

**ELDERS  
MINISTRY**  
VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK

# ELDERS MINISTRY

VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK

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*Equipping You to Serve*

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**CHURCHLEADERS**  
P R E S S

*Colorado Springs*

# ELDERS MINISTRY

VOLUNTEER HANDBOOK

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*Equipping You to Serve*

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*Colorado Springs*

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## FOREWORD

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*H*ealthy things grow.

God himself designed this principle into creation. When our children are born, growth is the expectation. If our child does not grow, we realize something is wrong. We consult with doctors to seek a remedy. If we plant a tree and nothing about it has changed for weeks or months, we surmise that something is wrong. God intended growth for everything that lives: plants, fish, birds, animals, and human beings. “Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and all the people” (Luke 2:52). Jesus was healthy—and he grew.

Several ingredients must be present for growth to happen. Plants need light and water and nutrients. Our bodies need the form and function provided by our skeletal system. Among other things, this internal structure enables us to move, and even provides critical blood cells that further enhance our health and strength. Without this internal structure, we could not exist.

Healthy churches grow, too. And like our bodies, they need the right structure. Dr. Christian Schwarz, founder of NCD (Natural Church Development) verified this. He studied hundreds of thousands of congregations on six continents from all tribes of Christianity. He and his research team discovered eight key traits of church health.<sup>1</sup> The focus of this book explores two of those traits – functional structures and empowered leadership.

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1 [http://ncd-international.org/public/natural\\_church\\_development.html#eight](http://ncd-international.org/public/natural_church_development.html#eight)

As the human body needs a healthy and strong internal skeletal structure, so also the local church needs a robust, functional leadership structure. A necessary feature of this polity (i.e., functional structure) is the elder team. Elders must lead effectively—and empower others to do the same.

Is the church growing? Reports the world over, from South America to Africa to East Asia, tell us the church is healthy and growing. To the discerning mind, this begs a scattershot of delicate questions: Is the church in the Western world growing? Is my congregation growing? Is yours? If the answer is no, are we willing to ask ourselves and our leadership colleagues, “What’s wrong?”

This book can help you find answers to those questions. And even if your church seems healthy, principles and practices described here can help your leadership team become more effective than ever before.

Your willingness to serve as an elder—and to consider how to improve your service—brings great hope. It’s important to remember, as goes the leadership, so goes the church. Your commitment to God, your obedience to his Word, and your development of a healthy team of elders are integral to the health, vitality, and future of your local congregation.

We wish you well as you study the recommendations in these pages. They’re borne of devotion to and study of God’s Word, extensive interactions with elders in dozens of locations, and an earnest desire for you to flourish as a leader in your congregation.

God makes it clear that your work is important to him and vital for the health of your congregation. Consider one of the Scriptures that anchors this book and joyfully serve God with the concern he has for your task as an elder:

*Care for the flock that God has entrusted to you. Watch over it willingly, not grudgingly—not for what you will get out*

*of it, but because you are eager to serve God. Don't lord it over the people assigned to your care, but lead them by your own good example. And when the Great Shepherd appears, you will receive a crown of never-ending glory and honor.*  
(1 Peter 5:2-4)

— **Gary L. Johnson**, Executive Director,  
e2: effective elders  
*e2elders.org*

## INTRODUCTION

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### to the *Outreach Ministry Guides Series*

*Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms*  
(1 Peter 4:10).

This handbook is part of a series designed to equip and empower church volunteers for effective ministry. If you're reading this, chances are you're a church volunteer. Thanks for your willingness to serve!

Several things make this handbook unique:

- The content is specific and practical for your given area of ministry.
- The information is compiled from experienced ministry practitioners—folks who've worked, served, and helped to train others in this particular area.
- It's written with you—a ministry volunteer—in mind.

Within these pages you'll find three sections. The first gives a brief overview of fundamental principles to provide you with a solid foundation for the ministry area in which you're serving.

Section 2 unpacks various skills related to the responsibilities involved. Understanding what is required and assessing if it's a good fit is helpful in creating a ministry team that is effective and serves together well.

Finally, Section 3 provides a multitude of practical ministry tools. These ideas and tips will help you demonstrate Jesus' love to the people you serve.

Whether you're a first-time volunteer or a seasoned veteran, my prayer is that the information and practical tools in this handbook will encourage and assist you. May God bless and guide you in your ministry!

— **Matt Lockhart**, General Editor

## INTRODUCTION

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### **to the *Elders Ministry Volunteer Handbook***

Perhaps no ministry in the local church is less understood than that of the elders. And yet as you'll see in this handbook, elder leadership can determine the health, the growth, and the future of your congregation.

But not everyone comes to the task of being an elder with the same set of expectations. Some compare their role to that of a company's board of directors. Similarities are there to be found, but the Bible knows nothing of such boards. Sadly, in many situations, elders have never been shown the Bible's description of their rich opportunities for influencing lives. Sometimes they don't realize the vital duty that belongs to elders alone.

That's why this handbook is so important. Here you'll find firm Scriptural foundation for the role of elders in the local church. You'll read about the variety of qualities elders must demonstrate and tasks they must take up. Elders will find encouragement for their ministry, information about their responsibilities, and direction for the work they have agreed to do.

And while all of this is Scriptural, none of it is theoretical. Each writer bases his insights and recommendations on years of experience with local congregations. They have not only served one church; they have traveled to help thousands of elders in hundreds of local churches.

This book is easy to read, but important to ponder. Talk about these insights and ideas with other elders on your team.

Decide next steps for molding your elders ministry in the form found in the Bible. Among all the volunteers serving your congregation, your church is depending on you more than any other.

— **Mark A. Taylor**, General Editor

## SECTION 1

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### ELDERS MINISTRY: WHAT IT IS

<b>Chapter 1</b>	Why Elders?	14
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## CHAPTER 1

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### WHY ELDERS?

*By Gary L. Johnson*

*W*hy elders?

The Bible has, depending on one's preferred translation, roughly 1,000 to 1,500 uses of the word "because." God explained to Adam and Eve *why* they were being punished—and banished—from Eden. God explained to Moses and Aaron *why* they would not step foot in the Promised Land, and to David *why* the sword would never leave his house. *Why* is important to God.

In 2009, Simon Sinek first published his now famous book *Start with Why*. In that work, Sinek's now well-known Golden Circle Theory was explained: Starting with *why* is powerful because it centers on motivation, not manipulation. We want to follow someone or contribute to a cause when the purpose, the *why*, is explained clearly.

*Why* is as important to us as it is to God. And so, in this handbook, we start with *why* elders are critical in the local church.

#### **The Current Situation**

Congregations are losing spiritual ground to the kingdom of darkness far too often in America today. An estimated 40 percent of Americans participate in worship any given weekend, but that number comes from self-reporting. The real total is most likely in

the high teens,<sup>2</sup> and that was before churches closed their campuses because of COVID. The decline of the American church was well underway long before the pandemic struck.

We face several formidable challenges, both from within and without. We live in a post-truth culture with widespread disrespect for the Christian faith. Christians are passive when it comes to evangelism and lukewarm about their discipleship. Consumer-driven Christianity produces member-driven churches that are no longer on mission to seek and to save the lost. With tens of thousands of churches struggling to maintain attendance, offering, and involvement, effective church leadership is needed now more than ever.

### **The Biblical Model**

So why elders? Primarily, it is because it is the model given to us in Scripture. It is biblical from start to finish, which will be explored in more detail in the following chapter.

God spoke throughout the Old Testament, especially through the prophets, pronouncing judgment against the nations of Israel and Judah, against the people, even against the land itself, all because of the failures of the *leaders*. A partial list of such references would include Psalm 94:20; Ezekiel 8:11-12, 14:3, 34:2; Hosea 7:7, 16, 9:15; and Zephaniah 3:3.

The integrity and godliness of the leaders determined the course for the nations of Israel and Judah. Likewise today, as the leaders go, so goes the church.

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2 <https://churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/139575-7-startling-facts-an-up-close-look-at-church-attendance-in-america.html>

## The Leadership Pipeline

God appointed Ezekiel as a watchman for the Hebrew people (chapter 33). He was Israel's watchman because no one else was willing to be one. The leadership pipeline was empty in his day, and likewise, the elder pipeline is empty across America in our day.

The Alyeska Pipeline Service Company reported that in February 2021, the daily average throughput of the Trans Alaska Pipeline was 498,875 barrels of oil.<sup>3</sup> The pipeline was designed to carry four times that amount—about two million barrels per day.<sup>4</sup> That maximum capacity was realized in 1988, when oil needed about four-and-a-half days to travel 800 miles from Pump Station 1 near Prudhoe Bay all the way south to the terminal at Valdez. In 2018, diminished oil throughput slowed its transit to nearly three weeks.<sup>5</sup> While the minimum capacity is much less certain than its maximum capacity, it is a very real threat. Too little oil would cause the temperature in the pipeline to drop so low that oil could literally freeze in place, and with barrels flowing south, it would back up and rupture the pipeline, spilling across the Alaskan wilderness.

In the church, the leadership pipeline is running dangerously low. Fewer people are attending college and seminary to prepare for vocational ministry. The same is true when it comes to the recruitment of elders. The local church must become intentional in recruiting the next generation of elders if we are to refill the pipeline.

Why? Because the days are urgent, and we need spiritual leaders in the local church. Modern-day shepherds are needed to

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3 <https://www.alyeska-pipe.com/historic-throughput>

4 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trans-Alaska\\_Pipeline\\_System](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trans-Alaska_Pipeline_System)

5 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trans-Alaska\\_Pipeline\\_System#Technical\\_details](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trans-Alaska_Pipeline_System#Technical_details)

help heal marriages and families, to walk with grieving people through the valley of the shadow of death, to help break the back of crippling addictions while leading the local church to healthy and robust ministry.

## **Six Challenges**

In recent years, e2: effective elders<sup>6</sup> has met with over 9,000 elders and church leaders in conferences. From hosting these intentional elder gatherings, we have discovered six challenges facing elders. These challenges are real in American churches from across the nation. We remember all six by using the convenient acronym E.L.D.E.R.S.

### **E–Evangelism**

God designed the church to run on the power of example. If the elders are not making friendships with people outside the faith and far from God, can we expect the congregation to do so? Elders who shirk this responsibility to share Jesus with people who don't yet know him almost guarantee that no one else in the congregation will do so either.

### **L–Leadership**

Does the congregation have an atmosphere and ethos of leadership, of self-leadership, of proactively tackling problems and “getting things done”? Do elders carefully select people with the leadership gift (Romans 12:8), and then empower people to serve using that gift? Or, on the contrary, do elders micromanage staff and volunteers?

Elders need leadership skills to grapple with whatever obstacles arise. It might mean steering the church through a pandemic, or

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6 <https://www.e2elders.org>

resolving conflict between individuals, or even protecting the doctrine of the church.

### **D–Discipleship**

Again, elders must lead by example. The uptick in biblical illiteracy is alarming. Christians seem to be growing older, but not growing up when it comes to living as fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul declared, “And you should imitate me, just as I imitate Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). Are the elders passionately becoming more like Christ with every passing day, and helping others do the same? Elders must be actively engaged in discipling others. The Great Commission is every believer’s responsibility, and elders are to lead the charge.

### **E–Equipping Elders**

Continual advancement, development, self-leadership, and improvement should be part of every elder team’s goals and activities. Elders are leaders, and they need to develop skills for today instead of depending on approaches from decades past. Far too often, elders are selected for nonspiritual reasons (i.e., we want a lawyer, a CPA, a corporate executive, a business owner, etc.). Such individuals are asset, but are they called by God as *spiritual* leaders?

### **R–Recruiting**

We are *all* “interim pastors,” as the saying goes. That sentiment is true not only of paid staff but for volunteers. Every volunteer, whether in the nursery or an elder, has a “shelf life” of ministry. We all age out at some point and will need to replace ourselves. Rather than assume years and years of service remaining, why shouldn’t we actively seek someone who will sit in our chair even sooner? The local church must develop an intentional practice of recruiting, equipping, empowering, and releasing the next generation of elders.

### **S—Structure**

The human body is “wonderfully complex” (Psalm 139:14), No structure better captures this complexity than the skeletal system. Without our bone structure we could not survive. Our skeletons not only provide the framework for our flesh, organs, and muscle, they also provide us with blood cells. Similarly, for the local church to thrive, it must have a healthy, biblically based, functional structure. We call this elder governance, and it is further explained in Chapter 3.

### **The Days Are Urgent**

With a burning bush, God called Moses to lead his people out of Egypt. Why? The days were urgent. With a blinding light, God called Paul to take the good news of Jesus to both the Jews and the Gentiles. Why? The days were urgent. God is calling today for elders to step up to the plate and lead. Why? The days are just as urgent.

## CHAPTER 2

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### WHERE DO WE SEE ELDERS?

*By Tom Ellsworth*

Culturally, the term *elder* evokes images of graying hair and slowing pace. *Elder care* is assistance specifically designed for the aging population. An *elder statesman* often refers to one who has labored faithfully in an elected position and is to be respected for years served and wisdom gained. And yet, being *elder* does not guarantee wisdom. I like the old adage, “Sometimes wisdom comes with age; sometimes age comes alone.”

In the church community, however, the term *elder* is associated with leadership, and rightly so. For the last two millennia, the biblical role of elder has helped guide the church through the trials and tribulations of history. I suspect most Christians today assume the elder’s role was created solely for the church dispensation. Such an assumption would be wrong. Surprisingly, of the roughly 200 uses of “elder” in Scripture, two-thirds appear in the Old Testament. To be fair, the Hebrew word translated *elder* (*zaken*), in its noun form, carries the idea of being “bearded”<sup>7</sup>, meaning someone chronologically older. Certainly, some references are merely indicative of age, but many others indicate a leadership role.

#### **Hebrew Heritage Examined**

The leadership role of elder goes all the way back to the time of the Israelite enslavement in Egypt. God directed Moses in

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7 <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/2206.htm>

Exodus 3:16, “Now go and call together all the elders of Israel. Tell them, ‘Yahweh, the God of your ancestors—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—has appeared to me. He told me, ‘I have been watching closely, and I see how the Egyptians are treating you.’” What’s more, God instructed the elders to accompany Moses in approaching Pharaoh. The Hebrew nation, though enslaved and controlled by the Egyptians, had elders who were “in charge” of God’s people. The elders of Israel were those who had moral authority. And these elders of Israel continued in their leadership capacity throughout the book of Exodus (4:29, 12:21, 17:5-6, 18:12, 19:7, 24:1-14).

Elders, similarly, appear throughout the entirety of the leadership of Moses, Joshua, and the Judges (as elders of cities and regions). Beyond that, elders as leaders of the people appear throughout Scripture, from the age of the prophets into the Second Temple era when Ezra leads the remnant in spiritual revival.

The role of elders continued through the monarchy period as well. “So there at Hebron, King David made a covenant before the LORD with all the elders of Israel. And they anointed him king of Israel” (2 Samuel 5:3). David had previously been anointed king over the people of Israel through Samuel’s divine assignment, but in this passage the elders of the people also anointed David, affirming God’s choice to succeed Saul.

Two generations later, as recorded in 1 Kings 12, Rehoboam ascended to the throne of his father Solomon. The nation of Israel teetered on the brink of civil war, and Rehoboam consulted the *elders* who had faithfully served his father. They offered wise counsel, but Rehoboam foolishly rejected their wisdom in favor of the young men’s arrogant, harsh advice. Consequently, the ten northern tribes seceded. By rejecting the elders’ guidance, the new monarch forever split God’s people into two factions, setting the northern tribes on a collision course with Assyrian annihilation

(1 Kings 12, 14; 2 Chronicles. 10—12). The lack of trust between the elders and a new king had a disastrous impact on Hebrew history.

The church would do well to take a lesson from Rehoboam's calamitous relationship with the elders of Israel. How much relational, emotional, and mental carnage is left behind in the wake of dysfunctional relationship between the church elders and church staff in American churches today?

These are only a few examples, but it is clear the leadership role of the elder has been around much longer than the church. And since the church at its inception was Jewish, the church family would have been familiar with an elder's role. Perhaps, if the church had remained Jewish exclusively, Paul's elder qualifications penned to Timothy and Titus would have been unnecessary. Thankfully, however, Gentiles were welcomed into the church. But without the aid of a Hebrew heritage, the Gentile believers needed instruction, an "Elders 101."

## Church Elders Defined

In those pastoral letters to Timothy and Titus, Paul details the spiritual qualifications for those who would serve as elders. This servant-leadership role demanded integrity in conjunction with a deep commitment from anyone appointed to carry out such responsibilities. In an effort to unite the church's understanding of the elder's role, three biblical terms provide us with different facets of understanding: *presbuteros*, *episkopos*, and *poimen*. The leadership principles inherent in these historic expressions seem to be timeless.

## Mature

*Presbuteros* is the most obvious term associated with the role of elder, since it means *senior*, *elder*, or *mature*. Most agree this term has far more to do with spiritual maturity than physical age. However, with the passing of years comes a collection of experiences from the