Elder Retreat Discussion Guide

Culture, Governance, and the Life of the Church

Based on three episodes of the Church Leaders Podcast (Pastors Joby Martin and Ryan Britt, The Church of Eleven22)

How to Use This Guide

There are five sessions of about 60 to 75 minutes each. Every session has Scripture, pull quotes with timestamps, discussion questions in three tiers (opening, going deeper, application), and a closing prayer prompt.

Suggested rhythm: 10 minutes to open and read Scripture, 10 minutes for quotes or a played clip, 30 to 40 minutes of discussion, 10 minutes for prayer and commitments.

Source mapping: Session 1 draws on the culture-as-a-value episode. Sessions 2 and 3 split the governance culture episode. Session 4 draws on the congregational culture episode. Session 5 draws on other elder-led churches and ministries, not the podcast.

Notes: Quotes come from the transcripts with false starts and repeated words removed; timestamps let you play the original clip. Eleven22's model (lay elders govern, staff leads) may differ from yours, so treat it as a conversation partner, not a template. Your transcripts included the congregational culture episode twice, so it is used once.

Session 1: What We Say, What We Do, What We Tolerate

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 11:1; Titus 2:7-8; Philippians 2:3-4

Big idea: Culture is not the poster on the wall. It is the combination of what a church says, does, and puts up with.

Quotes to Read or Play

- "Maybe the simplest way to talk about culture is what you say, what you do, and what you allow." (Joby Martin, 5:06)
- "You can say whatever you want to say, but what people do, their attitudes behind it, and then what you put up with is really what your culture actually is." (Joby Martin, 5:32)

- “And then last, you tolerate people on your staff robbing God.” On a culture of generosity that nobody builds. (Joby Martin, 10:25)
- “As goes the leader, so goes the people.” (Ryan Britt, 20:25), followed by the lesson Joby learned from another pastor: stop saying “my people won’t,” and start saying “I have not led our people to.” (21:27)
- “Did I show up to this place to serve the bride of Christ or am I trying to use this organization as a platform for me to get to do what I want to do?” (Ryan Britt, 35:32)
- “Culture has to be stronger than any one leader’s ability to replicate it. It’s just got to be self-reproducing or self-propagating.” (Ryan Britt, 37:47)
- “If you’re going to have a strong, healthy culture, it starts with words.” (Joby Martin, 24:25)

Opening Question

Think of a church, business, or team you walked into for the first time. What did you sense in the first five minutes, and what did that tell you about what they really valued?

Going Deeper

1. Of the three, say, do, and tolerate, which is hardest for elders to own honestly? Why do you think “tolerate” is the one people overlook?
2. In the generosity example, a church wants generosity but never talks about money, never offers an on-ramp, never asks, and tolerates stinginess in leaders. Where might one of our stated values be contradicted by what we quietly put up with?
3. Joby wrote a code of conduct because a value like “authenticity” can excuse rude behavior (“I’m just being authentic”). Do we define behaviors, or only values? Which of our values could be twisted into an excuse?
4. Have we ever said “our people won’t…”? What would change if we said “we have not led them to…” instead?
5. Ryan warns that a leader’s personal wording, even good wording, can pull a team “two degrees off.” Where have we seen small differences in language become big differences in direction?

Application

1. Joby says chemistry with the culture matters as much as competence in hiring and in picking leaders. How do we tell the difference between “not a culture fit” and simply “not my personality”?

2. Ryan notes some leaders say they want people “ingrained in the culture” when they mean “close enough that I can control them.” How do we guard against that in ourselves?
3. Take the group-leader example: one leader changes a study for a season to meet a real need, another does it to have a platform. How do elders discern heart posture, and how should we raise it humbly?
4. Joby hopes two things last 40 years: a Bible-teaching, Bible-believing church and a culture of “one more.” If you could name two things for our church that would last 40 years, what would they be?

Closing Prayer Prompt

Ask God to show each elder one thing they have said, done, or tolerated that quietly contradicts what they say they believe. Pray in pairs.

Session 2: Governance Chosen, Not Merely Inherited

Scripture: Mark 7:6-9; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Philippians 2:1-4

Big idea: Whatever structure a church uses should be clear, biblical, and focused on disciple-making. Most churches inherit their governance without ever testing it.

Quotes to Read or Play

- “Governance doesn’t really seem to matter until it matters. And then once it matters, it’s the only thing that matters.” (Joby Martin, 2:41)
- “Very few people actually choose their governance. Most people just inherit it.” (Ryan Britt, 6:00)
- “Whatever model you choose, it needs to be clear. It needs to be biblical and it needs to be focused on discipleship effectiveness.” (Ryan Britt, 5:45)
- “Nobody’s ever always done anything.” On “that’s how we’ve always done it.” (Joby Martin, 8:00)
- “They’ve all got pain points and payoffs.” (Joby Martin, 47:30)
- “So far in all of human history, there’s only been one benevolent dictator and they crucified him and he’s coming back.” (Joby Martin, 35:36)
- “Governance is not the point. Making disciples. It is a means to that end.” (Ryan Britt, 47:14)

- “If you don’t have the right humans in the right place, it don’t matter what you have, you got a mess.” (Joby Martin, 49:27)

Opening Question

How did our church end up with its current governance? Did someone choose it on purpose, or did we inherit it?

Going Deeper

1. Joby says governance doesn’t matter until it does. Have we been through a moment where it mattered? If we had to explain our structure to the congregation from a defensive posture, would it hold up?
2. Joby and Ryan suggest holding bylaws and polity up against the New Testament and asking what we inherited that Scripture does not prescribe. Where do we have clear biblical warrant, and where might we be holding to tradition the way Jesus confronted the Pharisees in Mark 7?
3. The New Testament gives qualifications for elders but no job description. Joby still writes one for clarity. Do our elders have a clear, written understanding of what they are responsible for?
4. Joby warns that “big decisions” means different things to staff and elders (a million dollars versus two hundred). How do we define which decisions come to the elders?
5. At Eleven22, elders’ areas of focus are: protect the lead pastor and family, protect staff and families, safeguard alignment with mission, vision, and values, ensure fiduciary integrity, and guard doctrine. Which of these are we strongest at, and which are we weakest at?

Application

1. Name the payoff of our current structure and the pain we have chosen to accept for it. Are we tempted to abandon the structure when we hit the pain point instead of remembering why we chose it?
2. Joby describes two churches’ extremes: congregational votes on everything, and a benevolent-dictator pastor with no real accountability. Where do our shadows show up?
3. Their financial controls include two signers, an elder treasurer, monthly updates, and elder re-approval of large one-time expenses. Do our controls protect our people and our pastor? When did we last review them?

4. When did we last have our bylaws reviewed by trusted outside eyes, including legal counsel? (see the Claude suggestions)
5. What one change, if any, should we bring to the next elder meeting after this retreat?

Closing Prayer Prompt

Pray for humility to examine our own structure honestly, and for the right people in the right seats.

Session 3: Elders as Praying Shepherds

Scripture: 1 Peter 5:1-4; Acts 6:2-4; James 5:14; Hebrews 13:17; John 13:12-17

Big idea: An elder's first assignment is spiritual, not corporate. It starts with prayer, shepherding, and humility.

Quotes to Read or Play

- "It's not primarily a decision-making role as though it's a Fortune 100 company because the church is not that. It's a spiritual assignment as given by God that starts on the prayer and fasting floor." (Joby Martin, 24:02)
- "What you're seeing is an American corporation with the cross out front." (Joby Martin, 24:38)
- "The church is not first an organization to be led or an institution to be managed. She is a wife to be loved." (Joby Martin, 25:10)
- "How many hours have you spent this week praying for our staff?" Joby's question to a newly onboarded elder. (27:22)
- "Nowhere in the scriptures can I find that it's any man's job to keep another man humble." (Joby Martin, 30:21)
- "It's not encouragement if you keep it to yourself. It's discouragement." (Joby Martin, 30:58)
- "A lot of these guys think their job is to protect the church from this lead pastor." (Ryan Britt, 31:18)
- "It's amazing how the human mind will just fill in those gaps with things that may or may not be true." On unclear communication. (Joby Martin, 45:57)
- "Humility is the thing that holds it all together." (Joby Martin, 51:43)

Opening Question

When did an elder or mature believer last pray for you in a way you still remember? What did it do for you?

Going Deeper

1. Joby says the elder role “starts on the prayer and fasting floor.” What portion of our elder meetings is prayer and shepherding versus decisions and reports? What would we do differently if we measured hours of prayer?
2. Where are we tempted to treat the elders like a corporate board and staff or members like donors and stakeholders? What would it look like to be “the body of Christ” instead?
3. The pastors distinguish protecting a pastor from the enemy and sin, which includes direct confrontation, from trying to “keep him humble” by withholding encouragement. Where is that line for us? Do we encourage our pastors out loud?
4. Ryan has seen elder boards whose posture is protecting the church from the lead pastor. What are the warning signs of that dynamic, and how do we guard against it?
5. Two extremes are elders so involved they change the color of the kids’ room, and elders so distant they never interact with staff. Where do we land on the “fairway”?

Application

1. Eleven22 assigns an elder as lead-pastor liaison who sits in senior leadership meetings, and the pastor’s wife has a direct line to an elder. Do we have anything like this? Who has their eye on whether our pastor’s family is healthy?
2. Joby describes gravity: governance carries spiritual weight at the bottom, staff draft off it, and the congregation responds. When governance, staff, and congregation run as three cultures, someone is stuck holding them together. Is that happening here, and who is it?
3. How do our elders communicate with staff and congregation so people are not filling gaps with suspicion?
4. Joby describes elders on hands and knees with towels after baptisms, and showing up in hospital rooms. What is the humble, hands-on service our elders already do, and what could they do more?
5. What specific commitment will we make as elders for prayer or fasting for our pastors, staff, and church?

Closing Prayer Prompt

Spend extended time praying for the pastors, their families, and the staff by name. Let the elders lead.

Session 4: Congregational Culture, Formation Not Branding

Scripture: Ephesians 4:11-16; Acts 2:42-47; Acts 11:24; Romans 12:1-2

Big idea: The congregation experiences the culture before anyone explains it. It is shaped by the pulpit, modeled by leaders, and aimed at formation, not image.

Quotes to Read or Play

- “Before people can articulate your church’s culture, they’ve already experienced it.” (Ryan Britt, 0:00)
- “It’s primarily going to be shaped by the pulpit.” (Joby Martin, 23:49)
- “The most important thing will be what you tell the church that we’re focusing on and reinforcing that with other decisions.” (Joby Martin, 24:48)
- “We can’t tell people we value this and then not create the space for them to actually do it.” On a culture of response. (Ryan Britt, 26:14)
- “Your efficiency people, God bless them, are going to be maybe unintentionally the greatest enemy to some of these kinds of things.” (Ryan Britt, 26:22)
- “Way more is caught than taught.” (Joby Martin, 37:40)
- “If you want people at the altars praying and never ever do you have staff and leaders down there praying, then what are you even doing?” (Joby Martin, 37:57)
- “You can argue with me about this and that theological nuance, but what you can’t argue with me about is what God has done in someone’s life.” On testimony. (Ryan Britt, 16:45)
- “This is not a growth strategy. This is a discipleship strategy.” On “one more.” (Joby Martin, 34:46)
- “Culture is about formation. It’s not about branding.” (Ryan Britt, 46:23)
- “Do I want from people or do I want for people?” (Ryan Britt, 47:23)

Opening Question

What does a first-time guest at our church experience in the first ten minutes, before anyone preaches? What would they say we care about?

Going Deeper

1. Eleven22's concrete floors and pallet wood came from necessity, not strategy, yet became part of the culture. What unintentional elements of our building, services, or habits have become part of who we are? What have we chosen on purpose?
2. Joby says culture is "primarily shaped by the pulpit." Looking back over the last year, what have we taught, celebrated, and reinforced? What has that told our people we value?
3. Joby describes a high-response culture (sing, bring, pray) that cost real estate, time, and efficiency. What do we say we value that we have not created space for in our time or facility?
4. "More is caught than taught." Where do elders, staff, and deacons physically show up in our services, and what do they model? What would change if the leaders led the way?
5. Joby says they celebrate testimonies even when a phone video looks less polished than a produced one. What do we celebrate, and are we ever tempted to put the cart before the horse (polish over people's stories)? What do we choose not to celebrate?

Application

1. Joby's language, "one more," shows how repeated words become culture. What are the three or four phrases our people hear on repeat? Do they point to the right things?
2. Joby says "nothing will deepen your relationship with Jesus like helping other people discover theirs." Do our people see the church as their partner in reaching the person they are praying for?
3. Joby and Ryan describe handling flags, noise, and distractions case by case with relationship rather than strict policy, balancing freedom and order. Where do we need the same balance, and how do we shepherd people through it?
4. When tempted to adapt to a neighborhood's style, Joby's answer is to never compromise the message and to be authentically who God made the church to be. Where do we feel pressure to change our culture to match our context?
5. Ryan asks whether the things we promote are helping people discover and deepen their relationship with Jesus, and whether the things we allow get in the way. What should we promote more, and what should we stop allowing?

Closing Prayer Prompt

Pray that the congregation would be formed into the likeness of Christ, not just look like our church, and that we as leaders would go first.

Session 5: Adding Elders

Scripture: Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; 1 Timothy 5:17-22; Ephesians 4:11-12; 2 Timothy 2:2

Big idea: Elders are a gift Christ gives, but a church can prepare well: know when the team needs more shepherds, pray and watch for who God is raising up, and bring new men in carefully, not hurriedly.

Note on sources: This session has no podcast quotes. It draws on other elder-led churches and ministries, with Eleven22's own approach (governance episode, about 26:30 to 28:20) as a comparison point. Read the practices below aloud or hand them out.

Practices from Other Elder-Led Churches

- **Receive elders as gifts, and ask God to show you who.** 9Marks teaches that churches do not make elders; Jesus gives them. Identifying them should be prayerful, because the men we least expect sometimes prove the most useful. Current elders should invest time in men they see rising, giving them teaching opportunities and letting them observe elder meetings.
- **Train for content, character, and competence.** Pastor Mike McKinley (Sterling Park Baptist) describes a training group open to any willing member. It covered doctrine, honest conversations about personal holiness and besetting sins, and real chances to teach (Sunday school, small groups, evening preaching) with feedback. He admits he built a church with too few leaders early on.
- **Elders lead the selection; the congregation consents.** 9Marks says Scripture gives no exact method, but the principles point to current elders examining a man and the congregation recognizing him. One pattern: elders nominate, then the congregation votes to recognize.
- **Pair, equip, and present new elders.** Pastor Garrett Kell (Del Ray Baptist) recommends giving each new elder an experienced elder to talk through meetings, pressure, time, family, holiness, and grace; a reading list and a record of past decisions; a small ministry budget if possible; and early public roles in front of the congregation.

- **Wait for the right men.** Alexander Strauch (*Biblical Eldership*) argues churches should insist on qualified men even if it takes years, and opposes fixed term limits or fixed numbers of elders. Many Presbyterian and Reformed churches, by contrast, use rotating terms. His study guide is designed for a prospective elder working under a mentoring elder.
- **Have a plan, not just good intentions.** A 2022 Liberty University doctoral project at one church produced written prerequisites for identifying elders, a seven-week training workbook, one-on-one pairing of current elders with candidates, and clear installation guidelines.
- **Widen the pool.** The book *Bully Pulpit: Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church* warns that elder boards can become a club for people who already fit the mold, and urges looking across vocations, backgrounds, and social classes.
- **For comparison, Eleven22:** a two-year, largely theological onboarding in which a candidate must be able to teach the Word; a question to a new elder about how many hours he prays for staff each week; elders are never un-eldered unless disqualified; only six elders sit on the board with the lead pastor, with rotation, while all elders shepherd.

Opening Question

Who first saw something in you before you saw it yourself, and what did they do that made a difference?

Going Deeper

Part 1: When do we need new elders?

1. How many elders do we have now, and when did we last add or lose one? Do we have a sense of the right number, and what is it based on?
2. If several members needed an elder tomorrow (a hospital stay, a marriage crisis, someone drifting), could we respond? How many people is each elder realistically shepherding? Some denominations ask elders at every meeting who needs special care or is drifting. Could we answer that?
3. McKinley describes a church that was a body with no skeleton: growth outran leadership. Have our attendance, campuses, or ministries grown faster than our elder capacity?
4. Are any current elders at capacity, burned out, or facing health, family, work, or relocation changes? Who may need a season off the board while remaining an elder?

5. Is the need about workload, or about a gap in gifting or perspective (teaching, counseling, finance, the next generation)? Are we filling a seat or answering a real need?
6. Is anyone feeling pressure to add elders quickly? What would waiting cost us, and what would rushing cost us?

Part 2: How do we identify and onboard new elders?

1. How do we find candidates today? Is it prayerful and intentional, or based on who is most visible or most like us? Who might God be raising up that we have not noticed?
2. Do we have a pipeline before the formal ask (a training group or apprenticeship)? If it is open to any willing man, how do we avoid false expectations?
3. How do we assess content (doctrine), character, and competence (teaching)? How do we look honestly at his household, his reputation outside the church, and the fruit of his discipling? How long do we observe him?
4. Are any of our prerequisites beyond Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3 (education, wealth, years of membership)? Should they be?
5. Who takes part in the decision: current elders, the lead pastor, his wife, the congregation? What do our bylaws require for nomination, approval, and a vote?
6. What should onboarding include: a paired elder, a reading list, a history of past decisions, time observing meetings before voting? How long should it last?
7. How do we help him count the cost of pressure, time, and family before he says yes? What will he need to stop doing?
8. How do we introduce him to the congregation and let them see him pray, teach, and share his testimony?
9. If we or he discern he should not proceed, how do we handle that graciously and protect the friendship?

Part 3: What else should we consider?

1. Tenure: should elders serve indefinitely, for fixed terms, or with rotation? What are the strengths and risks of each, and how can an elder step back without shame?
2. Board and elder: do all elders sit on the legal board, or only some? How does that change training, voting, and legal duties?
3. Unity: how much agreement do we need before adding someone, unanimous or a supermajority? How do we handle an elder who is hesitant?
4. Variety: are we selecting men who look and think like us, or men whose age, vocation, and season of life complement ours?

5. Succession: who is being prepared for the next season, including for the lead pastor's role?
6. Removal and restoration: what is our process if an elder is disqualified or must step down? Are we ready before we need it?
7. Legal and governing documents: what do our bylaws, state law, and any denominational rules require? Who will have counsel review any change?
8. Sending: are we raising elders only for our own team, or also for planting and sending?

Application

1. Do we need to add elders in the next 12 months? Each elder answers in one sentence and says why.
2. Privately write the names of men God may be raising up, then share. What is one next step for each?
3. Who will own this process, and do we need a written plan with a timeline?
4. What should we do better for the elders we already have?
5. Which one item from this session goes on the agenda for our next elder meeting?

Closing Prayer Prompt

Ask Christ to give the church the shepherds she needs, to keep us patient instead of rushed, and to strengthen the elders already serving.

Sources for this session: McKinley, Raising up Elders: Three Areas to Address; Kell, Four Ways to Equip New Elders; 9Marks, How Should Elders Be Selected?. The Strauch, Liberty dissertation, and *Bully Pulpit* points come from excerpts and abstracts; check them against the full works before presenting.

Retreat Close: Three Commitments

Before leaving, have each elder write one answer to each prompt, then share:

1. **Say / Do / Tolerate:** One thing I will start saying or doing, or stop tolerating.
2. **Governance:** One thing our elder body should review, clarify, or change.
3. **Prayer and Shepherding:** One specific way I will pray for or care for our pastors, staff, and congregation this month.

Close by reading Ryan's reminder together: "All of these things are a means to a God-glorifying end." (Joby Martin, 47:39)