

ARTICLE 3.1

A Job Description for Lay Elders

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You were humbled—and a little surprised—when the pastor asked you to serve as an elder. You prayed about it, talked to your wife, and got the input of a few trusted church members. With a mixture of trepidation and excitement you accepted the nomination, and a few weeks later you were voted into office.

Now you sit at your first elders' meeting, waiting for things to start. And a nagging thought arises: "OK, I am an elder. Now what do I do?"

Well-Intentioned but Ill-Informed

Lay elders are often godly, well-intentioned men who love the Lord and serve the church faithfully. But they sometimes lack a well-rounded understanding of the biblical job description for elders. Unfortunately, paid pastors often share in their confusion!

As a result, lay elders sometimes fill the gaps of their understanding with their own life experiences. They assume being an elder is roughly equivalent to serving on a board of trustees for a nonprofit organization, leading a company, managing a project, commanding a warship, or supervising subcontractors. While aspects of those skills and experiences will prove useful, none of them adequately approximate the elder task.

So what is a lay elder's job description? What are they supposed to do? Attend meetings? Approve budgets? Distribute Communion?

Shepherd God's Flock

Here's the short answer from the apostle Peter: "To the elders among you . . . be shepherds of God's flock" (1 Pet. 5:1–2; see John 21:15–16; Acts 20:28). Elders serve the good shepherd by providing his flock with spiritual oversight. Elders feed, lead, protect, and nurture church members like shepherds do with sheep.

Let's get even more specific. While shepherding is a powerful metaphor for framing an elder's job description, our new elder needs concrete instructions. He needs an answer to his question, Now what do I do? Fortunately, God's word lists very specific duties that help elders get to work.

Four Primary Duties

There are four duties that are central to the elder's job description: teach, lead, model, pray. While this list is not exhaustive, if lay elders devoted themselves to these four things, they would excel as shepherds.

Teach

First, an elder must be "an able teacher" (1 Tim. 3:2 HCSB; see 5:17). He must hold "to the faithful message as taught, so that he will be able both to encourage with sound teaching and refute those who contradict it" (Titus 1:9 HCSB). Jesus's undershepherds feed his sheep with his word.

If you're an elder, find venues for teaching the Bible regularly. Teach a Sunday school class, lead a home group, give a lesson to the youth group, or study Scripture with a member over coffee. And if you're offered a chance to preach, take it.

Further, tune in to the church's overall teaching ministry. Keep a finger on the pulse of what's being taught through congregational singing or in the Sunday school curriculum. Listen closely when members talk about what they're reading, and watch out for rotten food in their spiritual diet.

Finally, remember that teaching includes training others to contribute to the church's teaching ministry. As Paul said to Timothy, "What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, commit to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2 CSB). So bring along an apprentice teacher whenever you can.

Lead

Just as shepherds lead their flocks, so elders lead local congregations. The biblical writers also call elders "overseers," a title that highlights their role as leaders (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:1; Titus 1:5, 7). Hebrews instructs, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account" (Heb. 13:17 HCSB).

Elders, be brave and lead your church. Don't hide among the baggage like King Saul. When you see challenges in your church, face them proactively and plot a course forward.

Courageous leadership might involve reaching out to a frustrated member who's stopped attending or confronting an unrepentant member through church discipline. Or it could mean wrestling through staffing strategies, budget challenges, or important policies that affect the spiritual identity of the congregation.

And as you lead, don't lose sight of the destination. The goal isn't to lead a church to become an efficient organization, as important as that may be. Rather, elders should lead church members toward maturity in Christ. Jesus gave teaching shepherds to the church "to build up the body of Christ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, growing into a mature man with a stature measured by Christ's fullness" (Eph. 4:12–13 HCSB). Elders bring the flock to green pastures and still waters when they help members know Jesus more and increasingly reflect his glory together.

Model

Most importantly, elders lead by example. They should shepherd the church "not [by] lording it over those entrusted to [them], but being examples to

the flock” (1 Pet. 5:3). Not surprisingly, the New Testament lists of elder qualifications focus predominantly on character (1 Tim. 3:1–7, Titus 1:5–9; 1 Pet. 5:1–4). An elder’s most basic job is to say, “Imitate me as I also imitate Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1 HCSB).

The mandate to model maturity carries two critical implications. First, modeling means you must guard your godliness: “Pay close attention to your life and your teaching” (1 Tim. 4:16 HCSB). Continue to live close to the Lord, nurture your wife and children, resist sin, and love people. Open your life to the loving accountability of the other elders. Modeling maturity is a team project.

This leads to a second implication: modeling requires elders to be among the people. Modeling only works if people see you up close. So open your life to church members. Invite them into your home, your hobbies, and your ministry. People need a firsthand experience of how you handle stress, relate to your wife, respond to difficult people, and humbly admit when you blow it.

Pray

Finally, elders should take up the apostolic shepherding mantle and say, “We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the preaching ministry” (Acts 6:4 HCSB). Ultimately, elders are powerless in themselves to mature anyone in Christ; only the Holy Spirit can do that through God’s word. The sooner an elder realizes this, the sooner he will hit his knees and plead for a continual work of grace among church members as well as in his own life.

So if you’re a lay elder (or a paid elder!), strive to be a man of prayer. Build regular prayer into your daily rhythms. Pray over your church’s membership rolls during your commute or while you walk the dog. As an elder board, carve out time for concerted prayer. And when you’re talking to a church member, be sure to stop and pray for her right then and there.

Shepherd Like Jesus

Maybe we could sum up an elder’s job description this way: shepherd the church members like Jesus shepherds his disciples. Like Jesus, make

teaching central to your ministry and make Jesus and the gospel the primary content of your teaching. In every decision, lead your people toward knowing and trusting Jesus. Let them see the character of Jesus exemplified in your life. And just as Jesus often turned aside to pray, so you as an elder should join him in interceding for his people. The undershepherds of Jesus are at their best when they reflect Jesus, the chief shepherd.