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Leadership

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Foreword

At Redemption Hill Church (RHC), we take the scriptures seriously and aim to reflect their teachings in all that we do. This is especially important in the area of church leadership. We believe that scripture lays out clear principles and methods for leadership for local churches. This booklet aims to convey our understanding of biblical church leadership.

In this document, we take a closer look at the principles and practice of leadership in a church. As with all matters of doctrine and practice, you will need to have your Bible open to confirm what is taught here, because the Word of God is the standard to which all teaching must adhere. 2 Tim 3:16 says, "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."

This booklet aims to convey our understanding of God's family and bride, our understanding of biblical church leadership and explain our practical approach to eldership, deacons and their relationship to the rest of the church.

We will start by establishing some biblical concepts for how we view church leadership and community. We will then look at a more specific definition of what an elder is and is not, what a deacon is and is not, the roles of non-elder and non-deacon Christians and finally a look at how we see church leadership working out in practice at RHC.

1

Leadership Viewed Through and Empowered by the Gospel

Everything we do at RHC is about the gospel. The gospel is not only that which saves us, but that which continues to change us and make us more and more like Jesus. Therefore for us to be godly, biblical leaders we must first be established in the gospel and see the implications of the gospel for our leadership. The gospel has implications for leaders in three main areas: it defines the goal of leadership, it shapes the leader himself or herself, and it provides the method of accomplishing the goal of leadership.

The goal of leadership is the goal of the gospel

The purpose of life and everything in it is to delight in and glorify God. Therefore the goal of the Christian leader is the same! He or she wants to see people reconciled to God through the gospel so that they may delight in Him and glorify Him with their lives. The only way that this reconciliation (and therefore delight in God) and magnification of God's character (including love, wrath and justice) can happen is through the gospel. The gospel shows all of God's attributes in full display and gives Him all the glory as the author and perfecter of salvation. Therefore leaders make much of God's saving work — the message of the gospel, which gives Him all glory and results in people reconciled to God and delighting in the knowledge of God.

Gospel-shaped leaders

Leaders in the church are those who have been shaped by the gospel themselves, resulting in many of the character qualifications necessary.

The gospel means that leaders are humble and will never boast or glory in their role because they recognise that all of life is a gift of grace, as is the ability that God has given them to lead. Gospel shaped leaders will never lord it over others because they see that at the most fundamental level we are all equal at the foot of the cross and only accepted by God as a result of His grace, not our abilities or achievements. They are also able to be vulnerable about weaknesses or failings, because their confidence is in Christ and not their leadership role.

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Transformation by the gospel also means that leaders will execute their roles without partiality, fear of offending people, or to earn favour, because they have been redeemed from other every other idol and are freed to serve God alone, executing His desires and proclaiming His word with humble confidence. Gospel shaped leaders are therefore not intimidated by anyone or anything.

Leading by the power of the gospel

The gospel also provides the method by which shepherd leading takes place. The leader's aim is to establish people in Christ through the gospel, which means that he or she is to know the gospel well and understand how to apply it properly to self and to other people.

Leading by the power of the gospel is liberating because it shows us that the power of transformation is not in ourselves, our skills, abilities or techniques but simply in the gospel alone. This gospel is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes.

This also means that leaders do not have to be strong, manipulative, controlling or overbearing. They are to simply declare and exemplify the gospel which transforms people as the implications are applied to all of life. The leader's job is to magnify the work and glory of God, primarily displayed in Jesus' death on the cross.

2

Concepts in Church Leadership

Elders and Deacons

The offices of elder and deacon are the only formal leadership functions in the local church mentioned in the bible (such as in Phil 1:1). These offices are explained in more detail later.

Before getting into specifics about elders, deacons and church members, we wish to put forward several biblical concepts that will help us better understand the biblical basis for church leadership.

Equality before God

According to the Bible, we can see that the organisational chart of the church consists essentially of two levels. On the first level is God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. On the second level is the priesthood of all believers.

Every man's equality before God is clearly taught in scripture (1 Cor 12:13, Gal 3:28, Col 3:11). It is from this fundamental starting point that we see our common relationship with God, value in His eyes, basic responsibilities and new life in Christ.

The worldly concept that leadership is a machination of man-centric power (and flowing with it the concepts of control, self-centeredness and one-upmanship) must be rejected in the context of God's church. The mechanics and structure of the body of Christ do not conform to the ways of the world. Worldly power, and with it worldly ambition, goes out the window in the light of Christ. This will require us to completely re-think what we know about how leadership works.

Hierarchy

While it is true that individuals rise to lead God's people at different times, places and circumstances, this is a result of God-given roles and gifting, as well as God's appointment rather than institutional hierarchy of power. We can see this in scripture when the church is compared to a family (Heb 2:11) and a body (1 Cor 12:27).

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The organisation of a body or of a family is one that emphasises roles and gifts, with every member or part as important as the next (1 Cor 12:21), with different functions – one function of which is leadership.

For us to gain a correct biblical understanding of the structure and leadership of the church requires us to reform any misconception we may have about authority and structure, and the essence of leadership and servanthood. It is with this key truth in mind that we look at elders, deacons and the priesthood of all believers.

Biblical authority

The authority given to church leaders is not the same as the authority given to leaders in secular organisations. The qualifications for authority and required character are different (spelt out in later portions of this booklet). The attitude of a leader in the church is different.

All authority is given to and flows from Christ (Luke 4:6, Col 2:10, Matt 28:18). This must be recognised first because it is ultimately Christ who enables us and gives us knowledge, authority and His Spirit to accomplish the work He has called us to.

Church leaders exercise biblical authority to accomplish their duties (listed in the later parts of this booklet). These include teaching, preaching, admonition, declaring God's word, exhorting and rebuking (Titus 2:15), discipline (Matt 18:15-17), to build up and not tear down (2 Cor 10:8, 13:10), all variously given in line with the role and duties that God has set before each one of us. Leaders must themselves also be held accountable to biblical standards.

As such, the whole church (including elders) is to be obedient to the eldership of a church (Heb 13:17, 1 Thess 5:12-13). The respect and obedience given allows the elders to effectively perform their responsibility to God and to the members they lead without the unnecessary heckling and opposition that will become detrimental to the spiritual health of the whole church.

Gifting

In terms of the qualifications of elders, deacons and other leaders in the church body, the Bible makes it clear that character is the primary concern. We see in both 1 Tim 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9 that God considers it foremost that people who lead the church be of godly character. Once character has been established, there is also a consideration of gifting.

As evidenced in 1 Cor 12:4-31, every individual in the body of Christ has his or her own gifts. From the perspective of leadership in a church body, an individual's gifts are an indication of the role they are to play.

We should note that while certain roles may require specific gifts, such as an elder needing to be gifted in teaching (1 Tim 3:2), this does not indicate that these gifts are exclusive to the role. The gifts are given to the body of Christ as a whole and must be exercised by those who receive it.

Servant leadership

One of the great dangers of leadership is a natural inclination to abuse a position of authority by treating the position as something detached from the people that the authority is over.

This is particularly the case when people see wrongly the church primarily as a structured organisation and then serve the form of the organisation rather than people.

Leadership in a church cannot be defined outside of relationship with the family of God. Three of the great characters of this relationship are servanthood, love and humility.

First, we look at servanthood. Jesus' teaching on the clear connection between leading and serving is in Mark 9:33-35. John 13:14-15 is also given as the rule in Christian life to all those who are His, whether they are in positions of leadership or not.

Second, we consider love. The commandment comes from Jesus in John 15:12 and is repeated by the apostles throughout the New Testament in places like 1 John 4:7-12 and Romans 12:10. This profound commandment must transform the concept and practice of leadership in the church.

Thirdly, we need to remember humility. Humility flows from a life of servanthood. Our servanthood is to the people around us but more importantly to God. When we have a humble spirit, we obey God and are exalted by Him (Matt 23:8-12), avoid strife and receive God's grace (James 4:6-10).

Plurality

The Bible consistently places an emphasis on plural leadership in the church, with individuals taking the lead only as 'primus inter pares', or 'first among

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equals'. We believe that the church was never meant to be led by one man at the top of an organisational chart. We will look first at plurality and then at 'primus inter pares'.

The concept of plurality is closely tied to the concept of the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:4-9). It is this equal and complete access to God that all believers share that prevents any single individual from claiming that they alone should lead the body of Christ. Plurality is also tied to the concept of the trinity.

Whenever elders are mentioned in the New Testament, they are almost always referred to in the plural. This appears in Titus 1:5, Acts 15, 1 Pet 1:1, Acts 20:17, Phil 1:1, and many other places. It has not been recorded in scripture that any church body was led by just a single elder.

Plurality of eldership (and the priesthood of all believers) is a safeguard against sin in the body of Christ. This is how every member in the body is held accountable. If there were man-made hierarchical structures with a single leader in a position that was superior to all others, it would be very hard to keep leaders in a church accountable. Because of the plurality of leadership and the priesthood of all believers, everyone – elders, deacons or otherwise – should humbly receive loving admonishment from any brother or sister in Christ.

Plurality is closely tied to the concept of gifting. As a body with different gifts, it is natural and sensible that a single part or person would be strong in some areas and weak in others.

The concept of 'primus inter pares', or 'first among equals' is not biblically explicit, but is alluded to in 1 Tim 5:17, which says that "elders who rule well should be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching." This indicates that certain elders, while not holding any special rank, but because of their calling and gifting and excellence in glorifying and reflecting Christ, should command greater honour than the other elders.

The Godhead is the prime example of 'primus inter pares'. The Father leads the Son and Father and Son direct the Spirit. Yet they are all equally God. There is no "superiority" of value, essence, quality or rank.

Similarly, the concept of 'first among equals' is clearly seen in the correct exercise of God's great mirror of the family. The husband has authority over the wife and father and mother have authority over the children. Father, mother and children are equally valuable to God.

In the Gospels and the Acts, we see that Peter, James and John were closest to

Jesus, sitting beside Him at meals and seeing His transfiguration. Peter himself has unique encounters with Jesus, is mentioned more times in the bible than any other disciple, yet calls himself a “fellow elder” in 1 Pet 5:1.

As we can clearly see, the ‘primus inter pares’ does not command blind obedience or unaccountable authority. Instead, through his godliness, diligence, love, humility, calling and gifting, he should be given the honour, respect, deference, trust and support in order to be free to lead the church to accomplish the task that Christ has given. He ought to be the person who most clearly recognises that Jesus is the true head of the church and acknowledges that God directs His church through more than just one man.

Family structure

Leadership in a church should have the dynamics of leadership in the family. This is why one of the qualifications of an elder is a track record of good family management and leadership (1 Tim 3:4-5).

The church is to be seen and run as the family of God (1 Tim 5). Herein we see how roles and seniority work out without greater intrinsic worth being placed on any individual. As mentioned in the section above, the husband has authority over the wife and father and mother have authority over the children. Yet father, mother and children are equally valuable to God.

The leadership of the family is much like the leadership of the body of Christ. Children in the Lord and those who are inexperienced in matters of faith are to be nurtured, admonished (1 Cor 4:14), not provoked to anger (Eph 6:4), taught (Deut 6:7), shown an example of Godliness (2 Thess 3:9), supported (Rom 15:1), loved (1 Cor 4:17), provided for (Luke 11:11-13), shepherded (1 Pet 5:2) and prepared for future service and leadership (2 Tim 2:2).

In a family structure, we also see how love ties in. There is love between father, mother, parents, children, brothers and sisters even as the roles of leadership, submission and responsibility are fulfilled.

Qualification

The New Testament lays out specific qualifications for both elders and deacons. These qualifications must be met for someone who is to fill that role.

Distinguishing qualification and gifting

The bible is clear about the list of qualifications elders and deacons must possess. As a church, we will adhere to these qualifications strictly. Even elders who become disqualified in any way after they have been appointed will be required to leave their role.

That said, individuals who are not qualified are not perceived as less valuable to the body of Christ. They retain the gifts that God has given them for the edification of the church and should continue to serve as a part of the church community according to their gifts.

Unqualified individuals are not expressly prohibited from teaching, preaching, or engaging in almost every area of ministry.

In principle we would encourage this state of mind:

- Eldership and deaconship are roles that serve the body and are not “exalted”.
- Poor adherence to qualifications will result in a weakened leadership and an unhealthy spiritual life of the church.
- Individuals disqualified from eldership or deaconship do not live in some black hole. They are still part of the holy priesthood of believers. Many are gifted evangelists, godly deacons (like Stephen and Philip), powerful preachers, sound teachers, community leaders and more.

Divorce and disqualification

Divorce is an often-mentioned topic when it comes to qualification, particularly of elders. In principle, we don’t believe that divorcees are disqualified from eldership. However, every person who desires to be an elder must fulfil all the qualifications of an elder as listed in the following section. It must be noted then that in addition to the usual testing of an elder candidate, it needs to be clear that the divorcee candidate meets the requirements of “blameless”, “above reproach”, “upright” and particularly “manages his household well” over a sustained period of time.

3

What is an Elder?

A leader of the church is referred to in the bible as an elder (presbuteros, Titus 1:5), overseer (episkopous, Titus 1:7) and a shepherd (Eph 4:11). They are qualified individuals who have many duties.

Elders are those who oversee the affairs of the church and shepherd the flock. They will stand before God one day to give account for the church and the souls of those under their care. Scripture does not separate the responsibility of oversight of the affairs of the church from the responsibility of shepherding. Elders therefore lead the church in every area. They sometimes delegate responsibilities to others, such as deacons who are appointed specifically to help in the execution of some practical responsibilities, as well as pastoral assistance.

One of the main duties of an elder is pastoring. In spite of the understanding of “pastor” in modern English as a separate office from an elder, pastoring is actually a duty of an elder rather than a separate office. While by definition, someone who performs the duty of pastoring (shepherding the flock) would linguistically be called a pastor; the biblical intention is to see pastors and elders as one and the same.

The term “elder” also refers to a stage of life and the deference and respect accorded to it. In the past, this was given to mature, experienced and older members of the community (Job 32:6-7, Exodus 3:16). In the church, age has much less bearing on eldership than maturity in Christ (Job 32:8-9, 1 Tim 3:6). In the church, elders are those who have walked long and faithfully with God, know Him well, are submitted to Him and live lives that show it.

Male eldership

Scripture teaches that only men can be elders in the church. It speaks of men being elders, Paul only ordained male elders, and there is no reference to anything other than male eldership in scripture. In addition to this, we see that even in the home men are called to servant leadership by way of carrying the weight and responsibility of the oversight of and authority over the home. This is not in any way hierarchical, but rather in accordance with the roles that God

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has assigned. Paul's letters to Titus and Timothy also tell us that an elder must manage his household well, a responsibility that describes the fatherhood role.

Men and women are created equal in the sight of God, but perform different roles. The bible tells us that the husband leads the wife, just as Christ leads all of his people, men and women, as the bridegroom of the Church and as Lord and owner of all things. 1 Cor 11:11-12 and 1 Cor 7:4 bring us back to remembrance that man and woman are completely interdependent and complementary. This is God's design.

Qualification

The main passages for elder qualifications are found in 1 Tim 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-12 and 1 Pet 5:2-3. The qualifications are:

Scripture	Qualification
1 Tim 3:2, Titus 1:6, Titus 1:8	Blameless, above reproach, upright
1 Tim 3:2, Titus 1:6	The husband of one wife
1 Tim 3:2, Titus 1:7	Sober-minded, not arrogant
1 Tim 3:2, Titus 1:7, Titus 1:8	Self-controlled, not quick tempered
1 Tim 3:2	Respectable
1 Tim 3:2, Titus 1:8	Hospitable
1 Tim 3:2, Titus 1:9	Able to teach, able to give instruction in sound doctrine
Titus 1:9	Able to rebuke those who contradict sound doctrine
1 Tim 3:3, Titus 1:7	Not a drunkard
1 Tim 3:3, Titus 1:7	Not violent but gentle
1 Tim 3:3	Not quarrelsome
1 Tim 3:3, Titus 1:7, 1 Pet 5:2	Not a lover of money, not greedy for gain, not serving for shameful gain, but eagerly
1 Tim 3:4	Manages his household well
1 Tim 3:4, Titus 1:6	Keeps his children submissive with dignity, children are believers, not charged with debauchery or insubordination

1 Tim 3:6	Not a recent convert
1 Tim 3:7	Thought of well by outsiders
Titus 1:8	Loves good
Titus 1:8	Holy
Titus 1:8	Disciplined
Titus 1:9	Hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught
1 Pet 5:2	Not serving under compulsion, but willingly
1 Pet 5:3	Not domineering over those in his charge, but being an example to the flock

Duties of an Elder as described in scripture:

- Pray (Acts 6:4)
- Minister (studying, preaching, teaching, counsel) the word (Acts 6:4, Heb 13:7, 1 Tim 5:17)
- Rule the church and its affairs (1 Tim 5:17, 1 Thess 5:12)
- Care for (manage) the church (1 Tim 3:5)
- Shepherd (feed, protect, lead) people in the church (1 Pet 5:2)
- Give account to God for the spiritual state of church (Heb 13:17)
- Be examples of life and faith for others to follow (Heb 13:7, 1 Pet 5:3)
- Use their authority wisely (1 Pet 5:3)
- Teach the bible correctly (Eph 4:11, 1 Tim 3:2, Titus 1:9)
- Pray for the sick (James 5:13-15)
- Rebuke false teachings (Titus 1:9)
- Protect the church from false teachings (Acts 20:17-31)
- Work hard (1 Thess 5:12, Acts 20:35)
- Admonish the flock (Acts 20:31, 1 Thess 5:12)

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- Discipline unrepentant Christians (Matt 18:15-17)
- Lead the church in submitting to secular authority (Rom 13:1-7)
- Build up, train, disciple and develop godly men to extend God's ministry (Eph 4:11-16, 2 Tim 2:1-2)

Many of these duties are also applicable to the rest of the flock, and naturally, because elders and non-elders alike are subject to the authority and leadership of God. As leaders, elders must pay particular attention to how they lead the rest of the flock in these matters.

Elders are shepherds who are also sheep. They lead only where Jesus leads, feed the flock only what Jesus has fed them, and protect the flock with the word of God. In other words, the best sheep make the best shepherds and the best servants make the best leaders, shedding light on the profound teaching of Jesus Christ in Matt 23:8-12, Mark 9:33-35, Mark 10:35-45 and Luke 18:9-14.

The call of an Elder

A man who becomes an elder must recognise that the duties of eldership become their primary responsibility, around which other responsibilities revolve.

While all Christians must put God first, it is especially important that elders recognise this and be transformed to conform to the will of God in every aspect of life (Rom 12:2).

Obedience to God must re-order family, work, leisure and every thought (2 Cor 10:5). This however, does not equate to saying that an elder abandons his other responsibilities, but fulfils them in the light of his eldership, so that he may be qualified for eldership, effective in eldership, equipped for eldership, freed up for eldership and supplied for eldership.

It is on this basis that he chooses to apportion his time and make sacrifices of effort, energy, time and finances. His success must be measured against his accomplishments in obedience to God as an elder, not as an employee or a professional or a member of society.

An elder is fully committed to the local congregation that he has oversight of. He must put the needs of the flock before his own, like our Good Shepherd (John 10:11), and like a loving father (Matt 7:9-11). He must not desire to be away from the flock (Acts 20:36-38) and should wish to spend much time with them.

At RHC, we expect elders to take a long-term view of their service. While we will not specify lengths of service (so that we shall not resist the Holy Spirit should He to move our elders and lead them elsewhere), an elder should be looking at committing himself for years of service.

Clear primary focus

Elders should have a clear primary focus – to carry out their duties as described in the list above. Their time and efforts should be concentrated on these areas because we believe that the spiritual life and familyhood of the church is the main focus of the elders.

As indicated in Acts 6:1-7 elders should not be caught up in a practical aspect of ministry that is not part of their duty, especially if it clearly takes time away from prayer and the ministry of the word.

At RHC, management of the church is seen as oversight. Vision, purpose and direction are given by elders, but the implementation and day-to-day running of those aspects of the church, especially when time-consuming, should be entrusted to deacons and other gifted members of the body.

Appointment of Elders

Above all, as far as appointment goes, elders are appointed by God (Acts 20:28). The mechanics of their appointment, as referred to in scripture follow:

A man must desire to become an elder (1 Tim 3:1). This must be born of the right motives (1 Pet 5:2-3). He should test himself and see if he is biblically qualified (1 Tim 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-12, 1 Peter 5:2-3) and then the leaders of the church must be able to test him to ensure that he is biblically qualified. This testing is no formality, but must open every relevant area of the candidate's life up to scrutiny. All points pertaining to qualification must be answered.

At this point, it is beneficial for the whole congregation to bear witness to the candidate's biblical qualification, and to raise any concerns they may have about his qualifications.

The ordained elders of the church (1 Tim 4:14, 1 Tim 5:22, Titus 1:5) in the conjunction with an credible person from outside the church (Acts 14:23) then ordain the individual by the laying on of hands.

It must be noted that the process can, and often should, be instigated and encouraged by the current leadership of the church (Titus 1:5, 2 Tim 2:2).

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In the absence of existing church elders, the appointing leadership of the church would be done by church planters and the elders of churches that have helped plant the church. We see this pattern in scripture in the work of Paul (Acts 14:19-23) and Titus (Titus 1:5); and presumably Timothy (1 Tim 5:22) and the apostles.

Any other administrative process (be it voting, casing of lots, registration, administrative ordination) is not specified, and therefore not necessary, but can be used as long as it does not violate the biblical process described above, nor usurp, diminish or displace the authority of the existing church elders.

Candidates for eldership may be approached by existing elders, volunteer for nomination, or be recommended by others in the church. There will be no voting process but formalities will be undertaken to approve our leaders to secular institutions (certificates of ordination, lists and rolls, etc.). As stated, existing elders are responsible for developing and appointing new elders.

Being appointed to the role of an elder extends from 'elder' work that is already being done by an individual. Those appointed as elders are obvious choices based on their Christian maturity, servant leadership, respect, shepherding of the flock and gifting. Hence part of the process of becoming an elder includes active participation in the non-official roles of an elder. Preparation for eldership may include formal mentoring, study, leadership in the church and study.

What an Elder is not

Here we want to address common misconceptions about eldership. In essence any definition that contradicts the scriptural definition of eldership is incorrect.

Elder is not a rank; it is not a title. Eldership is a role performed by those who are qualified and gifted for the role. Therefore, an elder is not the top of the food chain of the church as there is no food chain in the church.

An elder or a pastor is not ordained just because they are very mature in their Christian walk. They must also fulfil the qualifications of an elder. For example, a mature, gifted, godly evangelist who lacked a gift of teaching would not qualify for eldership. His disqualification from the role of elder does not indicate in any way that he is less mature or less capable or less valuable to the church. It is simply that only those qualified for the role should be given that responsibility.

Elders are not the equivalent of board members. They do not sit on any board per se. They should actually function more like a team. The mechanics of their

relationship and leadership should not reflect that of a secular board, but the biblical qualities of brothers in Christ and godly elders.

The duty of an elder is not primarily administrative, although elders with the gift of administration should exercise that gift. Their primary calling, however, is spiritual and remains as described in the duties above – oversight, shepherding, teaching, preaching, prayer, discipline and leadership.

The duty of an elder is not primarily practical help, although elders will find it necessary to help their flock in practical ways. Individuals whose primary calling is practical help fulfil their calling in roles other than pastoral eldership.

Organisation

The organisation of elders within a church is never explicitly stated in scripture. Some indications are that they do need to meet together as a whole group and make decisions on major issues that affect the whole body of the church.

At RHC, elders will meet as a group regularly but we also organise elders into smaller teams to oversee the affairs of specific aspects of church life, especially according to the strength of their gifting. These groups are organic and flexible.

Duration of Eldership

We do not believe that eldership in a local church is for life, nor do we hold to any length of terms for eldership. An individual's office, authority and role of eldership ceases when he becomes biblically disqualified (or habitually fails to perform his duties), experiences a change in God's calling and gifting for his life (and thus relinquishes his office), or when he dies.

Membership and voting rights

We have designed our constitution and our membership to reflect the final authority of elders over the church. Only elders constitute the ordinary membership of the church and have constitutional voting rights. This fulfils the requirements of Singapore laws. Other church members are registered as associate members who do not have constitutional voting rights.

Charges against Elders

1 Tim 5:19-20 warns us about easily believing and putting charges against elders. If elders are qualified and godly, there ought to be great hesitation to admit the charge without substantial proof. It is credible that allegations made against any individual with an exemplary testimony are to be thoroughly investigated before being admitted and acted upon.

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What is a Deacon?

Deacons are first mentioned in the bible in Acts 6:1-7. In this case, seven men were appointed to handle the task of serving tables, distributing relief fairly to all the widows of the church so that the apostles could pray and minister the word.

Elders are responsible for teaching, and overseeing the church, while the Deacons' focus is in on handling of various practical matters, and assisting and encouraging those going through challenging circumstances, in a way that enables the other members of the body to serve God in the way that He has called them to. This enables the church to function as it should, and together accomplish the mission that God has for it. Their service enables the saints to be adequately cared for and shepherded, and it also enables the shepherds to devote themselves to the word, prayer and care of the flock.

Qualification

The biblical qualifications for deacons are similar to those of elders in that there is greater emphasis on godliness than anything else. The texts outlining their qualifications are Acts 6:3 and 1 Tim 3:8-13. The main difference in criteria is that elders must be "able to teach", which is one of the primary functions of an elder. The following table summarizes the qualification spell out in scripture:

Qualification	Scripture	Note
Of good repute	Acts 6:3	
Full of the Spirit	Acts 6:3	
Full of wisdom	Acts 6:3	
Dignified	1 Tim 3:8	
Not double-tongued	1 Tim 3:8	
Not addicted to much wine	1 Tim 3:8	
Not greedy for dishonest gain	1 Tim 3:8	

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Hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience	1 Tim 3:9	
Tested	1 Tim 3:10	
Proven blameless	1 Tim 3:10	
Women/wives: dignified	1 Tim 3:11	The words “their wives” in some translations of verse 11 can be translated as “wives” or “women”.
Women/wives: not slanderers	1 Tim 3:11	
Women/wives: sober-minded	1 Tim 3:11	
Women/wives: faithful in all things	1 Tim 3:11	
The husband of one wife	1 Tim 3:12	This is to be taken in reference to the qualifications of elders.
Manages children and household well	1 Tim 3:12	This requirement is for men as sound family leadership is one proof of godly shepherding, which deacons often assist elders in.

In addition to these qualifications, the area of ministry of a deacon ought to be in line with the individual’s gifting. A deacon will need gifting and skill in this area of service in order to be effective in that appointment. A church must hesitate to appoint an individual who lacks gifting in serving others.

Duties

The word that “deacon” is taken from is the Greek “diakonos”. This word means servant or helper. This best defines the duties of a deacon.

Acts 6:1-7 records that the seven were appointed to serve (diakonein) the tables of widows. Hence, the key focus is on extending mercy and compassion, and dealing with practical matters of church life. This includes mercy and benevolent ministries such as visitations and distribution of relief to the sick, orphans, the poor, the imprisoned, the fatherless, the destitute, martyrs and their families and the oppressed; and managing the administrative side to church life.

From Acts 6:1-7 we can also conclude that the purpose of the office of a deacon is to free up those whose primary duty is prayer and the ministry of the word. In other words, deacons assist elders in time-consuming practical and pastoral matters so that elders can spend the required time in prayer and preparation for the ministry of the word. The following are the types of things that deacons will be involved in:

- Taking charge of various administrative and operational tasks in the church e.g. set-up, venue move, organizing meetings, camps etc.
- Praying for people, answering questions and offering basic counsel after services, and in between services
- Visitations to those in hospital, or who are home-bound, or who need someone to encourage them through a difficult season. Assist and encourage members and regular attendees in challenging circumstances.
- Assessing the financial and other needs of those going through challenging circumstances, and connecting them with the available resources within the church e.g. benevolence schemes, job availabilities etc.

It can also be said that deacons, by their appointment, and by carrying out their duties result in the unity of the church, as the needs of different ones are met by the church as a whole. They help to pull together the fraying ends of a community that is larger than the elders can practically manage. They do this in a godly manner.

Deacons also enhance the evangelistic mission of the church by their work. Acts 6:7 indicates that the appointment of the seven enabled the ministry of the gospel to continue with great effect.

Appointment of Deacons

According to what is recorded in Acts 6:1-6, deacons are appointed to meet a practical and pastoral needs in the church to free up the elders for their duties. When the need arose, the elders called for deacons to be nominated by the church based on their qualifications.

The elders and the church, and tested their qualifications those who were chosen were prayed for and the leaders of the church would lay their hands of them.

What a Deacon is not

Deacon is not a rank or title. Deaconship is a role performed by those who are qualified and gifted for the role. Deaconship is servanthood, which all believers are called to. Those in the office of a deacon are those among the servants who also fulfil the qualifications of the role and who are appointed to take charge of a particular area of service, according to their gifts.

Deacons are not leaders in the same sense that elders are not clerics. They are servants, just as elders are. However, oversight, discipline and doctrinal leadership are not part of the function of a deacon.

It would be wrong, however to say unequivocally that deacons are not leaders in the church. Like elders, their godly life testimonies and great faith make them examples to the church. Their attitudes and examples of humility in servanthood build up the church. In these they ought to be followed, and in this sense they lead the church, completing our understanding of Mark 10:43.

However, practical authority necessary to perform their function must be given to deacons. This is granted in practice by elders, as we see in the instance of Acts 6:1-7.

We would also warn against treating the office of deacon as an office of a pre-elder or a role that leads to eldership. This is clearly not what the office is for. Elders can be appointed from inside and outside the deaconate. Deacons must not take their office as a stepping-stone to eldership. This incorrect view of the deaconate will impair its effectiveness and destroy the family-hood of the body of Christ.

Deacons are not the managers of the secular affairs of the church. They assist the elders in this role and as such execute many secular affairs, handling and disbursing money and goods, but as servants, they do not act without the proper direction of those who lead them.

Deacons are not a filter or a level between the elders and the congregation. As we set out at the start of this document, there should be no hierarchy, but rather the recognition of roles. This means that such a concept of deacons is incorrect. However, because of their maturity in Christ, deacons can and do watch over people, particularly in their area of service and where necessary they minister to them and keep the elders aware of the spiritual needs of others.

Just as with elders, deacons are not a board. They are teams of servants who assist the elders in advancing the gospel and perform their duty with the utmost godliness.

Women as deacons

Whether the interpretation of 1 Tim 3:11 refers to the wives of deacons or to female deacons is open. Valid arguments for either interpretation exist and the bible does not clearly present evidence that prohibits women from serving as deacons nor precedent that a woman has ever been a deacon.

Linguistically, the translation of the Greek in 1 Tim 3:11 seems to lean to the possibility that women can serve as deacons. The word for deacon is also used of Phoebe, a woman, although the meaning of the word could also be interpreted as “servant”. Also, some scholars find it unusual that criteria be set for deacons’ wives where none exist for elders’ wives.

On the other hand, the Greek text can plausibly be taken to refer to the wives of deacons. The nesting of the verse in its context lends to the strength of this argument.

Doctrinally, we find that the bible is not final on the issue of women as deacons, and take it by faith that it is up to each church to discern which practice is most suitable and brings the greatest glory to God. At RHC, we find that it is profitable that women be allowed to perform the duties of the diaconate, and to be appointed to the office of deacon. This is especially true in the time and place that we live in.

Couples that are married and at RHC where both are saved will always be brought on as deacons together, even if the primary ‘deaconing’ or ‘serving’ is done primarily by either one of them (the other should be still be serving in some capacity). It is imperative however that both parties of the couple meet the biblical qualifications for a deacon.

Organisation

RHC does not believe in convening a board of deacons as a formal group. While all the deacons of the church may attend a meeting together, the meeting is not a formal group. Instead, deacons work together and make decisions organically, especially within their areas of service and where their responsibilities overlap. They may of course organize themselves around their areas of service and responsibilities. They also work and make decisions together with the elders who have oversight of their area/s of service.

Leadership

Deacons often are responsible for coordinating and directing non-deacon church members who give their time and energy to the church. This is not a relationship of rank, but of function.

Deacons and finances

At RHC, a group of elders oversee the financial matters of the church. They will have deacons to support them and to take on the hands-on work, which often includes making decisions on acquisitions, budgeting, bookkeeping, auditing, processes and so forth.

Where financial responsibility has been entrusted to deacons (and since they have been proven to be of sterling character, they should be trusted), they should be given leave to make decisions on the ground without having to refer to the elders, fulfilling their role as individuals who relieve elders of burdensome administration and allow elders to focus on their core responsibilities.

Duration of service

Like elders, deacons do not have specified terms of service. Their service is ongoing until they are disqualified, called and gifted to a different ministry, Christ returns, or they die.

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What is the Leadership Role of a Non-Elder and Non-Deacon?

Just as with the role of the elder, we seek to reflect what is taught in scripture when we put into practice our doctrine of the role of the deacon. Our practice must follow biblical mandates, glorify God and serve in itself as a message of God's great gospel to all those who behold His Bride.

The priesthood of all believers

1 Pet 2:5-9 tells us very clearly that every single member of God's family is a priest and has direct access to God by the Spirit (1 Cor 6:19-20), needing no mediation through another priest (1 Tim 2:5). This is because of the reconciliatory life, death and resurrection of Jesus on the cross (Heb 4:14-16, Matt 27:51).

The salvation of a believer is not merely an issue of being saved from hell, from guilt or from the judgement of God, but it is a full and complete call to extreme holiness as a member of God's priesthood.

Without deviating too much from the issue of church leadership, every believer is on the same level when it comes to his or her ability to communicate with God and approach Him. They may have different gifts and faculties but this does not impair a believer's ability to be holy.

There is no separate class of clerics, priests, pastors, elders, or other sort of spiritual hierarchy that a believer should put his faith in.

The implications of this are profound.

- For one, every believer is responsible to God for his life and service (Eph 4:11-12). Everyone has a work to be done and must do it diligently and according to his or her gifts and roles (1 Cor 12:27, Eph 4:7). This covers the entire spectrum of the work of God and the work of the Church. Everyone plays his or her part and no one is excused.

Leadership

- Neither elders, deacons nor any other leader are in a higher position than any other believer. There is no clergy. There is no laity. Eph 4:4-7 tells us very clearly that we are all of one body and one spirit. Nobody is to be disdained in their role and nobody is to be exalted because of their gift, calling or ministry (Matt 23:8-10).
- Nobody is to be considered more important or more valuable than his brother or sister. All have roles to fulfil. We are all the children of God (Rom 8:14-17), with Christ as the firstborn (Col 1:15).
- Everyone must play a part. There is no hanging back or cruising in the Christian life. Every priest has a work to do. Every one of us should be asking God for gifts and using those gifts for the building up of the church (1 Cor 4:12,26).
- Every person is a follower; every person is a leader. This must be the mentality of every Christian – that everyone should be focussed on following Christ so that they may lead well (1 Cor 11:1).
- Every individual faithfully plays the role that God has appointed to him for that season. All work is done with a pure heart and clean hands, and a change in God's role and calling is sought in humility, submission and absolute focus on the glory of God.

Having said all this, we must stress that the church is still a body and must live and act in unity. Our priesthood is worthless without our subjection to Christ, the high priest and head of the body and bridegroom of the church.

Leadership in smaller groups (Community, Family)

If you are a Christian with the Spirit living in you, life in the church community calls for involvement and service. Jesus has clearly un-defined the line between the earthly concepts of service and leadership in Mark 9:33-35. The servant-leader, follower-leader roles of elder and deacon further clarify this.

Leadership roles are generally defined as roles in which one can exercise authority over others or act as the frontline "face" of the church. This includes team leaders, community group leaders, all children's teachers, bible study leaders, welcome team members, worship leaders, and people leading any other area of ministry.

This is one reason why RHC has a membership process. With our structures

in place, we hope to see that individuals who are believers, and thus mature, humble and committed, take up serving (which are leading) and leading (which are serving) roles in the church. This enables us to be effective gospel-wise and gives greater opportunity for exemplary gospel living.

In addition to this, we find that it is vital to stress godly family leadership by husbands and fathers, and mothers over their children. This helps people to see how God works in his church as a family (1 Cor 1:10). Experience in godly family leadership qualifies men for eldership (1 Tim 3:4-5), supplying the church family with qualified, Christ-like leaders from every generation.

A church that is a living, active priesthood brings great glory to God! True Christians are encouraged to take ownership of their spiritual lives and activity and service to the church.

Membership

RHC has a membership process that is in place to gauge the spiritual maturity of our members. While this process is not fool-proof or exclusive, it provides the leadership with a good foundation for giving responsibility and authority in the church to individuals.

Encouraging initiative

Opportunities for service and leadership in the church are often presented to us organically as we talk to and relate with people. We must not rely on teams or programs or offices to be effective in filling every need in the church. The best way to find ways to serve is to build strong relationships with people.

There are always things to do in the church – children to watch over, cards to send, someone going through a difficult time, someone needing a listening ear, people needing discipling, encouragement, edification, someone looking for a friend, wanting to go out for a meal, evangelism, and so much more.

We need to ask God to send us people to care for and ways in which we can serve His body. We then meet these needs with a spirit of humility and servanthood. Ultimately, a priest should not rely only on elders, deacons or other leaders to do his or her work – God directs and talks to each one of us individually as well.

In all these practical things, remember that as priests, our practical service stems from and leads to the spiritual.

Where do church staff fit in?

Church staff all fall under the priesthood of all believers. Those who are qualified for eldership or for deaconship may be ordained.

Being on paid staff should not make a difference to the holiness and commitment of an individual.

The rationale for paid staff is to ensure that the core mission of the church is served by maintaining a long-term supply of man-hours needed. One must remember that this still ought not to be an issue of compulsion or obligation (particularly with paid elders) but work is to be done with joy.

It should be noted that as per the priesthood of all believers, church staff should all be believers and mature believers are preferred because they will represent the church.

Further Reading

The following books have been most helpful in furthering our understanding of leadership in the church:

Driscoll, M. (2008). *A book you'll actually read on church leadership*. Crossway, Wheaton, IL.

Strauch, A. (1995). *Biblical eldership: an urgent call to restore biblical church leadership*. Lewis and Roth, Littleton, CO.



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