

MULTIPLE ELDERS AS A PASTORAL TEAM

Dr. Howard L. Bixby
Seminary Dean
Vice President for Seminary Academics
Professor of Leadership and Church Growth
Baptist Bible Seminary, Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania

INTRODUCTION¹

Early in the writer's church ministry as a member of a multiple pastoral staff, he had an experience that awakened him to the need for pastors to function as a team. Our pastoral staff was trying to arrange a professional development retreat with the staffs of five other large Baptist churches. We were never able to pull it off because "The Pastors" (Senior) of the other churches did not want their other staff members in the same discussions with the "senior pastors." Their staffs were seen as lower-valued pastors, and they did not really want to fellowship with them as peers. This caused me to frame a question: Is it possible and is it biblical to see multiple elders as equals on a pastoral team?

In the first two sections of this study, *A Biblical Perspective Regarding Elder Rule*, the definition of *elder* was established and the question of *elder rule* was addressed. A concise summary of "What Is an Elder?" is found in "Elder Rule."² A brief thumbnail sketch of the conclusion is that *elder* (πρεσβύτερος), *bishop* (ἐπίσκοπος), and *pastor* (ποιμήν) are terms used interchangeably of the same pastoral office in the NT church (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5-7; 1 Pet 5:1-4). *Elder*, *pastor*, and *bishop* are terms addressing different aspects of the same office. All are associated with a called and set-apart clergy. This is not an isolated view. Other respected Bible scholars have come to the same conclusion:

¹ This is the third and final section of a three-part series entitled *A Biblical Perspective Regarding Elder Rule*. See *JMAT* 9, no. 2 and 10, no. 1 for the first two sections.

² See Howard L. Bixby, "Elder Rule" *JMAT* 10, no. 1 (2006): 5-21.

Bishops and pastors are not distinct from elders. ... The textual evidence indicates that all three terms refer to the same office. The qualifications for a bishop, listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, and those for an elder, in Titus 1:6-9, are unmistakably parallel. In fact, in Titus, Paul uses both terms to refer to the same man (1:5, 7).³

A classic study has been done by Lightfoot in his commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians where he states, "It is a fact now generally recognized by theologians of all shades of opinion, that in the language of the NT, the same officer in the Church is called indifferently 'bishop' (ἐπίσκοπος) and 'elder' or 'presbyter' (πρεσβύτερος)."⁴ He goes on to list at least six very logical, and I believe biblical, reasons why it is so.

Hiscox, in his *New Directory for Baptist Churches*, covering the subject in a chapter on church officers, uses the heading of pastors and then proceeds to begin his description of pastors thus:

In the New Testament the term *episcopos*, which is usually rendered *bishop*, and *presbuteros*, which is rendered *elder*, are used interchangeably, and often applied to the same person. The *episcopos* was an *overseer*, what the term properly denotes; it was the word used chiefly by the Greek Christians as applied to the *pastor*, who had the oversight of the flock, and performed the work of the shepherd in spiritual concerns. The term *presbuteros* or *elder*, was evidently derived from the synagogue, and used chiefly by Jewish Christians, to designate the same person.⁵

The chart, "New Testament Terms Pastoral Office Used Interchangeably"⁶ demonstrates the exegetical strength of *pastor*, *elder* and *bishop* being synonymous terms for the office of pastor.

³ John F. MacArthur Jr., *The Master's Plan for the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 183.

⁴ J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953), 95.

⁵ Edward T. Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches* ([Valley Forge]: Judson P, 1894; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1970), 85.

⁶ See Howard L. Bixby, "What is an Elder?" *JMAT* 9, no. 2 (2005).

WHAT ARE ELDERS SUPPOSED TO DO BIBLICALLY?

An understanding of the meaning of each of the three terms used for pastor in the NT (*elder*, *bishop*, *pastor*) allows the definition of pastor to be established. A pastor is set apart by God, biblically qualified, trained, and prepared; then called by a congregation to lead, govern, oversee, protect, and spiritually feed the congregation of God's people.

This definition of a pastor would seem to apply to all pastors, regardless of their ministry speciality, giftedness, time on the staff, or salary arrangements.

When operating from the assumption that the terms *elder* (πρεσβύτερος), *bishop* (ἐπίσκοπος), and *pastor* (ποιμήν) are used in the NT of the same church office, the word *pastor* can logically refer to any qualified pastor, regardless of position on the staff. A study of the roles and responsibilities associated with each term provides a picture of the complete pastoral ministry needed by the church. The following is a beginning study.

Shepherd (Pastor)

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| Ephesians 4:11 | Noun— <i>pastor</i> (ποιμενας) as is used in grammatical construction with <i>teacher</i> (διδάκαλος). This is also supported in I Timothy 4:13. |
| Acts 20:28 | Verb—These leaders were to shepherd the assembly (KJV “to feed”). Trench, in his book on synonyms, says it would better read “tend the flock.” Thus the meaning of caring for, training, equipping. ⁷ |
| 1 Peter 5:2 | Verb—Elders were to shepherd the flock, leading them through trials. Christ here is called <i>the Chief Shepherd</i> (ἀρχιποίμην). |

⁷ Richard Chenevix Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (London, 1880; reprint, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1966), 85.

Elder (Πρεσβύτερος)

- 1 Peter 5:2 Noun—The elders mentioned here were to lead through trials and set an example, being a picture of Christ’s leadership of the church. Peter referred to himself as an elder.
- Acts 20:28 Noun—The elders here were the recipients, keepers, and teachers of the revelation of God given through the Apostle Paul. A charge is being given to so train and guard the flock against false teachers and doctrine.
- 1 Timothy 5:17 Verb/Participle—The elders were to “rule” the church, being respected and paid for their work, leading the flock and teaching them the word of God. (τιμνής=compensation).⁸

Overseer or Bishop (Ἐπίσκοπος)

- Titus 1:5-9 Noun—Gives the high standards of the office.
- 1 Timothy 3:1ff Likewise gives standards of conduct and office.
- Acts 20:28 Bishops are set as overseers of the flock of God to guard their doctrinal and practical purity.
- 1 Peter 5:2 Verb/Participle—Refers to the work of oversight and leadership.

All of these references and descriptions of pastoral roles and responsibilities can refer to any pastor on a church staff, not just a senior/preaching pastor.

⁸ BDAG, 1005.

BIBLICAL PASTORAL QUALIFICATIONS

When a church calls a pastor/elder/bishop to lead them, the spiritual qualifications and character qualities of 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-10 must be true of his life. It is beneficial to understand these qualifications when considering the call to be a pastor or when calling a man to be a pastor on the church staff.

Found in 1 Timothy 3:1-7

Blameless	Having a good reputation in past and present attitudes and actions
Husband of one wife	Not divorced, polygamist, or a “womanizer” with a roving eye
Vigilant	Alert to avoid all appearances of evil
Sober	Sensible, sound-minded, and of good judgment
Of good behavior	Living a well-ordered and respectable life
Given to hospitality	Lovingly reaching out to include others in his life
Apt to teach	A teachable man who is able to pass on to others what he learns
Not given to wine	Not a drinker or approver of mind-controlling substances
No striker	Not prone to being out of control physically, using physical intimidation to get his way
Not greedy of money	Having right priorities and motivations in relation to money

Patient	Able to put up with being wronged without vengeance
Not a brawler	Not contentious, not quarrelsome, but gentle
Not covetous	Not wishing he had more and selfishly exploiting the ministry to get it
Not a novice	Not a new believer or one who does not know or apply much Scripture
Having a good report of them ... without	Having a good testimony among unbelievers who observe him

Additional qualifications from Titus 1:5-10

Not soon angry	Not quick-tempered or a pouter who flies off the handle when opposed
Having faithful children (in subjection) not accused of riot or unruly	Having children who grow up to honor God by example
Not self-willed	Able to give up being “right,” not demanding his way or being stubborn
A lover of good men	Known for the good company he keeps and to which he is attracted
Just	Wise and discerning as he deals with decisions and other people
Holy	Devoted to God and becoming more Christ-like ⁹

⁹ Howard L. Bixby, *Fleece or Feed: Biblical Patterns for Faithful Ministry by Missionaries and Pastors* (Cherry Hill, NJ: Assoc. of Baptist for World Evangelism, 1985), 36.

A man biblically called to the elder office should be qualified and prepared to step into the pastorate of another church if God so directs, and a congregation should be led to extend the call. The eldership is not a “lay office” with lesser qualifications than “a pastor.” Any man who accepts the title elder, bishop, or pastor must be qualified and recognized as a pastor. All of the pastors who serve a church must also share the same qualifications and receive the recognition of 1 Timothy 5:17. This would not be reserved for just one leader in the church unless he is the only one that is qualified, prepared, called of God, and called to serve as a pastor in that church.

HOW MANY PASTORS SHOULD A CHURCH HAVE?

The simple answer to this question is: as many as are needed and as many as God calls to be pastors in a congregation.

The plurality of pastors (elders) is not really in question, but the difficulty is in the application of this truth. How do multiple pastors function in various sized churches? What are the benefits of a pastoral team? How can the pastoral functions and ministries be carried out in a church by a team of pastors? These questions will be addressed in the remainder of this study.

What About Small Churches?

This is an important question that necessitates understanding the churches of the first century when NT Scripture was being written. It is most probable that the average NT church was quite a bit smaller than the average evangelical church in America today.

Because there is no evidence of large church buildings during the historical period of the book of Acts, NT churches had to spring up in homes across Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, and other cities where churches are mentioned. Because of space limitations, most of these house churches were of necessity composed of 20-50 people. If there were a hundred house churches in the city of Jerusalem, they were considered as one when the apostles or the Scripture text addressed “the Church of Jerusalem.” In our independence, isolation, competition-driven church culture today, it is easy to be nervous about this fact of NT life. The size of churches in the book of Acts would be descriptive rather than prescriptive and not proscriptive for today. Incidentally, the “House

Church Movement” is gaining momentum in the USA right now. George Barna has researched the phenomena in his book *Revolution*.¹⁰ He indicates that millions of people may be attending house churches in the U.S.

Small house churches in NT times probably did not have fully salaried pastors, although it might have been more possible with cottage industries, agriculture, and bartering in a simple lifestyle than it is today in America. While the NT teaches financial giving for the support of pastors and teachers (1 Tim 5:17-18; 1 Cor 9:5-11), many pastors, then and now, have chosen a bivocational ministry.

Therefore, the pastoral team ministry in a small church could be accomplished by individual house church pastors in an area regularly coming together to encourage, learn from, and assist each other in decision-making and leadership. Another way it could be accomplished would be by a team of called pastors serving in an individual small church bivocationally. Each could bring his gifts, experiences, and perspectives to the team in more time-limited ways. Three pastors serving as a bivocational team can provide a fully orbbed ministry to a small congregation as it follows a vision to reach and grow out in its community. This is practiced effectively in church planting as well. Often God blesses the ministry and the church grows to the point where the pastoral team is all fully supported by the church. Another caveat would be for a team of pastors to use the “circuit rider” principle of simultaneously serving three to five small churches that are geographically close. In this way each church could enjoy the blessing and benefits of a team of pastors and pool their resources to support them.

As a church grows it is financially able to build a larger, full-time paid pastoral staff to support the leadership needs of a full-service church. Like any business or organization, it is easier to accomplish more if there is a full-time leadership team to focus and concentrate more intently on the church needs and opportunities than is possible with part-time or volunteer leadership.

Sometimes a new growing church plant will utilize a team of one full-time pastor and two or three bivocational pastors to create a team. Sometimes the pastoral team will include retired missionaries, other ministry professionals, and/or pastoral students who have been called and ordained to ministry and are available in the area.

¹⁰ George Barna, *Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2005).

Whether or not a man is paid a full-time salary by a church is not what determines if he can function as a pastor (elder). As mentioned earlier, qualifications, training, call of God, and being set apart for ministry by a church are the real biblical criteria. If a church normally requires “ordination” for its senior/preaching pastor, then it should be a required qualification for all elders/pastors on the team.

What Are the Benefits of a Pastoral Team?

The following chart summarizes some of the principles of a team ministry along with a Scriptural basis and how the team concept benefits both church and pastors. This is a brief and concise display of a significant body of information and teaching.

Pastoring As A Team – Blessings & Benefits

PRINCIPLE	BIBLICAL BASIS WHY GOOD OR NEEDED	BENEFIT TO THE PEOPLE	BENEFIT TO THE STAFF
A Division of Labor Together to Perform Total Ministry	1 Cor 1-3; 1:12, 3:5 & 6, 21 Acts 14:14, 21-23 Acts 15:22	More work done – all needs met; pastor-people ratio small; more spiritual gifts in operation.	Ministry Covering/Rotation. Job gets done – may get help. When notice hole – fill it.
Specialization (Gifts)	Ephesians 4:11-14 1 Cor 3:1-15 1 Cor 12	Referrals/get help needed.	Everyone builds up each other. Team members can do what they enjoy & be successful for God.
Breadth of Input Educ./Exper. Background Expertise Approach Variety of Perspective	Acts 11-15: Barnabas & Paul Acts 16-20: Paul ministered in his way while others did in theirs. Acts 17:13-15, 18:5, 18ff, 19:22, 1 Cor 3:5-8	Match personalities in dealing with people; varied sensitivities.	Assist with decisions and give advice. Bounce ideas. Ask another to approach a difficult person.
Encouragement/ Motivation–Support	1 Cor 13 1 Cor 4:14-16 Phil 2:17-30	The team of pastors provides an example in personal relationships. Love–harmony	Shared concern/understanding. No ulcers; know bases will be covered.
Moderate but Strong Leadership	Acts 20:17, 28, etc. 1 Pet 5:2 1 Tim 3:1-7	The team builds trust/faith. People do not fear worst. Deacons don't need to protect people. Good leadership from each in their area.	Can avoid tangents. Bad programs may be sorted out early.
Team Decision-Making Personnel Program Positional	1 Tim 5:17 Acts 15 Acts 6:1-7	Most church decisions may be made as needed instead of waiting for board or committee meetings.	Enjoy group wisdom – test ideas. Safety in counsel of trusted teammates. Spiritual consensus.

How a Pastor Team May Function

Teams of pastors (elders) form in various ways. The most healthy and long-term teams are drawn together around a common vision. Each will have spiritual gifts and God-directed “ministry passions” that complement others on the developing team. Each pastor brings a distinct contribution to the team. It is not wise for teams to be comprised of “clones” of the “senior” pastor and agree to each idea or directive he gives. The healthy long-term team celebrates methodological and procedural differences between team members, while jealously guarding personal loyalty, friendship, and mutual respect bonded by a common theology and ministry vision.

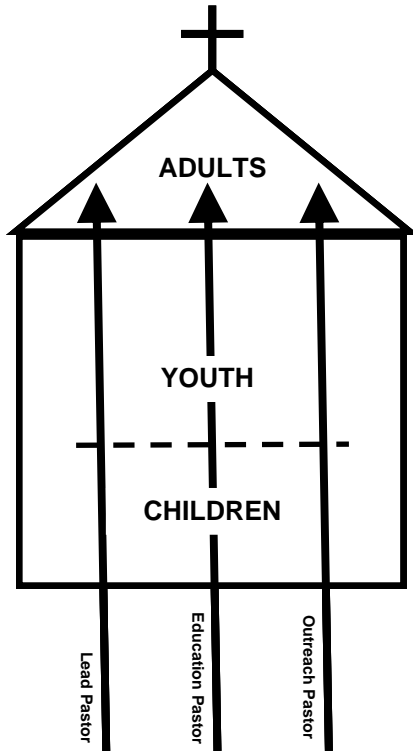
A typical pastoral team (whether salaried, bivocational, or a mix) will usually involve at least three ministry concentrations. These men would each focus on an area of the ministry such as:

- (1) the leadership of the team and the Bible teaching/worship of the church,
- (2) the training and family-nurturing ministries, and
- (3) the outreach/assimilation ministries of the church.

Each would minister across age group lines and indeed exercise pastoral leadership among the children, youth, and adults of the church and community.

The following diagram displays this team relationship.

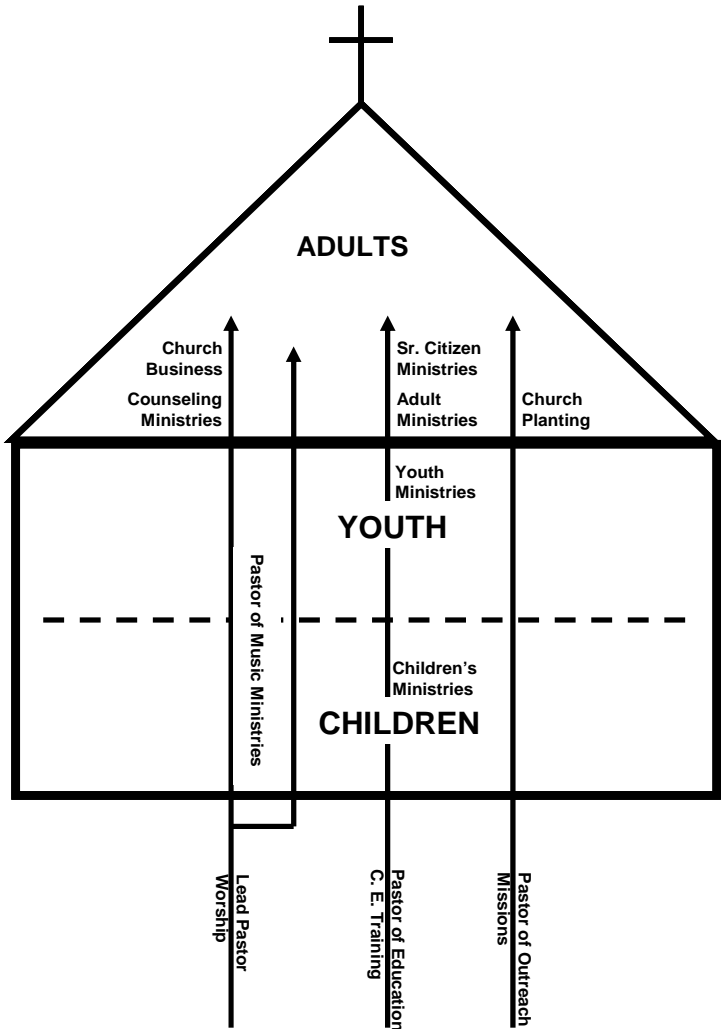
Pastors In A Team Ministry



As churches grow larger and function with more complex programs, there is usually a need to divide the leadership of these ministry/service areas among pastors who are prepared and passionate about them. When churches grow to more than 500 regular participants, various pastoral leadership “specialties” begin to be needed. The fact that a church of this size will often minister to over a hundred teenagers each week makes it logical to seek a pastor to focus more exclusively on the youth ministries. Likewise, there are often many opportunities to grow the music and worship-related ministries and outreaches with a pastor of music ministries.

The following chart displays how the team relationships might look organizationally.

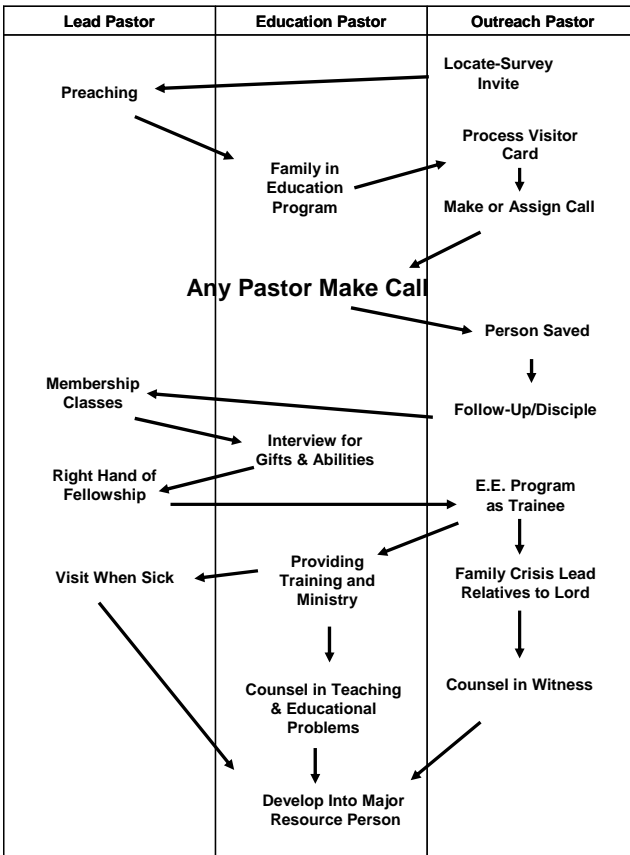
Pastoral Team Functions In a Larger Church



The benefits of a godly team of pastors working together for the glory of God, the health of the church, and the reaching of a community are significant. Some of these are already displayed in the chart “Blessings and Benefits”. But real-time benefits become realities in the day-to-day functioning of a genuine pastoral team.

The following diagram shows how a team of three cross-generational pastors could work together ministering to the same community family that visits the church, comes to faith in Christ, and takes its place as a productive member of the body.

The Team Ministry Meeting A Visitor’s Needs



As a congregation grows, additional elders/pastors are added to provide leadership coordination and pastoral care in expanding ministries. As noted in the preceding diagram, while all of the elders are equally qualified and called as pastors, there may need to be a structural order among the staff in order to accomplish the most ministry most effectively. Generally the pastoral functions are first categorized by those that are exercised transgenerationally. Consequently the diagram shows Lead Pastor, Education Pastor, and Outreach Pastor being the first team. Other pastoral ministries, though equally important, may be grouped with one of these three transgenerational ministries.

Titles and Team Functions

Since the NT Scriptures do not give a clear delineation of order among members of a pastoral team and the prevailing relationship value is serving and submitting to one another, the traditional American church staff hierarchies do not seem appropriate. There seems to be three basic ways multiple staffs currently are organized in the American church:

1. **The Single Pastor with Pastoral Assistants.** In this scenario, all pastors (often referred to by their first name and not considered to be “real” pastors) other than the head pastor are hired by him to carry out his assignments and serve as a kind of apprentice until the assistant develops enough to become a pastor on his own. His move “up” may be in replacing his former pastor or going to another smaller church in a single-pastor role.
2. **The Multiple Pastor Staff with Pastoral Associates.** The multiple pastor staff arrangement is normally led by a senior pastor who has gathered a team of two or more ministry specialty pastors whom he values and interacts with as associates rather than assistants. (Associates are consulted with rather than primarily instructed.) Associate pastors are called to the church staff as pastors and carry out their ministry under the direction of the senior pastor who is clearly the one responsible.
3. **The Pastoral Leadership Team.** The pastoral team is a group of equally qualified, prepared, called, and respected pastors (elders) who work together to assure a complete ministry to the church and community. A “Lead Pastor” will lead the team ef-

forts and share both responsibility and authority. The title “Lead Pastor” allows for organizational order and a clearly identified leader of the pastoral team, but promotes collegiality rather than hierarchy. The Lead Pastor works at consensus building with the staff rather than ordering a course of action. He is considered “first among equals.”

As displayed in the “Pastoring as a Team—Blessings and Benefits” chart, teamwork by a pastoral (elder) staff brings a church many advantages. Genuine teams led by a “Lead Pastor” are not only beneficial for the church body and constituent community, but are a delight to minister with in serving God. A brief look at some of the advantages for the Lead Pastor and the Associates could include the following:

- ▶ The congregation receives complete pastoral care regardless of which staff pastor is ministering to them. Because pastors’ (elders’) meetings can focus on the complete ministry, other pastors are providing input to the one engaged in the actual service to the individual or group. They receive the benefit of the truth that “in the multitude of counselors there is safety” (Prov 11:14).
- ▶ Pastoral decisions are more thoroughly researched, prayed over, and tested. The benefit of multiple inputs is that it builds confidence in the quality of church leadership initiatives. The church people will also have more portals of input through the various pastors with whom they interact.
- ▶ The lead pastor does not need to feel the crushing emotional weight of being the only one responsible. A genuine team shoulders decision-making as well as implementation, and spreads its weight. Each works hard for the good of the team and the Lead Pastor does not have to feel that he must “go it alone” as a leader.
- ▶ When there is a pastoral vacancy or need for expansion, the team is able to play a prominent role in seeking a successor or addition. A positive implication of this is that a successful church ministry vision does not need to be side-tracked, postponed, or destroyed while waiting for a pastoral replacement. In

addition, the pastoral team can assist in the selection process so that the new pastor (if the lead pastor) fully understands the church's vision and is selected at least in part because he will also work toward it. Failure in this area results in continual ups and downs in a church's numerical and spiritual history.

What About Lay Boards and Committees?

As has been established, *elder*, *bishop* and *pastor* refer to the same church office in the NT. There is also reference to multiple elders/bishops/pastors in the NT. Consequently, the church utilizing a "Board of Elders" should actually be referring to a "Board of Pastors" in a pastoral team ministry. These would be qualified, trained, called, and ordained men who could pastor a church in their own ministry alone if necessary.

The other NT office described for the church is "deacon." Passages like Philippians 1:1, Acts 6:1-6, and I Timothy 3:8-13 indicate a plurality of deacons as well. Since the term *deacon* (διάκονος) means to minister or serve, men holding the office of deacon partner with the pastors in meeting the needs of people. This would be consistent with the spiritual gift of ministering (Rom 12:7 – διακονία) and would be consistent with the deacons' function as church board members. Deacons are to lock arms with pastors in carrying out the church's vision, purpose, and ministry.

Deacons, like all other committees, task groups, or serving members, can have regular and meaningful input into the church leadership process. Wise pastors will continually consult, brainstorm with, and ask advice from gifted, godly people in the church. The priesthood of the believers and their spiritual giftedness enables them to provide helpful and needed counsel.

For legal reasons, being a tax-exempt organization in the U.S. requires a certain amount of board and committee structure to ensure "checks and balances" in financial matters, decisions, and government reporting. This necessitates that legal corporate matters be processed through some type of boards and committee. Together with the spiritual ministries of church committees and individual input, we are able to enjoy the benefits of "congregational church government."

A Brief Recap

The study of “Multiple Elders as a Pastoral Team” is a brief follow-up of two previous studies, “What Is an Elder?” and “Elder Rule.” This treatment should be read in conjunction with the first two and are therefore linked together under the title *A Biblical Perspective Regarding Elder Rule*. Therefore the recap will include all three papers.

(1) *Elder*, *bishop* and *pastor* are terms used of the same church office in the NT. They refer interchangeably to the same men and their qualifications, preparations, calling, and position in the church. Therefore, it is appropriate to use any one of the three terms to refer to a pastoral position in the church.

(2) Pastors, by virtue of definition and calling, are to lead the church in its teaching, ministering, and outreach. The pattern is Christ’s role as the “Good Shepherd” leader.

(3) Pastors are referred to as plural in the NT and are seen ministering as teams to accomplish Christ’s vision for his church.

(4) Pastors may minister in teams regardless of the size of their church. Individual pastors of small churches can form a team with other small church pastors.

(5) All members of pastoral teams do not need to be paid full financial support by their church. Bivocational pastoral teams can function well. The office of pastor/elder is not determined by its source of income.

(6) Pastoral teams are teams of equals because biblically they are all to be elders/bishops/pastors in order to be on the team. Consequently, the term *pastor* may be used of all on the team. A clear term to designate the one who leads the team could be *Lead Pastor*.

(7) While pastors are rewarded or judged by God, they are also accountable to each other, other pastors in their area, and to the people of the church. Wise pastoral teams develop and grow in godliness and wisdom together in this context of accountability.

(8) The huge benefit and blessing of pastoral teams leading churches are experienced in the multiple gifts, experiences, inputs, and skills that are available to the church through a team ministry. The level of care, training, and leadership can be much broader and deeper for the same group of people.

(9) The mutual respect and love demonstrated by the pastoral team in relation to each other is a powerful factor in developing a loving, caring, and healthy congregation.

(10) Pastoral teams working together with teams of deacons and laymen are able to mobilize the effectiveness of congregational church government and the growth of the church. Developing, maturing, and mobilizing the saints to reach their community for Christ is a primary focus of multiple elders as a pastoral team.

This study of NT eldership has exciting implications for the health and growth of the church. Jesus Christ signaled his intentions for the church in Matthew 16:18-20 where he stated, "I will build My church!" Little is more satisfying on this earth than to be a part of his Great Commission army in reaching the lost and seeing them come to faith, grow in spiritual maturity, and reproduce their knowledge and experience in the body. Elders are a key component in this dynamic process. When the terms *elder/bishop/pastor* are applied biblically to the pastoral leadership team of the church, great things can happen. It is a great privilege to serve as undershepherds while Christ functions as Head of the church.