



Local church leadership and eldership

This document was written as part of the 2017 review of Core Commitments by the International Apostolic Team (IAT), with further updates in 2019.

The document describes the biblical pattern for local church leadership, with a particular focus on the role of eldership. It clarifies what we see as 'normative' practice for churches in the S&L international family, while being sensitive to national and cultural variations.

The companion document, 'How the Wider Family Works', describes more fully how apostolic teams work and relate to local churches.

1. Introduction

How should a local church¹ be led? By an individual or a team – and then, what kind of team? What titles should those leaders have? What is their guiding vision, and what should they focus on?

The S&L family of churches sees that the Bible is clear and consistent in its teaching about leadership of God's people, and that the NT both *describes* and *commends* a threefold pattern of church leadership:

- **Elders:** Commissioned by apostolic teams as overall leaders of the local church
- **Deacons:** Commissioned by elders to take charge of specific matters within the local church
- **Apostolic teams:** A team of apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, teaching and pastoral leaders serving in a 'sphere' of ministry beyond one locality, by planting and equipping local churches (for more on this, read the companion document *How the Wider Family Works*)

While we see this as a 'normative' pattern, we understand that there will be variations determined by

- the *maturity* of the church (e.g. a plant may need strong support from an apostolic team)
- the *model* of church being pursued (e.g. regular church, house church, 'multisite', etc.)
- the *history* of the church (e.g. whether it has joined S&L while also remaining in denomination)
- the *mandate* for the church (e.g. an 'apostolic base church' will have a blend of apostolic team and eldership)
- the *culture*, including national, generational and political culture (e.g. titles)

Despite these variations, we agree that setting out some expectations, rooted in the Scriptures, will provide a helpful and necessary plumb line to churches and apostolic teams within the S&L family.

¹ The term 'local church' refers to a specific local congregation, as distinct from God's worldwide/universal church.

2. Family

(a) The tone

The church is the Body of Christ, God's family. All leadership is therefore relational, not positional. The tone we want for all local church leaders is that of being spiritual parents – fathers and mothers – in God's family.

Everything starts with God's own nature. The Trinity – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – expresses divine family! The Father loves the Son and rejoices to send Holy Spirit. The Son honours the Father, the Father honours the Son, and the Holy Spirit serves and glorifies the Father and the Son. They are bound by love and they are united in goal: bringing many sons to glory.

In Eph. 3:14, we read "For this reason I kneel before the *Father*, from whom *his whole family* in heaven and on earth *derives its name*." There is a play on words here. The Greek word for father is *pater*, and *patria* (family) derives from it. In Biblical thought (as in the Greek language) family comes out of fatherhood. You cannot have family without fatherhood. The whole family of heaven and earth comes from God's fatherhood; and every specific expression of family flows out of a father's being and name. This is the significance of all the lists of genealogies of the OT: the Israelites saw that the name of your father gave you significance, and that family line was more than a historical narrative: it stood for identity, belonging, and your unity in a common heritage.

God wants this sort of family life in our churches, as his family on earth. Families are filled with love, care for one another, submit to one another, and care for children fully and properly as God intends. That takes good fatherhood and good motherhood. This is why Paul tells Timothy and Titus that a key qualification for leadership is that leaders should know how to care for their own families properly. The church is a family; a leader in the church must therefore be able to take good care of family.

As we come to the Biblical teaching on leadership in the local church, it is important that we set that teaching in the context of God's design and mandate for family, and for men and women:

- **In the natural family, men and women are created to lead together:** God created men and women to lead together, jointly reflecting his image and mandate. He created men and women, not with interchangeable gifts and personalities, but to bring distinctive contributions as they lead together. Therefore, we want to encourage strong servant leadership in homes, as men and women together build family.
- **In the church family, men and women must lead together:** Similarly to our natural families, we will establish strong servant leadership in the church, as God's family, as men and women together build family by serving as spiritual fathers and mothers. To that end we will foster mutual respect, honour and love; we will invite all voices to be heard and we will train, invest in and release everyone who is willing.
- **In home and church family, there is order:** While the overarching atmosphere we want in local church leadership is one of being spiritual fathers and mothers *together* in God's family, we acknowledge that, biblically, a specific leadership role is given to men. This is unpacked more fully below.

To this end, in 2019 IAT agreed a set of commitments regarding men and women working together in leadership in the church family:

1. *We will hold up the biblical view that, in God's creation, men and women must lead together, jointly reflecting His image and mandate.*
2. *We will grow in appreciating the distinctive contributions of men and women as they lead together.*
3. *We will build strong servant leadership in homes, as men and women together build family.*
4. *We will build strong servant leadership in the church, as God's family, as men and women together build family by serving as spiritual fathers and mothers.*
5. *We will build teams where men and women lead together, acknowledging that the role of lead eldership ('headship') is biblically given to men.*
6. *We will foster mutual respect, honour and love.*
7. *We will invite all voices to be heard.*
8. *We will train, invest in and release everyone who is willing.*

3. Elders

(a) The biblical pattern

Elders were not a NT invention, but were present throughout the history of Israel. The exact role of elders varied according to their situation, but they were consistently treated with respect, always functioned as a group and were understood to be:

- Heads of families – 1Ki. 8:1-3
- Wise advisors – 1Ki. 12:1-8
- Law enforcers amongst God's people – Josh. 20:1-4
- Spiritual leaders – Lev. 4:15; Josh. 7:6

In the 1st century AD, the Jewish community also had other types of leaders (including synagogue rulers, priests and teachers), and some of the first house churches seemed to operate simply under the oversight of the home owner (Phil. 1:2; Col. 4:15). However, when the NT apostolic teams appointed leaders for local churches, it was consistently to the role of 'elder' (Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5).

(b) The role

Elders in NT churches operated with some authority. They were expected to

- Be spiritual and bring blessing (Acts 13:1-2; James 5:14)
- Build family (1Pet. 5:2; Acts 20:28, 20:20; 1Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:8)
- Set a godly example (1Tim. 4:16; 1Pet. 5:3)
- Lead in mission (2Tim. 4:5; Tit. 1:9; Acts 5:22, 15:4, 15:22)
- Maintain sound doctrine and refute its opponents (1Tim. 5:17; 2Tim. 1:12-14; Tit. 1:9)
- Rule and direct the affairs of the church (1Tim. 5:17)
- Govern church finances (Acts 11:30)
- Teach and disciple others (1Tim. 3:2, 4:13-14, 5:17; 2Tim. 2:2, 2:24, 4:2; Tit. 1:9; Eph. 4:11-13)
- Deal with problems (Tit. 1:5, 1:10-13; Acts 15:6f, 22f; 1Tim. 4:6; Tit. 1:10-13)

Acts 20:28 describes the Ephesian *elders* by two words which help us to further understand their role:

- **Shepherds/Pastors:** Elders work as *under-shepherds* (1Pet. 5:4) to the 'Good Shepherd' (John 10:1-18; Ps 23), looking after the well-being of God's people, searching after the lost, and leading everyone forward. This involves prayer, teaching and hospitality. It requires elders to be available, and to spend time listening to people, speaking God's word to their heart.
- **Overseers:** The Greek word here is *episkopos*, 'one who watches over'. Some denominations use the modern equivalents 'overseer' or 'bishop' to describe regional leaders, but here the word is used to describe the team of local leaders (also Phil 1:1). As *overseers*, elders must have an overview of the whole church, not just one part; not promoting their favourite people or ministries, but having all the church in their hearts. All areas of church life are accountable to them, and, through servant-leadership, they unify the church. A key aspect of oversight is holding onto the 'big picture' of God's apostolic purposes.

(c) The qualifications

The personal attributes required of an elder are helpfully laid out in Paul's letters to the younger leaders to whom he had entrusted the task of appointing elders (1Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-9).

Eldership requires some ability in ministry, notably 'being apt to teach,' but even more important is having godly character. According to Jesus himself, even prophets and miracle-workers are rejected by him, if they are also evildoers (Matt 7:21-23): giftedness alone certainly does not qualify someone for eldership.

(d) The team

The apostle John is the only person in the Bible ever described as a solitary elder (2Jn 1; 3Jn 1). In every other instance, we read of a group of elders. Titus and Timothy were commanded "to appoint elders (plural) in every place". God, who is Trinity, delights to work through persons playing different roles together as one team. It also provides each elder with both personal support and accountability.

Ideally there would always be at least three elders. If there is only one person in a church suitable to be an elder, he will need to work more actively with the apostolic team for the benefits of team-work.

(e) The 'lead elder'

The Bible does not describe the role of a 'lead elder'. However, the conduct of James at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) shows an example of effective 'chairing' leadership by an elder. Usually we find a similar grace operating in the life and ministry of one elder, who is then recognised as a leader amongst the elders, and so, in practice, most of our churches have a lead elder (called 'The Pastor', in many churches).

The exact role of the 'lead elder' depends on his specific gifts and the gifts present amongst the other elders, but typically he will provide overall direction, guide decision-making and be a point of personal accountability for the other elders. The 'lead elder' is never more than a 'first amongst equals', despite having a personal *spiritual* authority and wisdom. He can't use his position to say "I'm in charge and this is what I want!"

Decisions are usually made by the common prayerful consent of all the elders together. In exceptional situations, the 'lead elder' might for example call for period of fasting, a vote, or ask the other elders to follow him despite their doubts. In cases of such disagreement, the 'lead elder' will do well to seek wisdom from the apostolic team.

(f) Gender

There is little doubt that the elders described in the Bible were men. It is therefore no surprise that Paul's instructions on appointing elders refer only to men.

Salt & Light is a diverse family that has come together over many years, reflecting many cultures, varying history and diverse convictions. The great majority of the churches in the family have seen elders as spiritual fathers and therefore only appointed men to this role, believing that this understanding of Scripture cannot be changed without fundamentally altering the revelation of God as Father.

However, there is some diversity – theological and practical – on this point:

- Firstly, some leaders in the S&L family believe that there are evangelical approaches to scripture whereby both men and women can be elders, and therefore would like to appoint women as elders.
- Secondly, we accept that there may be occasions when women *have to* function as elders, owing to the absence of qualified men

Since different views on this issue both speak strongly to different cultures and reflect differing approaches to Scripture, there is plentiful opportunity for disagreement.

Therefore, in order to maintain our unity as a family of churches whilst preserving the principle of male headship, the IAT agreed in 2016 and again in 2019 that those churches and apostolic teams who wish to appoint women as elders may do so, and may still remain part of the family, as long as a woman is not appointed as a 'lead elder'.

For clarity, in view of the variety of structure across the international family, for the purpose of this document, by 'elder' we mean a member of the senior spiritual leadership team in a church, responsible for overall pastoral leadership, direction and doctrine. The 'Senior Pastor' in a church is therefore effectively 'lead elder'.

(g) Permanence

The only process we find in the NT for someone ceasing to be a local church leader is when they were commissioned to another ministry (e.g. Acts 13), although the NT also teaches that elders who fail morally may need to be publicly rebuked (1Tim. 5:20). That may mean they are no longer above reproach and thus no longer suitable as elders (c.f. 1Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:7).

So, we see that appointment to eldership is not time-limited, but that neither is it guaranteed for life. Elders need to ensure that they continue to set a good example, and that eldership does not hold them back from obeying God's call to other ministry. It is therefore helpful for there to be a regular review (at least, say, every few years) of each elder's lifestyle and calling. This will involve the other elders, and perhaps also the apostolic team. It is most likely that the elder's character and gifts will have only matured and strengthened, but someone's calling or capacity may have changed significantly, and it is important for elders not to continue in the role beyond the Lord's chosen timescale for them.

(h) Titles

Cultures vary in how much they like to use titles. For example, African cultures have a preference for honorific titles, whereas contemporary European culture strongly prefers to avoid them. In both cases this reflects national culture and approaches to leadership, which will always have shortcomings. What then does the Bible say about giving titles to church leaders?

- Titles serve to identify someone's appointment to a role and to confer honour, and the NT is clear about elders being *appointed* (Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5) and *honoured* (1Th. 5:13, 17; Heb. 13:17).
- However, Jesus rebuked anyone seeking status for themselves (Luke 14:7-11; Matt. 23:8-10).
- The early church leaders described themselves with lowly words like 'brother', 'fellow-worker' or 'servant'. The biblical usage of 'elder' or 'apostle' seems to be to accurately describe the roles being performed, avoiding any sense that church leaders form an elite amongst Christians.
- The Hebrew 'Rabbi-disciple' relationship in the gospels seems to correspond to the 'father-son' language Paul uses as he seeks to translate the concepts of leadership into the Gentile church. This suggests that we should find words to describe leadership roles that work best in each culture.

It is clear that leaders, whatever their title, should model a servant-attitude, not dominion. Titles must not be 'badges of honour', but expressions of function. The best words to achieve this will vary from one context to another. However, regardless of title, where leaders are fulfilling the role of elders then the requirements for elders should be considered as effective criteria for those leaders.

4. Deacons

The word 'deacon' means 'servant'. Although apostles and elders described themselves as servants, many other people in the early church were also appointed as servants. The first of these deacons are described in Acts 6:1-6 and were charged with food distribution. Through Paul's first letter to Timothy, God provides us with guidance that applies to all deacons (1Tim. 3:8-13).

Whereas elders oversee the whole church, the word 'deacon' can be applied to anyone appointed to a specific responsibility in church life. This could be a more practical task, such as administration, managing finances, buildings or catering, or it could be a more spiritual task, such as running the children's church. Indeed, it is not helpful to see a strong divide between practical and spiritual tasks, since the deacon Stephen was described as 'a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 6:5).

Even when churches don't use the title 'deacon', they nonetheless effectively appoint people as deacons, as that is the biblical word for those to whom elders delegate specific tasks in church life.

5. Elders in partnership with others

(a) With apostles and their teams

This relationship is described and explored more fully in the document 'How the Wider Family Works'.

As in Acts, apostolic teams and elders are meant to work together! The apostolic team has a distinct task and should not function as 'super-elders', but rather provide training and equipping, support and accountability for local leaders. In the early stages of planting a church, the apostolic team may be strongly involved, after which they will identify and appoint local elders. Their role in this is ongoing and they are usually involved in 'laying hands' on new elders.

It is sometimes asked who is *really* the final authority in the local church – the elders or the apostolic team? In the NT, some strong statements from apostles reveal a direct authority in the local church (3Jn 9-10; 1Cor. 4:14-21; 2Cor. 11:28, 13:10), which the apostles sometimes exercised by addressing letters, not just to local church leaders, but directly to the whole local church. However, this apostolic authority prefers to appeal rather than to command (2 Cor. 4:2), because the goal is really a partnership in ministry. If we ask who is *really* in charge, it's rather like asking whether a child needs a mother or a father! The point is rather to value both and keep working on the relationship to arrive at a point of unity.

This relationship is vital, and so we understand that a church is only a part of the S&L family if it recognises and receives an apostle (who is part of the Salt & Light family) and his team. That apostolic team in turn will connect with other teams, and to the IAT.

(b) With their families

No one could fulfil the personal requirements of eldership without support from their 'household' (be that their immediate family, their wider family or even close friends). If married, the spouse's support (of heart, home, time and involvement) in leadership is essential, especially because the deep unity of a marriage covenant ('one flesh', Gen. 2:24) is a strong foundation and powerful tool in ministering to God's people.

Since the Fall, relationships between men and women have faced profound difficulties (Gen. 3:16b), but that was not God's original intention. He made men and women to rule the world together (Gen. 1:27-28). Men and women have distinctive perspectives arising from their sex/gender, and so both are essential for there to be godly rule.

(c) With trustees/directors

One specific task often delegated to others is the operation of the church as a legal entity, e.g. as a company, charity or association, with a board or governing committee. The members of this board, sometimes called directors or trustees, are often not the same people who make up the eldership.

These men and women are likely to have final *legal responsibility* for the church organisation (finances, employment, etc.), but they remain subject to the *spiritual authority* of the elders, according to the biblical pattern. If they are not elders, it is perhaps most appropriate to consider them to be deacons. It is particularly important that they maintain a healthy partnership with their elders. This does not mean that the elders control the legal entity as through a group of puppets: the trustees must refuse to authorise actions that are illegal, imprudent, lack integrity etc.

(d) With a broader leadership team

It is good practice for elders to gather a broader leadership team of men and women that includes:

- people with fivefold equipping gifts
- people leading key ministries

Teams like this can provide:

- good synergy between spiritual, relational and practical aspects of church life
- a good way for spouses to be involved and together set a family atmosphere for the church
- a forum for leaders to see the whole church beyond any direct responsibilities

Where a church has a broader leadership team, it will help everyone to be clear about how the remit of the leadership team differs from that of the elders.

Where retired leaders serve in a team to bring wisdom and maintain good relationship, care must be taken that these leaders play an appropriate role, releasing younger leaders into ministry.

A broader leadership team also provides an excellent context for training new leaders. Rather than looking just to cater for their church's current needs, elders should create teams that provide leadership opportunities for their spiritual sons and daughters, with a view to further expansion, into new local ministries or into new locations. Our purpose is not only to arrange church leadership rightly, but to seek growth. This will require the active and continued development of new disciples and new leaders, including young adults and single people, centred on practical apprenticeship alongside existing leaders. Our call is not only to be godly leaders, but to ensure the multiplication of godly leaders (2 Tim 2.2.).