

# What is an Elder?

## I. WHAT IS THE OFFICE OF ELDER ALL ABOUT?

The Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons gives a fine summary:

*Elders are . . . responsible for the spiritual wellbeing of God's people. they must provide true preaching and teaching, regular celebration of the sacraments, and faithful counsel and discipline. And they must promote fellowship and hospitality among believers, ensure good order in the church, and stimulate witness to all people.*

In the exhortation the elders are told to:

*Be a friend and 'Christ like' example to children. Give clear and cheerful guidance to young people. By word and example, bear up God's people in their pain and weakness and celebrate their joys with them. Encourage the aged to persevere in God's promises.*

Article 24a of the Church Order states:

*The elders, with the minister(s), shall oversee the doctrine and life of the members of the congregation and fellow office bearers, shall exercise admonition and discipline along with pastoral care in the congregation, shall participate in and promote evangelism, and shall defend the faith.*

The Christian Reformed Synod of 1987 gave the following summary:

*The special functions that characterize the office of elder are: the pastoral care of the congregation, and participation in the promotion of evangelism, the oversight of the doctrine and life of the congregation and fellow office bearers and the exercise of admonition and discipline.*

## II. WHAT QUALITIES SHOULD AN ELDER SEEK TO DEVELOP?

The Form for Ordination of Elders and Deacons contains a wealth of information regarding these offices as can be seen from the following examples:

*In the office bearers of the church we see the love of Christ for his people . . . he taught us the spirit of true leadership when he said. "Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever want to be first among you must be your slave . . . (Matt.20:26-27)  
(Elders) are mature in the faith, and. . . exercise their offices with prayer, patience, and humility.*

Qualities of love, humility, godliness, maturity, prayerfulness, cheerfulness, patience, and compassion are implied in the exhortation:

*Pray continually for the church.  
(Be) completely mastered by your Lord.  
Give clear and cheerful guidance . . .  
Be compassionate, yet firm. . . .*

The words of the prayer in the form for ordination deserve careful consideration:

*Help them to perform their duties with enthusiasm and humility. In their work, grant them a sense of sustained awe, which is rooted in daily adoration of you, their Lord.*

The Christian Reformed Synod of 1973 accepted a study report called “Guidelines for understanding the nature of Ecclesiastical Office and Ordination. The fifth guideline reads:

*The particular ministries are characterized by service, rather than status, dominance, or privilege. These ministries function with Christ’s power and authority, . . . rooted in obedience to His Word and expressed in loving service (Acts of Synod 1973, p63)*

### III. HOW CAN ELDERS BEST PERPARE THEMSELVES FOR THIS TASK?

Preparation is very important. I offer the following ways:

1. The most important, but also the most difficult form of preparation takes place in the heart. Those chosen to be elders will reflect on their special calling: their personal relationship to the Lord, their commitment to serve, and their willingness to model the Christian life.
2. The local pastor(s) will also play an important role in preparing the elders for their work. The pastor should take the initiative now and then to reflect with the elders on their common task and how to go about it most effectively.
3. Conferences and workshops are occasionally offered in various localities of the denomination. Elders should encourage one another to attend.
4. No one can minister to others without being replenished himself in the way of much prayer. Elders should train themselves in the disciplines of Bible study, prayer, and meditation.

#### IV. SCRIPTURE TEXTS ELDERS MAY FIND HELPFUL

Scriptural basis: Matt. 18:15-17; Acts 11:30; 14:23; 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:1

Authority: Matt 18:18

Qualifications: Eph. 5:27; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; James 3:1

Doctrine and life: Matt. 28:20; 2 Tim. 3:14-17; Titus 1:9; Rev. 3:19

Tending the flock: John 21:16; 1 Thess. 5:11-14; Heb. 13:7; 1 Pet. 5:2

Visiting the sick: Matt. 25:36; James 1:27; 5:14

Ruling the church: Acts 15:6; 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:4-5; 5:17; 1 Pet. 5:1-5

Discipline: Matt. 18:17, 1 Cor. 5:13; Gal. 6:1; 2 Thess. 3:14-15; 1 Tim. 5:20;  
Titus 1:13; 3:10-11; Heb. 12:7; 13:17

#### V HOW CAN ELDERS SERVE AS SHEPHERDS TO THE FLOCK?

Elders' care for the congregation resembles the biblical idea of the shepherd heeding the flock. The shepherd's task had two aspects, one communal and the other individual.

1. Collective care-- As the shepherd watched over the flock as a whole, led it to new grazing grounds, protected it from enemies, and provided shelter, so the elders today care for the congregation as a whole. They take time to reflect on the overall wellbeing of the congregation, determine its spiritual direction, arrange for the necessary resources, and supervise the various segments of the church's ministry program.

2. Individual care – As the shepherd knew each sheep by name (John 10:3) and sought to meet its needs, so the elders minister to members individually according to needs and possibilities. The key word is personal contact. The Family Visit is crucial, of course, but there are other forms of contact. A chance encounter, a hospital call, a telephone conversation, a sympathy card, or a cup of coffee together are all examples of contacts by which elders show their concern and reflect the mind of Christ.