

Ministry Description:



Elders

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Contents

Introduction	4
<i>Serving in the Church</i>	<i>4</i>
Requirements	6
Responsibilities	7
<i>Summary of Responsibilities</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Description of Responsibilities</i>	<i>8</i>
Concluding Thoughts	10
Appendix: Church Offices	12
<i>BCO 2.2 The Presbyterate</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>BCO 2.4 Officers' Ordination and Installation Questions</i>	<i>13</i>

Introduction

In his book entitled *Biblical Eldership*, Alexander Strauch describes the responsibilities of an elder as follows:

- “Elders lead the church (1 Tim 5:17; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:1-2),
- Teach and preach the Word (1 Timothy 3:2; 2 Timothy 4:2; Titus 1:9),
- Protect the church from false teachers (Acts 20:17, 28-31),
- Exhort and admonish the saints in sound doctrine (1 Timothy 4:13; 2 Timothy 3:13-17; Titus 1:9),
- Visit the sick and pray (James 5:14; Acts 20:35),
- and judge doctrinal issues (Acts 15:16).

In biblical terminology, elders shepherd, oversee, lead, and care for the local church”¹

Serving in the Church

The Bible describes the church in a number of different ways, but one of the richest analogies is that of a body working together with every part doing its share.

In 1 Corinthians 12 we learn that:

- members should strive to use all that they have been given to serve in the church (v7)
- the church is one body made up of many different members (v12f)
- God has positioned each of the members in the body for specific purposes (v18)
- even though some members have a more prominent role, every member is absolutely necessary (v21-25)
- if one member stops doing their part, the whole body is affected, because the whole body is interconnected (v26)

These points should cause every member to regularly ask questions like:

- “What am I contributing to the life of this church?”
- “Am I using my gifts, abilities and opportunities to benefit the rest of the church body?”
- “Am I a contributor or am I a consumer?”

Such questions are important to ask because there is always plenty of existing work that needs to be done, there is always plenty of new work that could be done, and in many churches 80% of the work gets done by 20% of the people.

¹ *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call To Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, by Alexander Strauch, © 1995, Lewis and Roth Publishers

However, for the body to function well, every part needs to do its share

(see Ephesians 4:16)

With such thoughts in mind the Session has decided to draft a number of “ministry descriptions” laying out ways in which members can helpfully contribute to the life of the church. Not all of these ministries are glamorous, not all of these ministries are prominent, but each and every one is important, and if done well, will be of great benefit to our church and/or community.

Therefore, regardless of the job at hand, we are looking for members who are committed to faithfully fulfilling their specific duties responsibly, diligently, and with excellence, always remembering Colossians 3:23-24:

“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.”

(Colossians 3:23–24 ESV)

Serving in the church, no matter what that looks like, is ultimately about serving the Lord. With this in mind, please prayerfully consider the following ministry description for Elders.



Requirements

- Elders must be men who are members of the church, who meet the Biblical qualifications laid out in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9, and who, after much prayer, believe that God is calling them to serve as an Elder.
- Elders must be men of faith who enjoy a close walk with the Lord, regularly feeding on His word and pursuing an active prayer life, and who lead their families in a godly way.
- Elders must be men of character who are committed to faithfully fulfilling the listed responsibilities for the glory of God and for the health and witness of the church.
- Elders must be men who familiarise themselves with the Westminster Presbyterian Church Book of Church Order (BCO) which lays out our denominational standard for church practice.
- Elders must be men who are able to take the WPC leadership vows (BCO 2.4), found on pages 11 & 12 of this booklet, with a clear conscience.
- Elders must enjoy the support of their families in pursuing this ministry.
- Elders must have the necessary time available to be committed to the ministry of the eldership.

Accountability and Authority

In the WPC, we have two types of elders: Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders. Teaching Elders are essentially trained and ordained pastors, whereas Ruling Elders are volunteers who share in the spiritual oversight of a local church.

That said, we also believe in the 'parity' of the eldership. In short, this means that even though different elders have unique responsibilities, each and every elder (whether Teaching or Ruling) carries an equal authority. As such, all elders are accountable to the eldership as a whole, because, as the BCO states, the official authority of the church is exercised collectively by the appropriate assembly, not individually.

Time Commitment

The exact time commitment required to be a faithful Elder is impossible to specify as there are so many variables. In normal circumstances, an average of a few hours per week over the course of a year is probably a reasonable expectation. However, this would increase during times of greater need.

Elders are expected to attend monthly Session Meetings, and may be delegated to attend quarterly Presbytery Meetings. Further to these formal meetings, elders will need to allow time to carry out the other responsibilities listed in this ministry description.

Responsibilities

Many of the responsibilities below are derived from the WPC Book of Church order, while others are specific to the ministry of Grace Christian Church.

Summary of Responsibilities

Elders are responsible too lead, feed, and protect the church by:

1. Committing oneself to regular prayer for the needs of the church
 2. Developing intentional personal relationships within the congregation
 3. Providing pastoral care for the church generally, but also by specifically caring for a designated group of members
 5. Attending monthly Session meetings to discuss and pray about the direction and needs of the church
 6. Taking ownership of a particular ministry portfolio
 7. Periodically leading worship services
 8. Teaching others in a context suited to one's personal gifts and abilities
 9. Being delegated to attend QLD WPC Presbytery meetings and National Assembly Meetings as needed.
 10. Meeting with individuals or families in specific circumstances.
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Description of Responsibilities

1. Committing oneself to regular prayer for the needs of the church

In Acts chapter 6 we read of the elders appointing deacons to care for the practical needs of the church. Their stated reason for doing this was so that they could devote themselves *to prayer and to the ministry of the word* (v4).

As such, all elders at Grace are expected to be diligent in praying for the people and the ministries of the church. After all, despite our very best efforts, without God we can accomplish nothing!

2. Developing intentional personal relationships within the congregation

In order to truly lead, feed and protect the church an elder must have a healthy relationship with as many in the congregation as he possibly can.

In a large church like ours it would be impossible for an elder to know everyone well, but elders must readily mix with the people, so that they have their finger on the pulse of the congregation. In order to foster such relationships, elders must be actively involved in the life of the church, attending both the formal and informal gatherings of the church where they are able.

Beyond this however, elders are encouraged to share their lives with others outside of the usual activities of the church, through visitation, other recreational activities, one to one Bible reading, and of course, (as is commanded in Scripture) hospitality.

Though doing this, they will be able to build intentional, meaningful, Christ-centred relationships with a handful of people in the congregation in order to help them grow in Christ.

3. Providing pastoral care for the church generally, but also by specifically caring for a designated handful of families.

Caring for each other is a mandate given to all Christians (1 Corinthians 12v24-26), but the elders in the church have a special responsibility to provide pastoral care for those within the congregation. Much of this care will take place through the Session collectively, but each individual elder is expected to take special responsibility for a designated group of church members. As a minimum, this would involve regularly conversing with and praying for these families.

4. Attending monthly Session Meetings to discuss and pray about the direction and needs of the church.

Session meetings are not an end in and of themselves, but they provide a necessary forum for prayerfully discussing and then addressing the various needs

of the church. Each elder is encouraged to actively contribute to the discussion that takes place at these meetings and is entitled to cast a vote.

Normally one of the pastors will act as the Moderator of the meeting, while another nominated elder will function as the Clerk.

5. Taking ownership of a particular ministry portfolio

Even though the responsibility for the various ministries of the church ultimately falls to the eldership *collectively* it makes practical sense for *individual* elders to have a special focus on a particular area. These “ministry portfolios” are wide ranging and include such things as Preaching and Teaching, Pastoral Care, Home Groups, Youth Ministry, Worship Services, Missions, Finance and Administration, Session Clerk etc.

Some of these portfolios will naturally be taken up by the Teaching Elders, but many of them can and should be taken up by Ruling Elders, as their schedules and abilities permit. As this stage, there is still much scope for developing each of the above portfolios, as well as a number of new ones.

6. Periodically leading worship services

At Grace Church we share the leading of our worship services amongst appropriately gifted men. Ideally, those on the eldership will be a part of the regular rotation. This is an opportunity to make our elders visible, and practically demonstrate their role of spiritual leadership in the congregation.

7. Teaching others in a context suited to one’s personal gifts and abilities

The only notable difference listed in the Scriptures between the qualifications for an elder and a deacon is that an elder must be “able to teach”.

This doesn’t necessarily mean that all elders must be engaged in public preaching ministry, but it does mean that all elders should have the biblical knowledge and the competency to explain the Word of God to those in their care, i.e. through leading Bible Studies, or giving wise counsel one-on-one.

8. Being delegated to attend QLD WPC Presbytery meetings and National Assembly Meetings as needed.

Presbytery meetings take place on a Saturday once every three months, while National Assembly meetings take place over three days, once every eighteen months. All elders are may be delegated to attend the Presbytery meetings as they are able, while a few elders are normally delegated to attend the National Assembly.

9. Meeting with individuals or families in specific circumstances.

Apart from the regular meetings mentioned above, elders are also sometimes required to meet with individuals or families as various needs arise. Such needs may include membership meetings, hospital visitation, conflict resolution, baptism interviews etc. In many cases, such visits will involve two elders jointly meeting with a person or a family. Oftentimes a more experienced elder will accompany a less experienced elder, so that no one feels out of their depth.

Process and Training

Elders may be nominated in response to a call for nominations issued publicly to the congregation by the Session. Nominations must include the name and signature of the nominator, a person willing to support the nomination, and the nominee themselves.

Nominations will be received by the Session, and will be discussed with nominees privately before presenting nominations at a congregational meeting.

Between nomination and election, nominees will work through Alexander Strauch's book *Biblical Eldership* with one of the pastors, and they will be given appropriate exposure to the ministry of the eldership. At the end of this 6 month period, if the nominee and the session are both satisfied, an official election will take place at a congregational meeting, whereby the congregation may vote that they be ordained as a Ruling Elder.

Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, it needs to be said again, that in a healthy church leadership arrangement, no one elder is responsible to lead, feed and protect the church on their own. As such, even though a man must be suitably qualified and experienced to become an elder, he need not feel that he must be exceptionally competent in all the areas listed above. After all, the Bible says that "*in an abundance of counsellors there is safety.* (Proverbs 11:14)

Each and every suitable elder brings unique gifts and unique perspectives to the eldership body, and what one person lacks, God-willing, another person can help make up, so that corporately, the eldership can lead, feed and protect the church, in a way that is honouring to God and helpful for the flock.

Please think and pray about whether or not you believe that God has equipped and is calling you to be an elder at Grace, always remembering Paul's words to Timothy:

"If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task."

(1 Timothy 3:1)



Appendix: Church Offices

(from the Westminster Presbyterian Church Book of Church Order)

BCO 2.2 The Presbyterate

(Note about terminology: This BCO uses "teaching elder" and "ruling elder" to denote the two vocations in the office of the presbyterate. Where there is no need to indicate a distinction it uses "presbyter". "Teaching elder" is an inclusive term and local churches are free to use "minister" or "pastor" as titles for teaching elders provided such usage corresponds in meaning with that of this BCO.)

.01 The qualifications of presbyters are outlined in the Scriptures, especially in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9.

.02 Presbyters are to guard, guide, feed, oversee, and rule the flock of God by teaching, exhortation and godly example.

.03 The official authority of presbyters is exercised in the assemblies of the denomination – sessions, presbyteries, the synod – and by authorisation by the appropriate assembly.

.04 The system of local and wider assemblies is not an hierarchical system but a more general exercise of the office of presbyter in a wider sphere of the church.

.05 A presbyter who is not at a particular time an active member of any assembly may nevertheless be called upon to serve in a special role and be accountable to the appointing assembly.

.06 No presbyter may be removed from office except as provided for in this BCO.

.07 There is complete parity of authority, but not of function, among the presbyters.

.08 Teaching elders are presbyters with a special gifting and calling in the church to preaching and teaching. A teaching elder has particular responsibility to: faithfully minister the Word, both publicly and privately; conduct public worship (including administration of the sacraments); care as a pastor for his people; visit the people, especially the sick; instruct the young; conduct marriages and funerals; aid in the government of the church, and provide a Christian example at all times.

.09 The ministry of the Word and sacraments, and prayer, are the primary functions of the teaching elder. Local churches must recognise this and ensure that other functions do not unduly impact upon this primary role. Teaching elders share with ruling elders the pastoral responsibility for the care and government of the church.

.10 Ruling elders are presbyters who are not ordained to the special gifting and calling in the church to preaching and teaching, but share with teaching elders the other responsibilities of presbyters in the care and government of the church.

.11 A local church finding itself without a teaching elder must not be satisfied with its circumstances but must seek God's provision of a teaching elder.

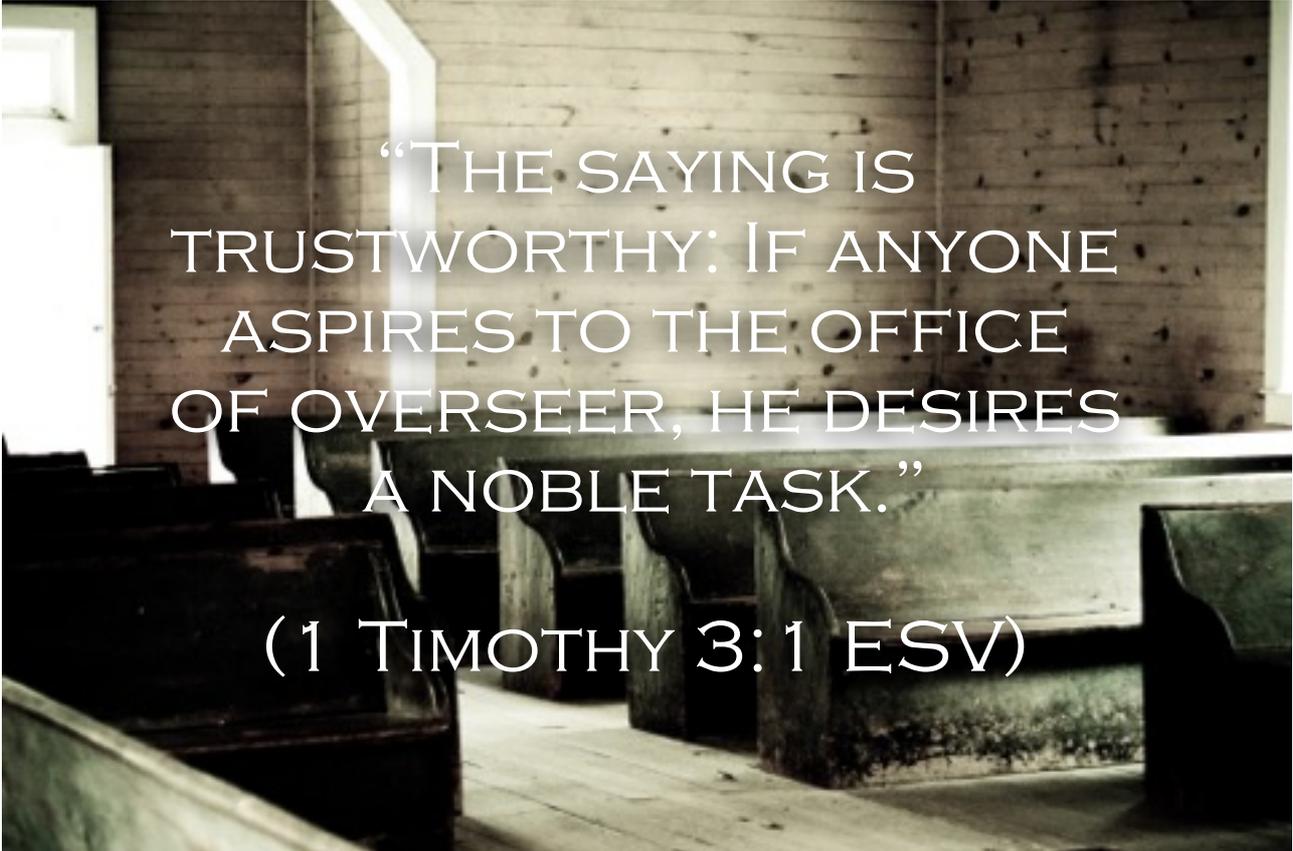
.12 If a local church is temporarily without a teaching elder, and if no teaching elder is available for a particular occasion, the session and presbytery together may authorise a ruling elder to preach and administer the sacraments on that occasion.

BCO 2.4 Officers' Ordination and Installation Questions

All presbyters, deacons, and licentiates of this denomination shall give affirmative answers to the following questions at ordination, installation, or appointment.

1. Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, inerrant in their original writings, the only infallible rule of faith and practice?
 2. Do you sincerely receive and adopt the doctrinal standard of this church, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, as embodying the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures, to the maintenance of which this church is bound before God by solemn obligation?
 3. Do you acknowledge the Lord Jesus Christ as the only Redeemer and Head of this church, and do you accept the presbyterian form of church government as derived from the Holy Scriptures?
 4. Do you promise, by the help of God, such subjection to your brethren as is taught in the Word of God?
 5. Have you been induced, as far as you know your own heart, to seek the vocation of the (teaching eldership OR the ruling eldership OR the diaconate) from love to God, and a sincere desire to promote his glory in the Gospel of his Son?
 6. Do you promise, by the help of God, to be zealous and faithful in maintaining the truths of the Gospel and the purity and peace of the church, whatever persecution or opposition may arise toward you on that account?
 7. Do you promise, by the help of God, to be faithful and diligent in your personal and family life, as well as in the public duties of your office, endeavouring to adorn the
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8. profession of the Gospel by your life, and walking in exemplary piety before the flock in which you shall serve?
9. Do you promise, by the help of God, to be conscientious in attending the assemblies of this church and in directing your best attention to the business thereof, doing all in a spirit of faithfulness, brotherly kindness, and charity?
10. Are you now willing to accept the responsibilities of a (teaching elder OR ruling elder OR deacon OR licentiate) in this congregation as you agreed to do so when you (accepted the call of OR were elected by the members OR (in the case of a licentiate) were appointed to serve here) – and do you promise, by the help of God, to discharge your duties to them in Christian ministry as God shall give you strength?



“THE SAYING IS
TRUSTWORTHY: IF ANYONE
ASPIRES TO THE OFFICE
OF OVERSEER, HE DESIRES
A NOBLE TASK.”

(1 TIMOTHY 3:1 ESV)



