and who can be an elder. Table 15 portrays the decisions commonly granted to elders as administrative, financial (usually within limits), vision, and personnel.[23] The categories of decisions allotted to the church and elders in these data support the notion of the congregation having final authority in important matters and elders being able to make day to day decisions.

The qualitative data support this model as well. The interviewer asked each participant if his church voted on elder selection and in every case the answer was "yes." Also, four of the six churches still vote to receive new members. Pastor 6 was very adamant that the elder body not push their decisions on the church. He quipped, "We try to stay away from the word 'board,' as though you have a room full of deciders. We need to respect the congregation and if our ideas are so great, let's pray through it and bring them along and convince them. None of us is Moses walking down off the mountain."

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[20] Phil A. Newton and Matt Schmucker, *Elders in the Congregational Life of the Church: Rediscovering the Biblical Model of Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Ministry, 2014), 117.

[21] Stephen J. Wellum and Kirk Wellum, "The Biblical and Theological Case for Congregationalism," in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 49.

[22] Page 85.

[23] Page 85.

The qualitative interviews explored two concepts beyond what the survey investigated. These were how churches select elders and how churches had transitioned to plural elder leadership.

Elder Selection

How a church selects elders directly relates to her polity. If the congregation has the ability to install and remove elders, this maintains authority in the hands of the body. On the other hand, if the elder team decides which men will serve as lay elders, they have the ability to be a self-perpetuating executive board. The literature related to elders suggests that which group selects elder candidates is not of major concern.

Merkle writes that whether the congregation selects new elders or the current elders do is not as important as the idea that the candidates be thoroughly vetted before being installed. He suggests that the current elders, as spiritual leaders, should guide the process but that the congregation should have input.[24] Similarly, Strauch says "the actual selection of elder can be done by the congregation . . . or it can be done by the existing elders, or by a combination of both."[25] He too believes the existing elders should oversee the process because they are the spiritual leaders of the flock.[26]

Table 19 above summarizes the interview data for this topic.[27] In four of the churches the current elders nominated new elders, in one the nominations could come from elders or the congregation, while in the other one the congregation nominated them. Importantly, they all went through a time of watching and testing before installing the new elders. Plus, all of them had to be voted in by the ultimate authority of the congregation.

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[24] Merkle, *Forty Questions*, 200-202.

[25] Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 282.

[26] Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 278.

[27] Page 89.

Transitioning to a Plurality of Elders

Related to the concept of what unpaid elders do is the notion of how a congregational church led by committees, a vocational staff, or by a single senior pastor can make the transition to an elder led church. Joshua Remy has cataloged the successful transition of his church and made recommendations to aid other churches attempting the same change. He provides some summary ideas that might generalize to other churches seeking to make this change. The first key principle is "understand the church." The second is "build on the Bible." Number three is "involve other people." The fourth is "plan and communicate intentionally." The last principle is "select the right elders."[28]

Newton and Schmucker have also taken churches through the journey of becoming plural elder led. They recommend a three-phase transition that consists of an evaluation stage, a presentation stage, and an implementation stage.[29] In the evaluation phase, the pastor works with a small group of leaders to study the issue. In the presentation phase, the pastor spends weeks or months teaching the church body about elder leadership and elder qualifications. In the implementation phase, the church and pastor work together to select the new elders.

The qualitative data from the present study compares favorably, although not exactly, with what Remy and Newton and Schmucker have suggested. Pastors 1, 2, 5, and 6 had each led their churches in moving to leadership by a plurality of elders. They related similar accounts of the process. The components they had in common were Scripture as the foundation, the idea began with the pastor, a time of focused teaching about elders, and implementing the change. These stories especially correlate with Remy's second and fourth principles and Newton and Schmucker's final two phases. The precedent literature and the present data agree that pastors should spend considerable

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[28] Remy, "Church Transition," 136-38.

[29] Newton and Schmucker, *Elders in the Life*, 184-88.

time teaching the congregation a biblical view of eldership. This teaching should not be limited to the concept of shared leadership and the qualifications for elders. It should include specific information about the roles elders would play in the church so that the members can make an informed decision.

Conclusion

The precedent literature reviewed in chapter 2 includes apologies for congregational polity, analyses of biblical texts related to elders in the first century churches, and calls for today's churches to adopt plural elder leadership. Occasionally, the literature might supply a first-hand account of an elder meeting or something like that.[30] However, there is not a systematic account of the precise tasks unpaid elders are doing in evangelical churches. This study begins to fill that void by cataloging a list of specific roles filled by lay elders in the sampled churches as wells providing empirical evidence of the competencies these churches look for in elders, and the decisions they allow their elders to make.

Further research

This study has provided some evidence of what duties unpaid elders are executing in Southern Baptist Churches. For the current sample, the majority of these men are carrying out scriptural tasks and joining their paid elders in teaching and preaching as shepherds of the flock. However, there are many questions yet unanswered that future research can address.

First, the current study needs to be replicated with different populations to get an accurate picture of the evangelical landscape concerning lay eldership. The present response rate was not stellar. Therefore, a similar study of the SBC on a much larger

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[30] For example, see Paul Winslow and Doorman Followwill, *Christ in Church Leadership: A Handbook for Elders and Pastors* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 2001), 41-43.

scale would be helpful.[31] Further, comparable studies of other evangelical denominations and non-denominational churches need to be done. [32]

Another important line of inquiry is the effectiveness of churches with plural elder leadership compared to the effectiveness of churches with other leadership models. Are churches with plural elder leadership better at evangelism? Are they better at missions? Are they better at making disciples? Do they have better rates of retaining teenagers and college students?

Similar to the effectiveness question is the matter of congregational perception. How do church members who were part of a church before and after it moved to plural elder leadership feel about the change? Do they believe they are receiving better pastoral care? Do they believe they are receiving better teaching? Do they believe the church is reaching more people?

This survey attempted to glean a wide array of information. In so doing, it could not collect specific data from a large number of churches. According to survey item 26, 16.36 percent of elder boards in this sample are involved in administration of the church but it is not clear what that entails. This could conceivably include management type duties that go beyond the biblical concept of elder. Future studies could look closely at specifically what it means for an elder group to be in charge of administration in a church.

Further, seven men reported that their unpaid elders helped maintain church property six to ten hours per week, two said they spend eleven to fifteen hours per week

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[31] Future researches might be well served to consider that nineteen percent of Southern Baptist churches are plural elder led (see James Allen Fain III, "A Descriptive Analysis of the Relationship between Paradigms and Duties of Pastoral Ministry" (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, 2010), 115) and to plan their sample accordingly. For example, if they want 400 completed surveys and assume a ten percent return rate, they would need to send 21,052 survey invitations to reach enough of the nineteen percent to get 400 surveys back.

[32] Potential evangelical groups to study include church networks such as the Sovereign Grace and Acts 29 churches, denominations such as Bible Churches and Evangelical Free churches, and non-denominational churches.

on it, and one spends more than fifteen hours a week maintaining the property. This is reminiscent of the situation in Acts 6. The church needed help fairly distributing food to Jewish and Gentile widows. The apostles said they did not need to take time away from prayer and the ministry of the word to perform the food ministry so they delegated it to others. Likewise, is property management the best way for elders to spend their time? Further research could examine if elders are fulfilling roles more traditionally expected of deacons. If they are, is it because they have not been trained, is it because they are not truly gifted as an elder, or is it strictly pragmatic?

Another area of inquiry that can be studied is how churches are training unpaid elders. These men normally have full-time secular jobs on top of their church responsibilities. This leaves little time for the kind of training a vocational minister would receive. Future research could ask questions such as: How do churches equip their lay elders? Many resources exist for training elders, which ones are most effective?[33] As evidence becomes available for how churches train unpaid elders, investigators can also inquire if there is a difference in satisfaction levels between churches with trained lay elders and churches with untrained lay elders?

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Summary

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At the outset, this project stated the problem to be that leadership by a plurality of elders, although biblical, has not been commonly practiced in congregational churches (such as Baptist) for many decades. Therefore, churches contemplating adopting this practice may not have correct ideas of the role of lay elders. Furthermore, the lay elders themselves may not know exactly how they should serve, nor be equipped to perform

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[33] David D. Ireland, *The Ministry of the Elder: Developing Effective Elders to Serve the Local Church* (Montclair, NJ: Impact Publishing House, 2004), Greg R. Scharf and Arthur Kok, *The New Elder's Handbook: A Biblical Guide to Developing Faithful Leaders* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2018), Robert H. Thune, *Gospel Eldership: Equipping a New Generation of Servant Leaders* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016) are just a handful of examples.

their duties. The researchers aimed to determine if this was truly the case by conducting a mixed-methods study of Southern Baptist churches who operated with unpaid elders.[34] Although the sample for this study was small and more research needs to be done surrounding this topic, the data collected from these churches suggest that most of them are experiencing elders who lead as shepherds while maintaining their congregational polity.

A statement from Pastor 3 provides an apt conclusion:

A lot of people think, well they really need [unpaid elders] in the larger churches because there is so much to cover. But we really need them in smaller churches and medium sized churches just as much because there's still groups out there that the paid staff can't really get to on a regular basis with all the other duties that people expect of us. So my unpaid elders are invaluable. I couldn't do this ministry without them and they're awesome.

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[34] As noted above, Pastor 5 is aware of a church in his area that is elder ruled rather than elder led. The current researcher is aware of a similar situation in his own context and his fear was that the project would uncover many more such churches.

APPENDIX 1

SURVEY INVITATION

Dear Church Leader,

Our names are Adam Mehaffey and Scott Rhodes. We are a research team of doctoral students from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, under the supervision of SBTS faculty member Dr. Danny Bowen. The purpose for our letter to you today is to thank you for the leadership of your church. Church leadership has many different dynamics and we are seeking to grow in our understanding of some of the changing dynamics in our denomination. If you are not pastoral staff at your church, we ask that you **please** send this information to one of the staff ministers.

There is much anecdotal evidence regarding the growth of unpaid elders in Southern Baptist Churches. We are working to find churches who use elders in their structure and seek to learn how unpaid elders are leading in Southern Baptist Churches. As such, we want to . . . in fact, we **need** to learn from you.

We are asking if you would take a few moments to complete the survey located at the link below within the next seven days.

Our research seeks to identify principles that may be transferable to other churches, so we need to hear from many pastors, including those that do not utilize unpaid elders. We pray that God allows us to see His hand at work in your church and to tell part of His story in your church.

As pastors, **we know** the daily pressures of ministry. There seems to be far more to do than time to accomplish it. This is why we are humbly asking you to give us some of your most precious commodity: **time**. We anticipate that the survey will require approximately 15 minutes to complete.

A select group of churches will be identified from the results of this survey and approached to commit to a more in-depth interview with one of our research team. If you agree to be available for a follow up interview, we will include you in a drawing for one of three $50.00 Amazon gift cards.

Would you please take a moment, even now, to help our SBC churches learn from you? Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. On behalf of

our team, thank you for your leadership and for your prayerful consideration of this request.

You may access the survey here: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/58SGKQX

For the sake of His name,

Adam Mehaffey   Scott Rhodes

APPENDIX 2

SURVEY INSTRUMENT

The Role of the Unpaid Elder in Congregationalist Congregations:
A Mixed-Methods Study

Developed by Scott Rhodes and Adam Mehaffey
EdD Candidates
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

A paid elder is a pastor or elder that receives compensation and wages for the work
performed as a pastor-elder.

An unpaid or lay elder is a pastor-elder that serves the church but does not receive
monetary compensation for his service.

Congregationalist polity is the system in which the church congregation has the power to
make final decisions on church matters. Congregationalist polity or rule does not mean
that every decision is left to the entire congregation as some decisions are delegated to
church leaders.

Demographic Information

1. Question one was an agreement to participate in Phase 1.

Agreement to Participate:
The research in which you are about to participate is designed to gather data on the
roles unpaid elders play in local churches. This research is being conducted by Adam
Mehaffey and Scott Rhodes for purposes of completing a thesis at the Southern
Baptist Theological Seminary. In this research, you will be asked to answer a series of
questions about the functioning of elders at your church. Any information you
provide will be held *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported,
or your name identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally
voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time*. By your
completion of this online survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your
responses in this research.

Agree
Do not agree

2. What is your current role in your church?
A. Senior Pastor
B. Lead Pastor
C. Pastor

3. How long have you been in your current position?
A. Less Than Five Years
B. 5-10 years
C. 11-15 years
D. 16-20 years
E. Longer than 20 years

4. What is the highest level of education you have attained?
A. High School Diploma
B. Associate's Degree
C. Bachelor's Degree
D. Master's Degree
E. Doctoral Degree

5. What formal ministry training have you had? Check all that apply.
A. No formal ministry training
B. Bible college
C. Seminary certificate
D. Seminary degree
E. Other

6. What is your church's average worship attendance?
A. <50
B. 51-100
C. 101-200
D. 201-300
E. 301-400
F. 401-500
G. >500

7. Your church context is best described as:
A. Rural
B. Suburban
C. Urban

8. Is your position paid or unpaid?
A. Paid
B. Unpaid

9. Does your church have a plurality of elders or pastors?

A. Yes
B. No

10.   Does your church utilize unpaid elders? [If "No," then the survey ends. If "Yes," then the survey will continue to Q.11.]

A. Yes
B. No

11. Are you willing to participate in a follow-up interview regarding the role of unpaid elders in your church?
A. Yes
B. No

Interview Participation Contact Information

12. Contact information: [Appears only if the answer to Q. 11 is "Yes"]
A. Name:
B. Church Name:
    A. Church address:
    B. Address:
    C. Street # and street
    D. City
    E. State
    F. Zip/Postal code
    G. Church website
    H. Email address
    I. Phone number

Elder Roles

We understand that each individual is uniquely gifted and has a unique set of training and experiences. Therefore, not all elders will perform all the duties we are asking about. In the table below, please enter the approximate number of hours you spend in an average week performing the duty listed.

13. Praying for Congregants

A. 0-5 Hours Per Week
B. 6-10 Hours Per Week
C. 11-15 Hours Per Week
D. More than 15 Hours Per Week

14. Counseling Congregants

A.   0-5 Hours Per Week
B.   6-10 Hours Per Week
C.   11-15 Hours Per Week
D.   More than 15 Hours Per Week

15. Visiting Congregants (Home, hospital, etc.)

A.   0-5 Hours Per Week
B.   6-10 Hours Per Week
C.   11-15 Hours Per Week
D.   More than 15 Hours Per Week

16. Oversight of Ministry Area

A.   0-5 Hours Per Week
B.   6-10 Hours Per Week
C.   11-15 Hours Per Week
D.   More than 15 Hours Per Week

17. Evangelism

A.   0-5 Hours Per Week
B.   6-10 Hours Per Week
C.   11-15 Hours Per Week
D.   More than 15 Hours Per Week

18. Community Benevolence

A.   0-5 Hours Per Week
B.   6-10 Hours Per Week
C.   11-15 Hours Per Week
D.   More than 15 Hours Per Week

19. Oversight of Church Finance

A.   0-5 Hours Per Week
B.   6-10 Hours Per Week
C.   11-15 Hours Per Week
D.   More than 15 Hours Per Week

20. Preaching/Preparation for Preaching

A.   0-5 Hours Per Week
B.   6-10 Hours Per Week

C.   11-15 Hours Per Week
D.   More than 15 Hours Per Week

21. Teaching/Preparing to Teach Individuals

A.   0-5 Hours Per Week
B.   6-10 Hours Per Week
C.   11-15 Hours Per Week
D.   More than 15 Hours Per Week

22. Teaching/Preparing to Teach Groups

A.   0-5 Hours Per Week
B.   6-10 Hours Per Week
C.   11-15 Hours Per Week
D.   More than 15 Hours Per Week

23. Elder Meetings

A.   0-5 Hours Per Week
B.   6-10 Hours Per Week
C.   11-15 Hours Per Week
D.   More than 15 Hours Per Week

24. Church Business/Member Meetings

A.   0-5 Hours Per Week
B.   6-10 Hours Per Week
C.   11-15 Hours Per Week
D.   More than 15 Hours Per Week

25. Managing Church Property

A.   0-5 Hours Per Week
B.   6-10 Hours Per Week
C.   11-15 Hours Per Week
D.   More than 15 Hours Per Week

26. Please list any tasks the unpaid elders in your church perform that have not already been addressed by this survey (even if you do not perform them).

27. Did your church use Scripture when assigning roles to your elder body? If so, which passages?

Elder Competencies and Skills

28. Our lay or unpaid elders must possess strong financial management skills.

_____Strongly Agree

_____ Agree

_____ Disagree

_____ Strongly Disagree

29. Our lay or unpaid elders must possess strong biblical and theological knowledge.

_____Strongly Agree

_____ Agree

_____ Disagree

_____ Strongly Disagree

30. Our lay or unpaid elders must be skilled in evangelism.

_____Strongly Agree

_____ Agree

_____ Disagree

_____ Strongly Disagree

31. Our lay or unpaid elders must possess strong leadership skills.

_____ Strongly Agree

_____ Agree

_____ Disagree

_____ Strongly Disagree

32. Our lay or unpaid elders must be skilled teachers.

_____ Strongly Agree

_____ Agree

_____Disagree

_____Strongly Disagree

Indicate how important each competency is for lay or unpaid elders in your church by circling the appropriate number. (1 represents minimally important and 10 represents highly important.)

33. Theological Acumen

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

34. Business Management Acumen

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

35. Governance Skill

    1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

36. Evangelistic Skill

1　　2　　3　　4　　5　　6　　7　　8　　9　　10

37. Teaching Skills

1　　2　　3　　4　　5　　6　　7　　8　　9　　10

Decision Making

38. The paid elders and unpaid elders in our church have equal say in elder decisions.
　　_____Strongly Agree
　　_____ Agree
　　_____ Disagree
　　_____ Strongly Disagree

39. The paid elders in our church have greater say in elder decisions.
　　_____Strongly Agree
　　_____ Agree
　　_____ Disagree
　　_____ Strongly Disagree

40. The unpaid elders in our church have greater say in elder decisions.
　　_____Strongly Agree
　　_____ Agree
　　_____ Disagree
　　_____ Strongly Disagree

41. Our church has policies that govern the decision-making process of our church elders.
　　_____ Yes
　　_____ No
　　_____ Don't know

42. Our church constitution or by-laws contain restrictions on decision making for paid elders.
　　____ Yes
　　____ No
　　____ Don't Know

43. If your church has written policies regarding the decision-making abilities of unpaid and paid elders, please briefly describe them below:

44. Please list the decisions the church votes on.

45. Please list the decisions delegated the elder body.

APPENDIX 3

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Qualitative Protocol for Senior Pastors

Informed consent and agreement to participate:
The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify the roles of unpaid elders in congregationalist, evangelical churches. This research is being conducted by Scott A. Rhodes, under the supervision of Dr. Danny Bowen, of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. In this research, you will be asked to respond to several questions pertaining to your experience in serving a church operating with lay elders. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. By your completion of this interview, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

Do you agree or not agree?

Verify demographic information

Name:

Title:

Years in position:

Education:

Worship attendance:

Setting:

Paid or not:

Clarify definitions:

Here are some definitions that should help in understanding the questions. For the purposes of this study:

Paid elder- men who lead a local church, preach and teach in the church, provide administrative oversight, provide pastoral care, equip the congregation for ministry and receive financial compensation for their work.

Lay elder, Unpaid elder- a man recognized by his church as an elder but who is not a vocational minister

Manager- one who makes decisions for the organization and directs others in carrying out the functions of the organization. Does not imply servanthood.

Shepherding- the job of elders (paid and unpaid) in leading, protecting, and caring for the congregation. Implies servanthood.

Teaching- transmission of sound doctrine through scriptural instruction as well as refuting unsound doctrine.

With those things in mind, tell me what you see as the role of an unpaid elder in your church and how your lay elders fulfill that role.

Teaching and Shepherding Questions

Our survey indicated that lay elders in your church spend _____ hours per week teaching congregants one on one.

Do you affirm that answer still?

If the answer was in the 0-5 range, can you verify that it is not zero?

About how much time do they spend teaching one on one?

Can you tell me more about the one on one teaching? Is it formal mentorship or something else?

Our survey indicated that lay elders in your church spend _____ hours per week teaching congregants in a group setting.

Do you still affirm that answer?

If the answer was in the 0-5 range, can you verify that it is not zero?

About how much time do they spend teaching groups?

Can you tell me more about their teaching groups? What are the settings? Sunday school? Small groups? Wednesday night? Sunday night? Do you teach published material or write your own studies?

Our survey indicated that lay elders in your church spend _____ hours/week preaching and preparing to preach.

Do you still affirm that?

If it was 0-5 can you verify that it is not zero?

About how much time do they spend preaching (including preparation)?

Do the lay elders preach at the Sunday morning service(s)? If not, why not?

Teaching, administration, and shepherding are the key duties of a New Testament elder. Our survey asked about the shepherding functions of counseling and visiting. You said unpaid elders at your church spent _____ hours per week on counseling and _____ hours per week on visiting? Can you give me a more precise number, just an average, I know it is not going to be the same every week?

Please explain the counseling and visiting duties more.

How did Scripture guide the development of these duties?

What other duties do your lay elders perform that might be considered shepherding?

How did Scripture guide the development of these duties?

Would you say that the unpaid elders at your church view themselves more as managers or more as shepherds?

Please explain your answer.

Would you say that the congregation at your church views the unpaid elders more as managers or more as shepherds?

Please explain your answer.

Elder Selection Questions

Our survey indicated that unpaid elders at your church are selected by _____. Please explain that process more fully. How did Scripture guide the development of this process?

Polity Transition Questions

Were you a part of this church before it utilized unpaid elders?

If so, can you describe the general process the church went through to make that transition, including with whom the idea originated?

What role did Scripture play?

Do you think the church functions more effectively now that you have plural elder leadership?

Qualitative Protocol for Unpaid Elders

Informed consent and agreement to participate:
The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify the roles of unpaid elders in congregationalist, evangelical churches. This research is being conducted by Scott A. Rhodes, under the supervision of Dr. Danny Bowen, of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. In this research, you will be asked to respond to several questions pertaining to your experience in serving a church operating with lay elders. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. By your completion of this interview, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

Do you agree or not agree?

Verify demographic information:

Name:

Title:

Years in position:

Education:

Worship attendance:

Setting:

Paid or not:

Clarify definitions:

Here are some definitions that should help in understanding the questions. For the purposes of this study:

Paid elder- men who lead a local church, preach and teach in the church, provide administrative oversight, provide pastoral care, equip the congregation for ministry and receive financial compensation for their work.

Lay elder, Unpaid elder- a man recognized by his church as an elder but who is not a vocational minister.

Manager- one who makes decisions for the organization and directs others in carrying out the functions of the organization. Does not imply servanthood.

Shepherding- the job of elders (paid and unpaid) in leading, protecting, and caring for the congregation. Implies servanthood.

Teaching- transmission of sound doctrine through scriptural instruction as well as refuting unsound doctrine.

With those ideas in mind, tell me what you see as the role of unpaid elders in your church and how you fulfill that role.

<p style="text-align:center">Teaching and Shepherding Questions</p>

Our survey indicated that lay elders in your church spend _____ hours per week teaching congregants one on one.

Has that been your experience?

If the answer was in the 0-5 range, can you verify that it is not zero?

About how much time do you spend teaching one on one?

Can you tell me more about the one on one teaching? Is it formal mentorship or something else?

Our survey indicated that lay elders in your church spend _____ hours per week teaching congregants in a group setting.

Has that been your experience?

If the answer was in the 0-5 range, can you verify that it is not zero?

About how much time do you spend teaching groups?

Can you tell me more about your experience teaching groups? What are the settings? Sunday school? Small groups? Wednesday night? Sunday night? Do you teach published material or write your own studies?

Our survey indicated that lay elders in your church spend _____ hours/week preaching and preparing to preach.

Has that been your experience?

If it was 0-5 can you verify that it is not zero?

About how much time do you spend preaching (including preparation)?

Do the lay elders preach at the Sunday morning service(s)? If not, why not?

Have you ever preached in the Sunday morning service? If not, would you like to?

Teaching, administration, and shepherding are the key duties of a New Testament elder. Our survey asked about the shepherding functions of counseling and visiting. You said unpaid elders at your church spent _____ hours per week on counseling and _____ hours per week on visiting? Can you give me a more precise number, just an average, I know it is not going to be the same every week?

Please explain your counseling and visiting duties more.

How did Scripture guide the development of these duties?

What other duties do you perform that might be considered shepherding?

How did Scripture guide the development of these duties?

Would you say that the unpaid elders at your church view themselves more as managers or more as shepherds? What about you personally, do you see yourself more as a shepherd or a manager?

Please explain your answer.

Would you say that the congregation at your church views the unpaid elders more as managers or more as shepherds?

Please explain your answer.

Elder Selection Questions

Our survey indicated that unpaid elders at your church are selected by _____. Please explain that process more fully. How did Scripture guide the development of this process?

Polity Transition Questions

Were you a part of this church before it utilized unpaid elders?

If so, can you describe the general process the church went through to make that transition, including with whom the idea originated?

What role did Scripture play?

Do you think the church functions more effectively now that you have plural elder leadership? Please explain.

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ABSTRACT

THE ROLE OF UNPAID ELDERS IN SOUTHERN BAPTIST
CHURCHES: A MIXED METHODS STUDY

Scott Alan Rhodes, EdD
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2020
Chair: Dr. Danny R. Bowen,

The purpose of this study was to discover the roles fulfilled by unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches. This project involved two phases. Phase 1 utilized a forty-five question survey which asked about duties of unpaid elders, competencies of unpaid elders, and barriers to decision making among elder teams. Phase 2 involved qualitative interviews of a purposive sample of survey respondents. The interviews sought clarifying information about elder duties, elder selection, and information about transitioning to plural elder leadership. A random sample of 2881 Southern Baptist churches was surveyed. One hundred-forty-six usable surveys were returned. Eight men were interviewed for Phase 2.

Data from both phases indicate that the role most filled by unpaid elders is teaching. Other frequent duties include prayer for the church, pastoral care, ministry oversight, and property maintenance. Results suggest that more of the elders in this sample play a shepherding role than a governing role.

Key words: unpaid elders; church polity; elder roles

VITA

Scott Alan Rhodes

EDUCATION
        BS, Baylor University, 1985
        MSEd, Baylor University, 1993

PUBLICATIONS
        "Tatian and Basil: Differing Views Regarding the Pagan Educational System
            of Antiquity." *Teach Journal of Christian Education* 13, no. 1 (Winter
            2019): 46-51.

ORGANIZATIONS
        Society of Professors in Christian Education, 2020

ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT
        Graduate Teaching Assistant, Baylor University, 1991-1993
        Adjunct Faculty, Baylor University, 1994-2004

MINISTERIAL EMPLOYMENT
        Interim Youth Minister, Mexia First Baptist Church, Mexia, Texas, 1993-1994
        Youth Minister (part time), Brazos Meadows Baptist Church, Hewitt, Texas,
            1995-1997
        Minister of Students and Education, Brazos Meadows Baptist Church, Hewitt,
            Texas, 1997-2020