

## **Why I encourage every church to develop a plan for naming elders** **By Bob Young [edited and expanded from an article by Wes McAdams]**

Many of the seminars I present as part of the work of Latin American Leadership Development are designed to help churches develop leaders, with the ultimate goal being the identification of elders in a self-governing congregation. The goal is important because every church is called to identify spiritual leaders and develop a biblical organization. The goal is important because every church should develop and identify elders. When I say that ‘Every church should develop and identify elders,’ there are always some who object. Let me explain why every church needs elders.

### **1. Every Church Should Work toward naming Elders because that is the church organizational plan taught in the Bible**

On Paul’s first missionary journey, he and Barnabas appointed elders “in every church” (Acts 14:23). This is a key verse in the work of Latin American Leadership Development. When I study the first century context of Paul’s work, this simple statement is amazing. The text says that all of the churches established on Paul’s first missionary journey had elders when he left them and returned to Antioch.

On the island of Crete, Paul gave the task of appointing elders to Titus. Paul wrote to Titus, “This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you” (Titus 1:5). In every town that had a church, Titus was to help the local church name elders. The way Paul phrases this instruction may indicate that a part of naming elders is preparation that corrects deficiencies; it may also indicate that every church without elders needs someone to put things in order.

### **2. Every Church Should Work toward Naming Elders because of the importance of the work elders are called to do**

A church without elders often fails in some very important activities or works. A church without elders often lacks teachers, does not have effective visitation efforts, cannot make effective decisions with adequate oversight to follow through, and does not aggressively search for the spiritually weak and wandering.

Every church not only needs elders, it needs the right kind of elders. Every church needs spiritual men who have the characteristics Paul mentions. They have certain qualities reflected in Paul’s instructions (Titus 1:5-16; 1 Timothy 3:1-7) and who are willing to do the work. Elders are the shepherds of the flock (Acts 20:28) and have a very important work.

- They are teachers of truth (Titus 1:9)
- They guard the flock against false teaching (Acts 20:28; Titus 1:9-16)
- They keep watch over the souls of the congregation (Hebrews 13:17)
- They pray with the sick (James 5:14)
- They are overseers of the congregation (1 Timothy 3:1)

These points could be expanded into a much longer list by looking at all of the Bible texts related to the work of the elders.

### **3. Every Church Should Work toward Naming Elders because it will let the local preacher focus on his real work of teaching, preaching, and evangelizing**

In the previous point, I described a church that lacks teachers; does not visit and follow up on visitors, new contacts, new prospects, Christians who are absent from the assemblies; and struggles with the decision-making process ; and fails to follow through on intentions. In a church without elders, all of these things often fall on the preacher. Not only is it not God's plan that the church be administered by one man, being responsible for all of the things listed above takes the preacher away from his biblical work of teaching and preaching and sharing the gospel.

### **4. Every Church Should Work toward Naming Elders because unqualified persons will assume leadership roles when there is a leadership vacuum**

Every church should have in mind the need for elders, because nature abhors a vacuum. If spiritual leaders are not identified and named, leadership roles will be assumed by those unqualified or less qualified. While it is better not to have elders than to have unqualified elders, based on passages like Acts 14:23 it is hard to imagine how a church could exist for very long before spiritually mature men would be ready to serve.

### **5. Every Church Should Work toward Naming Elders Because Every Christian Needs a Shepherd**

Sheep need shepherds. Every sheep needs a shepherd. We tend to think that it is just some sheep that need shepherds. We think sick sheep, new sheep, or not-so-smart sheep need shepherds. We deceive ourselves and think we who are spiritually mature do not need a shepherd. I need shepherds; you need shepherds; we all need shepherds.

Churches in the New Testament not only had shepherds; they had a plurality of shepherds. One reason for this is that even a shepherd needs to be shepherded. Elders are not only shepherds to the local church; they are shepherds to each other as well. They mentor each other, hold each other accountable, teach each other, and confess their sins and struggles to each other.

Everyone needs a leader. Everyone needs a spiritual support system. We need those who care for us and correct us. We need those to whom we are accountable. We need instruction. We need those who give us examples, persuade us, and guide us. It is a joy to submit to such spiritual leaders (Hebrews 13:7, 17). Submission humbles us and makes us more like Christ.

### **6. Every Church Should Work toward Naming Elders because Biblical teachings have to be applied in the local church**

In the Old Testament, the elders made decisions about how to apply God's Word. The church today needs leaders with the same ability. Every church needs spiritual leaders who know how to read, study, and apply the word in their own lives, and are capable of giving wise counsel concerning the personal and corporate application of God's Word.

Today, as in the first century, there will usually be a brief period of time in a church's infancy when it has no elders. Decisions will have to be made for the congregation. How should such decisions be made? Although Scripture does not say specifically, it appears that in the first century the missionaries and evangelists gave guidance. That is still the model most often

applied today. A good process is to develop a plan for sharing the leadership and decision-making as indigenous spiritual leaders develop, but congregations will require continual guidance in various matters until elders can be appointed.

Many congregations use men's meetings or congregational meetings, in which decisions are made democratically. It is true that congregational church organization is a part of church history. Perhaps we use the congregational organization and think it is a biblical method because we live in a democracy. The problem is that too often decisions are made by those who are spiritually immature. In a growing congregation, 50% or more of the members are new Christians, babes in Christ with very limited spiritual experience. In every congregation, there are those who have long years of Christian history but have failed to grow. Congregational government may be an acceptable short-term arrangement with the guidance of missionaries or an evangelist, but it is not a long-term solution. The Bible describes no New Testament church that was organized and governed in this way.

The church is not a democracy. It is a monarchy. Christ is the head and certain Christians have specific responsibilities in the church: "He gave some to be apostles, others prophets, evangelists, and shepherd-teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-12). How is the lordship of Jesus over the church to be seen if every person must be a part of every decision about what happens in the local church.

### **7. Every Church Should Work toward Naming Elders because the members have to be trained, encouraged, and equipped**

Ephesians 4:11-13 says that one responsibility of leaders, including elders as pastor-teachers, is to help the members of the church learn how to participate in the work of ministry. A church without elders, and every church without effective spiritual leaders, suffers from the lack of involvement of the members in the work. Ephesians 4:16 refers to the work that each member has in the church. This seldom becomes reality without elders who take seriously their work of shepherding, which includes facilitating the work of the members. To say that elders are administrators, responsible for overseeing the church, suggests also their role in helping others find their own ministries (ad-minister means toward ministry).

### **The Most Frequent Objection: What If There Are No Men Qualified?**

This is the most frequent protest, "There are many congregations without qualified men or without men willing to serve. How can such a church have elders? Surely that church does not need elders." In Latin America, the objection is expanded. Some of the things I have heard include, "We do not have men with a lot of experience. We have problems in our families. We have problems in our marriages. We have problems in the time we can devote because of our heavy work schedules." I understand the challenge, both in the U.S. and in Latin America.

The Bible says a sinner needs water in order to be baptized. Someone might think an exception should be made for people who do not have any water or do not have easy access to water, but I would say that is not true. I would say a person with no water needs to find water, not make an exception. When we do not have what the Bible says we need, we must find a way to get what we need. Congregations without elders need to feel the tension, "We do not have elders right now, but we need to be working toward the time when we can have elders." When a church and its members feel this tension, they will make the hard but necessary decisions. In

the U.S. those decisions may include such items as McAdams lists, “Should we consider merging with another congregation, even if that means driving a few extra miles? Should we consider financially supporting older men to move to our community and serve as our elders?”

My experience is that the best way to resolve the tension is to begin in the local church a concerted effort to train and equip the men (and boys) so they are able to serve as elders in the future. There will be times when a church does not have elders, but during such times the church must not become comfortable with that situation.

The tension is essential. A church in Latin America named elders, and after a few years as a result of several factors, the church was again without elders. When I visited the church one of the members said to me, “We used to have elders. Now we do not have elders, but nothing is different without elders.” That church did not feel the tension. Perhaps when the church had elders, those elders did not really fulfill the role and do the work of elders. Perhaps the member I was talking to was spiritually immature and not aware of the dynamic of the local church. My point is not to explain every detail in that situation. My point is that every church must maintain the tension and keep in front of it the goal of naming elders. Every church should be working through a process that will result in naming elders.

### **Before It Begins**

When we recognize that every church needs elders, we will include that teaching in the Bible message. We will teach and preach about it. I spoke about biblical organization in a church in Latin America. The church had been established a number of years ago by a missionary. When I finished explaining the Bible teaching and God’s plan for church organization, they said to me, “We have never heard that.” If the first Christians in a newly established church do not have in mind the goal of becoming spiritual leaders, it is less likely to happen. When a new congregation is formed, the question should be raised fairly soon, “Who will serve as the elders?” In Latin America, too often the local church sees the need for a building before it sees the need for elders. The Bible says a lot about elders in the local church. It says nothing about a building for the local church. Let us go back to the Bible and seek God’s priorities. Every church should be working toward naming elders!