




Guess I Was Right!

Back in the March issue we asked for your (the readers') input about how you manage your time and responsibilities as an elder. The request was born out of my suspicions that most elders are super busy and feel that much is neglected. I guess I was right, if the lack of specific feedback to my question is any indication (or else most of our readers don't generally respond

in writing to questions that editors' ask!)

So as not to load too much more on your plate, we keep each issue of ESN brief, so that every article can be read in a short sitting. Thanks to so many who have responded in person during our travels. And thanks to those who contribute financially to keep this ministry going. To God be the glory.
The editor 

Biblical Qualifications

Elder, Encourage Thyself

by Chuck Gianotti

Encouragement is a commodity in short supply. While not alone in needing this, a leader of God's people can readily to David's experience:

David was greatly distressed because the people spoke of stoning him, for all the people were embittered, each one because of his sons and his daughters. But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God. (1 Sam 30:6 NASB).

Hopefully, this is not the elder's usual experience, but there are times when the task seems overly daunting.

That great leader and motivator of God's people, David, needed encouragement during his down times. So do we!

The word translated "strengthen" in the NASB, is rendered in the KJV as "David encouraged himself in the Lord his God." The underlying Hebrew word carries both connotations—"to encourage by adding courage or strength." That great leader and motivator of God's people, David, needed encouragement during his down times! The people were bitter and ready to stone him. Some reward for faithful leadership! Can you relate?

When I think of discouragement (speaking from experience) I picture that state of being where enthusiasm for stepping into the future is nullified by present perceptions of opposition, failure, uselessness or ineffectiveness. This is often accompanied by a loss of hope for being a choice (or at least an accept-

able) vessel of service for the Lord. So the question is pertinent, how does an elder encourage himself? Here are some helpful ways:

Look to God's Word

Scripture contains many stories of godly leaders who at times struggled with discouragement. We learn two things from reading about them: 1) We are not unique in our struggles and 2) We can learn from how those godly men dealt with emotionally debilitating circumstances. Chapter 11 of book of Hebrews, the "Hall of Faith," as some have termed it,

is included for a reason. These were godly men who endured many adverse situations and did not give up. Meditating on passages like that can have a cathartic effect on the discouraged leader.

Review past working of God in your life

God frequently instructed Israel to look back at past rescues from oppression and failure. The Passover, for example, served to continually remind them that God saves His people from hardship when they follow Him. Piles of rocks set up as monuments reminded future generations of the great activities of God. So, as those who struggle to serve the Lord and lead His people, we do well to remember the many times when our God worked in our past situations. Some

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Leadership Principles

The Simple Elders' Meeting

by Jack Spender

The title of this article might strike some as strange. Why should a meeting for church elders be simple? Well, it need not be, but my desire is to address a particular problem that is not uncommon; elders who meet only when there is a "crisis," fearing that regular meetings could make life complicated! Asking a few questions to figure out why this should be so, brought some surprises. The "official-ness" of a regular elders' meeting conveys intimidating ideas of power, control, and big business. Better to keep things low key and only meet when forced to by circumstances. Interesting!

Let's spend some time thinking about how a simple elders' meeting can become a valuable

tool in providing what every assembly needs: good leadership, without falling into the trap of complexity or power seeking. This can serve as a checklist for elders who already enjoy regular meetings as well as a resource for those who do not.

Why a Meeting?

While there are no specific instructions in the NT as to how elders should carry out their work, the idea of elders coming together to consider a matter is found in Acts 15, commonly referred to as the Jerusalem Council. Here a plurality of leaders moved toward a decision by receiving input from those who had helpful information to share. The end result was unity (Acts 15:25 lit. "having come to one accord") and blessings for the churches (15:30-31). What sort of material might occupy a typical elders meeting today?

Preserving Simplicity

There are at least three reasons why elders ought to come together for the good of the church. 1) They should spend time together in the Scriptures and in prayer, 2) They can discuss and make plans for shepherding the flock, and 3) They can exercise oversight by making necessary and timely decisions.

Each of the above can, with practice, be kept to a reasonable amount of time and will soon result in blessings for the church. Of course, there are many added benefits from such meetings as well. The believers find joy in knowing that those who lead them take the Lord's work seriously, and will learn to pray for them. Elders are drawn together by working together on a regular basis resulting in a team spirit which is a good model for the whole assembly.

Fortunately, there is great freedom

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for elders to meet in a way that best serves their needs. The following suggestions are offered simply as helps to those who may not be sure where to begin.

Time in the Word and Prayer

Elders need to know and defend their priorities. This is the great lesson we learn from the earliest church leaders in Acts 6:1-7. As the church grew, temporal concerns threatened to swamp the spiritual leaders forcing them to abandon their most important work of spending time in the Scriptures and in prayer.

It is no different today! Elders must delegate temporal work of the church to men who can care for it, leaving them free to spend time with the Head of the church seeking wisdom and direction to lead. In my own assembly, it has become a matter of habit over the years to identify issues and problems that could consume large amounts of time. These are immediately handed over for action to the deacons of the church or in some cases to the monthly meeting of the brothers.

But what does it mean to spend time in the Word and prayer? Here simplicity is best. The goal is not to plunge into deep studies on thorny

church issues, but simply to spend time with the Lord Jesus, learning from Him as He explained in Matthew 11:28-30. As laborers together with Him, we want to take His yoke, learn of Him, and then speak to Him about what we are learning.

This can be accomplished beautifully if one of the brothers will bring a brief meditation from a portion of Scripture. Alternatively, the men may work through a book or section chosen in advance. The tone can be devotional rather than theological; under-shepherds listening to the heart of the Chief Shepherd as He would encourage, train, exhort by His Spirit through the Word. This time in itself can make the elders meetings a delight

for every brother.

But be assured that the adversary will not allow such quality time without some opposition. "Emergencies" seem to come out of nowhere when elders purpose to dedicate time to meeting with the Lord. Firm resolve is needed to hold good ground!

Shepherding the Flock

The writer of Proverbs counsels shepherds to "be sure you know the condition of your flocks..." (Prov. 27:23 NKJV). This is good advice for elders. At the heart, elder-work is all about people. It is sad when elders become so engrossed in discussions and decisions about church funds and temporal matters that the care for people is neglected. What simple tools can help in this crucial work?

Providing a list of all who are in fellowship is a great asset. By the way, I am not referring to the conventional "church membership" list which tells who is a member of the corporation and gives them certain legal rights in voting, etc. Rather, the fellowship list is a simple resource for church elders reminding them of those for whom they are responsible before the Lord to "keep watch over you" (Heb. 13:17). Regular

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No Return Address

by Mary Gianotti

An envelope with no return address was the first letter on the pile of junk mail. Good thing we opened it. Inside was one thin piece of paper, a bank check made out to us. It was clear the giver wanted to remain anonymous. What a blessing! Once again God proves Himself faithful in meeting our needs. But, that is not where the story ends.


When I realized the gift was anonymous, I said to myself, "Great, now we will have to be nice to everyone!" Although I was kidding I couldn't shake those words from my mind. Why did they slip out so easily? Was there a speck of truth in what I had said? If so, something was wrong at the heart level.

I began to think about Peter's words, "Love one another deeply from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22). Do I love my fellow believers "deeply"? The word means "intently" and occurs only one time in the New Testament. It has the idea of a love directed with strained or eager attention. This kind of love leaves no room for writing people off, holding a grudge or ignoring them.

When the elders make a decision that is criticized and my husband is a leader, I do not feel like loving the dissenters. In fact if I'm honest I have some pretty ugly thoughts... far from loving. We are directed by the Holy Spirit in a situation like this to put a great

amount of effort into loving these believers. It seems impossible unless you look at the rest of what Peter says. The whole verse reads, "Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart." Obedience precedes love.

Discovering how to obey means being in God's Word, absorbing the truth. Reading 1 Peter is a good place to start.

And yes, I will not just "have to be nice to everyone." I will have the privilege of choosing obedience and focusing my attention on extending God's love to everyone. 

The Simple Elders' Meeting *(cont. from page 2)*

prayer for those in the church, deciding who needs to be visited in the home or hospital, learning from one another about needed growth steps and significant decisions ahead in individual lives, are all aspects of shepherding care.

This will shed light on future needs for platform ministry or conferences for equipping. Once again, try to keep it simple. If meetings are regular, even if only monthly, there is no reason why a brief time to work through one section of the list of names could not result in covering every family and individual in the course of a year.

Another helpful tool can be a written record of families visited and prayer requests.

Decision Making

This one presents a special challenge because if it is not restrained, it will quickly swallow up the other two! Without question, there are decisions which need to be made by elders; the careful and judicious exercise of spiritual authority for the good of the church. But wise elders will learn to distinguish between serious doctrinal or moral issues which they must not neglect, and routine decisions in the myriad of small concerns that can well be

handled by younger men who need to learn the basics of working together in problem solving.

In any case, it will greatly help if the first two items are given attention at the early part of the meeting.

Other Suggestions

Elders should adopt the thinking that training younger men in assembly work is more important than the financial or material concerns that are handed over to them. Give them the freedom to make some decisions and learn by experience!


Also, it can be a great encouragement for elders to meet periodically with deacons or others who are serving in this way. Ask more questions about how they are doing in their walk with the Lord or in their marriages or in their ability to work together as a team than about the details of their tasks.

Be sure to thank them for the work they are doing to relieve the elders from things that might draw them away from their priorities. Assure them that the time thus gained will not be spent in merely addressing other such issues, but that it is really being applied to time with the Lord, and caring for the flock.

Conclusion

Because the assembly is more an organism than an institution, it will manifest the marks of life. This means that a healthy elders' meeting must be a tool that serves something living; not a harsh task master in a cold organization. There will be both demanding times and times that are more restful by comparison.

Flexibility is important. Brothers will be absent for business or vacations. It will be helpful to agree in advance that the regular meetings should continue where possible. Most needs and decisions can be handled by those present, the others giving their blessing and trust to those who meet. Unanimity should especially characterize more serious matters, and those who are absent can use modern technology to "check in" through phone or email in such cases.

As the Lord sees our willingness to invest time in the work of shepherding His people, we may find the same words used to describe the earliest church in Acts 6:1 "In those days, when the number of disciples was increasing...." applied to us! 

Elders, Encourage Thyself *(cont. from page 1)*

make use of a journal that they can readily review. I personally like to keep what I call “an encouragement file.” This contains letters of appreciation, updates from those I once mentored or disciplined, and other reminders of how God has used me in someone’s life. Such things are not for ostentatious show, as being framed and displayed for all to see. Rather, they are simply private reminders of God’s faithfulness in using me in some small ways—putting a stone monument by the river’s edge so that I can remember and be encouraged.

Sometimes my wife and I will purposely reminisce. When she is discouraged I will bring up past victories or accomplishments in her ministry. And she does the same for me. Photo albums are helpful in this remembering, and can be an uplift during down times. The encouragement does not come from what we have done, but from remembering what God has done through us.

Share your discouragements

Find a trusted friend or accountability partner with whom you can share your discouragements & disappointments. I am thinking here of someone who is a good listener and not too quick to provide a solution. This can be difficult because most men seemed programmed to see

problems as things to be solved. Discouragement is not resolved like that. We often know the Scriptures that apply, but what we need is not a sermon, but someone who can come along side and add “courage” or “strength.” This can be simply a listening ear, or a time of prayer.

However, doing this means becoming vulnerable on two fronts: 1) We must humble ourselves by admitting when we are discouraged, which can expose us to the possible misguided condescension of other men. 2) We need to accept the encouragement God brings through others, knowing that at other times we may be called upon to encourage that other person.

Talk to yourself

In the duplex chapters of Psalms 42 & 43, we find David three times asking himself, “Why are you in despair, O my soul. And why have you become disturbed within me?” He talks to himself while wrestling through his thoughts and emotions. And each time, he responds to his question with a firm but constructive challenge, “Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him. The help of my countenance, and my God.” We need to *choose* to put our thought back on God, and the hope He promises. This will help us shore up courage

in the face of opposition and difficulty.


Encourage others

One of the best ways of dealing with discouragement is to actively and willfully go out of our way to encourage others (1 Thess 5:11). Since discouragement results from the introspective focusing on ourselves., the most effective cure is to simply focus on others (Phil 2:4).

Pray

I have not mentioned prayer until now, because most elders know its importance and probably do it instinctively. My sense is that most of us probably feel that to seek encouragement in any other way than prayer might be a sign of spiritual immaturity. If we have the Lord, why would we need these other things?

My response is that while discouragement may be a symptom of spiritual *weakness*, it is not a symptom of spiritual *immaturity*. Yes, we all get weak spiritually at times, and as such we need help in tangible forms. In fact, the “other things” mentioned above are frequently the very answers to our prayer poured out before the Lord.

So, Elder, encourage thyself! Actively look for the Lord’s encouragement through the many avenues He provides. No one else is going to do it for you. 

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