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THE ROLE OF THE UNPAID ELDER IN SOUTHERN  
BAPTIST CHURCHES: A MIXED-METHODS  
STUDY

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

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by  
Thomas Adam Mehaffey

December 2020

**APPROVAL SHEET**

THE ROLE OF THE UNPAID ELDER IN SOUTHERN  
BAPTIST CHURCHES: A MIXED-METHODS  
STUDY

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For Heather, my wife.

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## PREFACE

All credit for this project goes to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is for His glory and for His church that this work was done.

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Adam Mehaffey

Gastonia, North Carolina

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **The Research Problem**

Scripture teaches that leadership was created by God, a concept illustrated by the creation mandate to man to subdue the earth (Gen 1:28-29). As Michael Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones point out, leadership was not something that God put into place after the Fall, but it was God's plan from the beginning for man to exercise the dominion of the rest of creation.<sup>1</sup> However, as a result of the Fall, man needs leadership and guidance in order to fulfill the purposes that God has set forth. Institutions need leadership, and the Church is no exception. Benjamin Merkle asserts that while church polity is not the weightiest decision that a church will make, adopting a biblical form is essential for the health of the church as it determines who leads and teaches the church.<sup>2</sup> In recent years there has been a growth of the use of elder leadership in Southern Baptist churches and the increase in elder leadership has included the use of unpaid elders.<sup>3</sup> While there is much prescriptive literature for the role of the elders in Southern Baptist churches,<sup>4</sup> there is little empirical research that describes the roles that unpaid elders are assuming in their

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<sup>1</sup> Michael S. Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones, *The God Who Goes before You: Pastoral Leadership as Christ-Centered Followership* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2018), 29–30.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008), 21–23.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Dever, *By Whose Authority: Elders in Baptist Life* (Washington, DC: 9Marks, 2006), 22–25.

<sup>4</sup> The original focus of this thesis was the role of the unpaid elder in evangelical, congregationally ruled churches. The focus was narrowed to Southern Baptist churches as they fit both of these descriptions. The explanation for how Southern Baptist churches are evangelical and congregationally ruled is in chapters 1 and 3 of this thesis.

congregations.<sup>5</sup>

### **Current Status of the Research Problem**

The New Testament describes two offices for the church: Elders and Deacons.<sup>6</sup> The book of Acts gives the account of Christ leaving the earth and giving the responsibility of building His church to the apostles (Acts 1:6-10).<sup>7</sup> The New Testament teaches that polity and church offices affect the governance of the church.<sup>8</sup> While there is much in the secondary literature that examines the evidence for each of these concepts and dynamics between them, there is little research regarding the practical application for unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches.

### **Congregational Polity**

Chad Brand and Stan Norman define polity as “the way a church or group of churches organize and administrate themselves.”<sup>9</sup> Brand and Norman write that church polity is essential to the ministry of a church since it will dictate the relationships of the congregation and leadership as well as have a direct impact on how the church ministers.<sup>10</sup> Congregational rule is distinct from elder rule as it is exercised in some

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<sup>5</sup> The literature describing the role of unpaid elders will be examined in chapter 2.

<sup>6</sup> Deacons and elders are both described in the book of Acts as offices in the early church. Paul also provided qualifications for both offices in Titus 1 and 1 Tim 3. However, the purpose of this thesis will be to explore the role of the elder in congregational churches. The role of deacon is vital to the health of a church and for a deeper explanation of the role of deacon, see Alexander Strauch, *Paul’s Vision for the Deacons: Assisting the Elders with the Care of God’s Church*. (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> All Scripture references are from the English Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

<sup>8</sup> Church polity or organization is addressed in the New Testament as it is recorded that the church observed ordinances together (2:41-42), kept record of membership (Acts 18:24-28, Phlm 9-12), and received offering (Rom 15:24, 1 Cor 16:1-2). Church offices are described in Acts 6:1-6 (Deacons) and Acts 11:30, 14:23; 1 Tim 3:1-7, 10, 4:14; Titus 1:5-9 (Elders).

<sup>9</sup> Stanton Norman and Chad Brand, “Is Polity That Important?,” in *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, ed. Chad Brand and R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2004), 15.

<sup>10</sup> Norman and Brand, “Is Polity That Important?” This thesis will focus on the congregational model of church polity and the role of elders within this model as Southern Baptist churches are

Presbyterian and Episcopal churches. In a congregationally ruled church, the church's authority is derived from Christ and rests with the congregation.<sup>11</sup> The congregation makes all decisions except for those that are delegated to the leadership of the church.<sup>12</sup> While congregationally ruled churches may belong to networks or denominations, they do not answer to a hierarchy but maintain their autonomy.

The New Testament provides evidence for congregational polity in several different passages.<sup>13</sup> Matthew 18:5-18 is a passage in which Christ gave instructions for handling church discipline. In this passage, Matthew records the only instance where Christ uses the word "church," as the members of the church are given the responsibility of dealing with wayward members.<sup>14</sup> Luke also provides an example of a congregation choosing its leaders in Acts 6, as the twelve apostles call for the members of the church *to choose for themselves* seven leaders to meet the needs of widows so that the apostles can focus on the work of ministry. Merkle correctly points out that all of Paul's letters are addressed to the members of the churches themselves, not just the elders of each church, giving evidence to suggest that Paul viewed the church members themselves as having

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predominantly congregationally ruled. There are many other forms of church polity and the proponents of each model have convictions that their model is supported by Scripture. A comparison of the different forms of polity will be provided in chapter 2. Brand and Stanton's book has a strong explanation and "debate" between proponents of several prominent forms of church polity. It is a helpful resource for those who wish to know what distinguishes each form.

<sup>11</sup> Gerald Cowen, *Who Rules the Church? Examining Congregational Leadership and Church Government* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 85.

<sup>12</sup> Phil A. Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2005), 26.

<sup>13</sup> See Acts 6:1-6; 13:1-3; 15:4, 12, 22; 2 Cor 2:6. For further explanation of these passages, see Harding Stricker, "Entrusted to Serve: Congregational Leadership in the New Testament and Early Church; Or Why Choose Congregationalism," *International Congregational Journal* 10, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 39-50. Also see Janet Wooten, "Biblical Origins of Congregationalism," *International Congregational Journal* 12, no. 2 (Winter 2013): 87-91.

<sup>14</sup> James Leo Garrett Jr., "The Congregation Led Church: Congregational Polity," in Brand and Norman, *Perspectives on Church Government*, 130. Garrett also uses 1 Cor 5:2 and 2 Cor 2:6 as evidence as they provide further instructions for church discipline.

final authority.<sup>15</sup> The New Testament also provides theological evidence for congregational polity by teaching that followers of Christ have access to God that does not require an earthly priest to act as an intermediary. First Peter 2:5-9 describes Christians as a “royal priesthood” and a “holy nation” with all the privileges of being children of God. The Christians’ access to Christ makes the church accountable to God, not just the church’s leadership. Jonathan Leeman argues that the responsibility of congregational authority is to protect the gospel by guarding membership and practicing church discipline.<sup>16</sup> One crucial piece of membership that must be present in order for congregational polity to function is the requirement of a regenerate membership. John Hammett points out that for church members to give meaningful contributions, that further the church’s mission, members must have a “genuine commitment to Christ.”<sup>17</sup>

However, a congregationally ruled church must still have leadership and shepherding, which is provided by the church elders. The primary responsibility of an elder is the equipping of the saints, and Leeman claims that the weekly meeting of the church should be a training session in which the elders train the congregation in doing its job.<sup>18</sup> The elders are also responsible for making day-to-day decisions in order to avoid the unwieldy task of taking every decision directly to the congregation.<sup>19</sup>

While congregational polity must have elders or pastors as leaders, nothing in

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<sup>15</sup> Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, 43–44.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *Understanding the Congregation’s Authority* (Nashville: B & H Group, 2016), 15–16.

<sup>17</sup> John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2005), 82–83. Hammett’s text is written for Baptists and from a Baptist perspective. Also see Mark Dever, *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life* (Washington: Center for Church Reform, 2000), as he argues that congregational rule is one of the hallmarks of Baptist polity. Therefore, many of the texts used in this thesis that are written from a Baptist perspective are still useful in explaining the functions of elders and congregationalism.

<sup>18</sup> Leeman, *Understanding the Congregation’s Authority*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life*, 58. Newton writes that there is no evidence in the early church that all decisions were brought before the congregation. Newton points out that trust from the congregation in a trustworthy plurality of elders was required for this type of polity to work.

Scripture instructs churches on the process of selecting elders or the number of elders that makes up the elder body.<sup>20</sup> Paul instructs Titus to appoint elders without explaining how, but instead gives qualifications to be sought in elders (Titus 1:5-9). William Cannon points out that traditionally a congregation chooses its paid elders by looking for seminary graduates that need ministry experience.<sup>21</sup> What experience, background, or competencies do congregations desire for unpaid elders to have? Unpaid elders will be discussed further in the next section, but we must ask the questions of how a congregation chooses from among themselves the men to serve as unpaid elders. While these texts provide justification and guidance on how elders may function in a congregational polity, there is little about how unpaid elders function in contemporary churches.

## Elders

The New Testament teaches that church elders were placed in congregations to provide leadership and oversight.<sup>22</sup> The Greek word in the New Testament for an elder is *presbuteros*, which literally means “old person.”<sup>23</sup> However, the New Testament teaching on elders indicates church leaders who are spiritually mature, not necessarily older in age.<sup>24</sup> Paul also refers to church leaders using the term *episkopos*, which translates to

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<sup>20</sup> Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, 166–69.

<sup>21</sup> William Ralph Cannon II, “Prior Pastoral Experience and Post-Seminary Experience: A Mixed Method Study” (PhD Dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015), 1–2.

<sup>22</sup> See footnote 7 in chapter 1 for Scripture references on elders in the New Testament. Chapter 2 of this thesis also exposit the passages that relate to church elders (see section titled “Scriptural Foundations for Elders in chapter 2).

<sup>23</sup> Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, 61–63.

<sup>24</sup> Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, 115. Merkle states several reasons for elders needing to be spiritually mature rather than simply older in age. He argues that Timothy was younger when Paul instructed him to appoint elders as Paul had told Timothy not to allow anyone to look down on him because of his youth (1 Tim 4:12). Merkle also notes that Paul gave a specific age for widows to begin receiving financial support from the church (60 years old) in 1 Tim 5:9, while no specific age for an elder is given. It also worth pointing out that in 1 Tim 3:4 Paul tells Timothy that an elder must keep his “children submissive.” The command to manage his children seems to show that an elder could have children still living in the home, which points to the allowance for a younger man to serve as elder.



*overseer* or *bishop*. While there are two different terms used in *presbuteros* and *episkopos* in the New Testament, biblical evidence points to the fact that these names are referring to the same office.<sup>25</sup> When Paul speaks to the Ephesian elders at Miletus in Acts 20:17-38, Luke refers to the individuals as *elders* (Greek word *presbuteros*) in verse 17 and then *overseers* (Greek word *episkopos*) in verse 28.<sup>26</sup> Luke first mentions Jewish Christian elders at Antioch in Acts 11:30, while the first mention of Gentile Christian elders is the appointment of the elders at Galatia in Acts 13. James Hamilton Jr. asserts that the elders in the early church may have borrowed their structure from the synagogue, although the direct influence of the leadership structure in the synagogue on the church is not easy to find.<sup>27</sup> Andrew Clarke agrees, stating that while there is the influence of the eldership structure from the synagogue, elder leadership was also heavily present in other Greco-Roman social and government associations.<sup>28</sup> However, Hamilton convincingly argues that even though the early church got their “concept of leadership” from the Old Testament, the New Testament elder is a new office created by the New Covenant.<sup>29</sup> In the Old Covenant, one could hold the office if one was a Jew, perhaps holding the office based on “ethnic or genealogical” grounds without knowing God.<sup>30</sup> The New Covenant “blasted the boundaries” of God’s people as the command to make disciples was given by Christ, allowing for regenerate Christian men to serve as church elders, not just ethnic

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<sup>25</sup> Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, rev. and exp ed. (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), 124–48.

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin L. Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church*, Studies in Biblical Literature, 57 (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 132.

<sup>27</sup> James Hamilton Jr., “Did the Church Borrow Leadership Structure from the Old Testament or Synagogue?,” in *Shepherding God’s Flock: Biblical Leadership in the New Testament and Beyond*, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle and Thomas R. Schreiner (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2015), 13–27.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew D. Clarke, *Serve the Community of the Church: Christians as Leaders and Ministers*, First-Century Christians in the Graeco-Roman World (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 166–68.

<sup>29</sup> Hamilton, “Did the Church Borrow Leadership Structure?,” 20–24, 31. Hamilton notes that this is why the requirements for elders needed definition in the New Testament as it would not be obvious to those without familiarity with the Torah to identify those who could serve as elder.

<sup>30</sup> Hamilton, “Did the Church Borrow Leadership Structure,?” 23.

Jews.<sup>31</sup>

Paul describes the primary activity of the elder as shepherding in Ephesians 4:11. Peter calls church elders to shepherd the church by feeding the sheep (1 Pet 5:1-5), while Paul exhorts elders to be on guard for false teachers and the like (Acts 20). Phil Newton describes the job of the elder in four words: *doctrine, discipline, direction, and distinction*.<sup>34</sup> Newton argues that these few words accurately represent the elder's job to protect the teaching and conduct of those within the church while setting an example for the flock with his own life.<sup>35</sup> In addition to the protection of the church, J. R. Briggs and Bob Hyatt argue that by fulfilling these vital functions, elders will help their churches remain true to the mission God has ordained for the church.<sup>36</sup>

Scripture holds instructions and provisions for elders to be paid for the work they perform in shepherding (1 Tim 5:17-18).<sup>37</sup> However, Merkle states that unpaid elders are permissible by Scripture and may provide the church an advantage. Merkle writes that elders are allowed to receive a salary outside of the work performed for the church.<sup>39</sup> He goes on to note that unpaid elders alleviate the financial burden of supporting a large number of elders.<sup>40</sup> Dave Harvey agrees, with Merkle's idea arguing that having only paid elders may limit the quality of counsel and wisdom a church may

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<sup>31</sup> Hamilton, "Did the Church Borrow Leadership Structure?"

<sup>34</sup> Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life*, 41–44.

<sup>35</sup> Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life*.

<sup>36</sup> J. R. Briggs and Bob Hyatt, *Eldership and the Mission of God: Equipping Teams for Faithful Church Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 50–53.

<sup>37</sup> Paul writes in this passage that "the Scriptures say not to muzzle the ox while he treads out grain," a quote from Deut 25:4. This is referring to the practice of allowing an ox to eat the grain that falls to the ground while he working the millstone to crush grain, thus benefitting and being nourished from the work that he is performing. In the same way, Paul said that elders should be allowed to be nourished from their work.

<sup>39</sup> Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, 215.

<sup>40</sup> Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, 218.

receive.<sup>41</sup> Harvey states that only using paid elders means that only churches that are “affluent” can have large bodies of elders, making strong leadership a luxury.<sup>42</sup>

The New Testament uses the term *pastor* and *elder* interchangeably, which means that the qualifications for pastor-elder are consistent for paid and unpaid elders.<sup>43</sup> Shepherding of the congregation takes place through the preaching of the Bible, the counseling of its members, the meeting of physical needs, by leading in worship, and making disciples.<sup>44</sup> While there is an agreement in the literature of what an elder’s job is in the church and that there is provision for unpaid elders in churches, there is little in the research literature about how the unpaid elder interacts or relates to paid elders. 9Marks has published journals prescribing and advising churches on how to utilize unpaid elders, but there is little empirical research to understand how churches are implementing the advice provided by 9Marks in regard to unpaid elders.<sup>45</sup>

There is still a need for further research and understanding of how unpaid elders serve within a plurality of elders.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this explanatory, sequential, mixed-method study was to understand the role of the unpaid elder in Southern Baptist churches. This study involved collecting quantitative data and then explaining the quantitative results with qualitative data. In the quantitative phase of the study, survey data was collected from church elders

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<sup>41</sup> Dave Harvey, “Lay Elders Are Not the Shepherding JV Team,” *The Gospel Coalition* (blog), accessed January 25, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/lay-elders-are-not-shepherding-jv-team/>.

<sup>42</sup> Harvey, “Lay Elders Are Not the Shepherding JV Team.”

<sup>43</sup> Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer*, 140.

<sup>44</sup> See Eph 4:11, 1 Tim 3:2, 4:13, 5:17, 2 Tim 2:2, Heb 13:17, Acts 20:17-35, and 1 Pet 5:1-5.

<sup>45</sup> *9Marks Journal* has published several articles and volumes that are helpful for those churches using unpaid elders or perhaps considering a move to elder-led polity. Two such issues are *Lay Elders: A User’s Guide Part 1* and *Lay Elders: A User’s Guide Part 2*, which are the November-December 2012 and January-February 2013 issues of the *9Marks Journal*.

at eligible churches to explain the roles of unpaid elders. In the qualitative phase, the researcher conducted interviews with paid and unpaid elders that determined how the qualitative data (interviews) compared with the quantitative data (survey). This study was a team study conducted by two EdD students at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions for this study included quantitative and qualitative questions.

#### **Quantitative**

1. What are the distinct roles assumed by paid and unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches?
2. What competencies do churches expect unpaid elders to have?
3. What are the formal and informal boundaries of decision making for elder teams?

#### **Qualitative**

4. What does the church do to prepare unpaid elders to serve?
5. How does the church select unpaid elders?
6. How are unpaid elders engaged in teaching and shepherding the congregation?

### **Population**

The population to be generalized in this study was Southern Baptist churches in the United States that are led by a plurality of elders that include unpaid elders.

### **Delimitations**

The study was delimited to Southern Baptist churches that have a plurality of elders, including unpaid elders. The Southern Baptist Convention is the largest

Protestant-evangelical denomination in the United States<sup>46</sup> and also meets the definition of evangelical as described by the National Association of Evangelicals.<sup>47</sup> Southern Baptists are also predominantly congregationally governed.<sup>48</sup> This study did not include churches that do not have unpaid elders as a part of their leadership nor include churches that are not members of the Southern Baptist Convention.

### **Limitations of Generalizations of Findings**

The quantitative results were only generalized to those churches within the Southern Baptist Convention that are led by a plurality of elders that include unpaid elders. The qualitative results were only generalized to those churches that participate in the qualitative interviews. The research was limited to Southern Baptist churches in the United States and did not include churches that are elder ruled. However, the intent was that this study could be replicated within other evangelical churches whose polity includes unpaid elders.

### **Methodology**

This mixed-method case study was conducted in sequential phases where the data from the quantitative phase was analyzed and then used to inform the qualitative

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<sup>46</sup> *U.S. Religious Census 2010: Overview*. SBC churches make up 6.4 percent of evangelical churches in the United States.

<sup>47</sup> “What Is an Evangelical?,” National Association of Evangelicals, accessed February 7, 2019, <https://www.nae.net/what-is-an-evangelical/>. The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) defines evangelicals as those who affirm the following: 1. Conversionism: the belief that lives need to be transformed through a “born-again” experience and a lifelong process of following Jesus 2. Activism: the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts 3. Biblicism: a high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority 4. Crucicentrism: a stress on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as making possible the redemption of humanity. Southern Baptists affirm each of these in the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* in Section I-*Scripture*, Section IV-*Salvation*, and Section XI-*Evangelism and Missions*. For more information on how the NAE arrived at these definitions, see <http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/NAE-LifeWay-Research-Evangelical-Beliefs-Research-Definition-Methodology-and-Use.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> “Southern Baptist Convention: The Baptist Faith and Message,” accessed December 19, 2019, <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp>. See Section VI-*The Church*.

phase.<sup>49</sup> The interviews for the qualitative phase were purposely selected from the quantitative phase based on the respondent's experience with unpaid elders revealed in the quantitative phase. The survey in the quantitative phase included questions asking about his willingness to participate in follow-up interviews.

### **Quantitative Phase 1**

The research team originally planned to screen the SBC Annual Church Profile (ACP) for eligible churches. However, the team was unable to obtain the ACP data from Lifeway Research. The team developed a database of 43,961 churches and sent a survey to a random sample of 2,881 SBC churches.<sup>50</sup> The survey asked demographic questions and then asked the respondent if his church used unpaid elders. If the answer was "Yes," then the survey continued and asked questions related to unpaid elders. If the answer was "No," then the survey ended. The remainder of the survey contained questions designed to gather data pertaining to the quantitative research questions. The surveys were collected and analyzed using the Internet collection software Survey Monkey. The purpose of this analysis was to aid in the purposeful sampling of the qualitative phase as well as observe findings that merit further explanation within the qualitative phase.<sup>51</sup>

### **Qualitative Phase 2**

Phase 2 of the study was conducted separately by each member of the research team. The sample for Phase 2 was purposely selected from those churches that met the selection criteria from Phase 1. The qualitative phase consisted of open-ended interviews conducted with at least one paid elder and one unpaid elder from each church. The

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<sup>49</sup> John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 3rd Edition (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2018), 190–91.

<sup>50</sup> All of the research instruments used in this thesis were in compliance with and approved by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary ethics committee.

<sup>51</sup> Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 234.

specific focus for this thesis was how the unpaid elders participated in shepherding and teaching within their congregations. Each researcher conducted the qualitative phase independently with different participants from different churches. The interviews were transcribed and coded for individual analysis as well as integrated analysis between the quantitative and qualitative phases.<sup>52</sup>

### **Definition of Terms**

This study used the following operational definitions:

*Paid elder.* An elder that receives compensation and wages for the work performed as a pastor-elder.<sup>53</sup>

*Unpaid elder.* An elder that serves the church as a pastor-elder but does not receive monetary compensation for his service.<sup>54</sup>

*Congregational polity.* Congregational polity is the system in which the church congregation has the power to make final decisions on church matters. Congregational polity or rule does not mean that every decision is left to the entire congregation as some decisions are delegated to church leaders.<sup>55</sup>

*Evangelical church.* An evangelical church is a church that aligns with the affirmations of the National Council of Evangelicals.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*.

<sup>53</sup> Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, 215.

<sup>54</sup> Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, 217–18.

<sup>55</sup> Mark Dever, *A Display of God's Glory: Basics of Church Structure: Deacons, Elders, Congregationalism & Membership* (Washington, DC: 9Marks, 2010), 33.

<sup>56</sup> The National Council of Evangelical Churches and Lifeway Research have also developed a set of affirmations to identify evangelicals in the research process. In order for respondents to be classified as evangelical, they must strongly agree with the following statements: “the Bible is the highest authority I believe, it is very important for me to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior, Jesus Christ’s death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin, only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God’s free gift of eternal salvation.” For more information on the development of these statements see *What is an Evangelical* (<https://www.nae.net/what-is-an-evangelical/>). As the term evangelical is utilized a great deal in our current climate, it may be helpful to also see other resources that define the term such as *Evangelicals: What’s in a Name?* (Evangelicals

*Competencies.* Spencer and Spencer define competency as an “underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to criterion-referenced effective and/or superior performance in a job or situation.”<sup>57</sup>

*Shepherding.* Shepherding is the job of the elder in leading, protecting, and caring for the congregation or flock.<sup>58</sup>

*Teaching.* Teaching is the giving of sound doctrine and “encouragement through biblical teaching” as well as rebuking those who “oppose the truth of the gospel.”<sup>59</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The current research into the role of unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches is very minimal, and much of what has been published addresses the role of elders in general rather than what unpaid elders are actually doing. This study will provide churches with data that will help supply counsel and understanding in the use of unpaid elders. It will aid churches in making the transition to elder leadership or strengthening their existing elder structures.

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Magazine, National Association of Evangelicals, Winter 2017/18), and Mark Nolls, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010).

<sup>57</sup> Lyle M. Spencer and Signe M. Spencer, *Competence at Work: Models for Superior Performance* (New York: Wiley, 1993), 9.

<sup>58</sup> Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 16–23.

<sup>59</sup> Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, 92.



## CHAPTER 2

### PRECEDENT LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of what unpaid elders are currently doing in Southern Baptist churches. The literature has much that prescribes what roles elders, both paid and unpaid, should have in congregational life. However, there is little empirical research that confirms what unpaid elders are doing. The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature that relates to the role that unpaid elders have in congregational congregations. The first part of the chapter will discuss the New Testament teaching on church Elders from the book of Acts, the Pauline Epistles, and the General Epistles.<sup>1</sup> The next section will be an explanation of the different forms of church polity within evangelical congregations and the roles for leaders in each system of polity. The last section will examine the prescriptive literature for elders in congregational church polity. The sections in this chapter shaped the research questions for this thesis.

#### **Scriptural Foundation for Elders**

Any system of church polity or leadership to be considered evangelical must be rooted in Scripture and view Scripture as the final authority on how the church is

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<sup>1</sup>James Tunstead Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and Offices in the Earliest Christian Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Andrew D. Clarke, *Serve the Community of the Church: Christians as Leaders and Ministers*, First-Century Christians in the Graeco-Roman World (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 2000); James Hamilton Jr., “Did the Church Borrow Leadership Structure from the Old Testament or Synagogue?,” in *Shepherding God’s Flock: Biblical Leadership in the New Testament and Beyond*, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle and Thomas R. Schreiner (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2015). Each of these authors provides a helpful explanation of how the New Testament office of Elder may have been derived from the Old Testament Elder. However, this thesis is examining the New Testament church elder and will focus on the teaching found in the New Testament.

governed.<sup>2</sup> This presupposition means that an understanding of the role of church elder must begin with an understanding of the New Testament teaching on the church elder. The exposition of Scripture for this chapter will be undertaken by examining the New Testament writing on church elders in Acts, the Pauline Epistles, and the General Epistles. The emphasis of this exegesis will be on the role of church elders in the church.

### **Church Elders in Acts**

Luke wrote the book of Acts as a sequel to his gospel. The book of Acts has many references to the role of church elder, and as Benjamin Merkle points out it is a historically reliable account of the early church.<sup>3</sup> Darrell Bock notes that of the sixty-six uses of the Greek word *presbyteros* in the New Testament, eighteen of the mentions appear in the book of Acts.<sup>4</sup> Acts provides a narrative description of the authority that elders possessed in the early church as well as some examples of how they functioned. The following section reviews the description of church elders in the book of Acts sequentially.

**Acts 11:29-30—authority of church elders.** Luke first mentions elders in Acts 11 where he depicts their authority over the church.<sup>5</sup> Luke describes the desire of the Jerusalem church to provide money for famine relief to the church in Judea after a prophet predicts a coming famine. While the focus of this passage may be on the generosity of the church in giving money, it is essential to notice that it is the church

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<sup>2</sup> “What Is an Evangelical?,” National Association of Evangelicals, accessed February 7, 2019, <https://www.nae.net/what-is-an-evangelical/>.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin L. Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church*, Studies in Biblical Literature 57 (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 122.

<sup>4</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 418.

<sup>5</sup> William J. Larkin, *Acts*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL, 1995), 180.

elders who are receiving the money for the church, thus establishing their position of authority.<sup>6</sup> Howard Marshall argues that the elders mentioned in Acts 11 may be the seven mentioned in Acts 6:1-6, who Luke refers to by a new title in a manner consistent with Old Testament terms for leadership.<sup>7</sup> While Luke does not provide an exact identification of who the Jerusalem elders are, he does view them as bearing authority over the church at Jerusalem.

**Acts 14:23—appointment of church elders.** Luke not only depicts the authority of church elders in the church at Jerusalem; he also records an account of the appointment of elders within the church at Jerusalem. The end of Acts 14 shares the story of Paul and Barnabas as they return to Antioch on their missionary journey (Acts 14:21). Paul and Barnabas end their teaching and disciple-making by appointing elders in the Gentile church. Bock notes that while Paul does not use the term *elder* outside of the Pastoral Epistles, this event shows that Paul cares deeply about the leadership of the local church.<sup>8</sup> John Polhill explains that elders appointed by Paul and Barnabas would have most likely been unpaid leaders as there would have been no professional clergy to assume leadership.<sup>9</sup> The pattern of unpaid leadership was established in these early Gentile churches.

While this passage shows the appointment of elders, it does not explain the process of their selection. Later in the Pastoral epistles, Paul provides the qualifications of elders but does not provide a process for assessing qualifications or prescribe a method

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<sup>6</sup> Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, rev. and exp. ed. (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), 124.

<sup>7</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 5 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 162.

<sup>8</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 483.

<sup>9</sup> John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary, vol. 26 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 289.

for choosing the elders.<sup>10</sup> Don Howell Jr. writes that Paul’s intention was not to be prescriptive, but instead to leave the selection process to the churches themselves as the “spiritual maturity and emotional stability” of the candidates were more critical than the selection process.<sup>11</sup> The apostles’ appointment of elders is a contrast to the congregation’s choosing of the elders in Acts 6:1-6, but Polhill leaves open the possibility that the selection of the elders could have been subject to congregational approval.<sup>12</sup> However, the apostles would most likely have appointed the elders because the members of the church would have all been new converts and relied upon the apostles to ensure that competent leadership was put into place.<sup>13</sup>

**Acts 15—The Jerusalem Council.** After describing the appointment of church elders, Luke discusses elders again in Acts 15. While the authority of church elders is affirmed in Acts 4, Luke demonstrates how the elders exercise authority through his account of the Jerusalem Council, an event that Polhill calls the “turning point” of the books of Acts.<sup>14</sup> Luke’s account shows that the elders decided doctrinal issues, a vital role that elders will play within the churches they serve. Luke shows in Acts 15 how the elders assumed this role in a plurality of leadership, used Scripture as their authority, and

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<sup>10</sup> See 1 Tim 1:1-5 and Titus 3. These passages will be examined later in this chapter.

<sup>11</sup> Don N. Howell, *Servants of the Servant: A Biblical Theology of Leadership* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2003), 287.

<sup>12</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 297.

<sup>13</sup> Polhill, *Acts*.

<sup>14</sup> Polhill, *Acts*. 300. According to Polhill, the Jerusalem Council is the transition of Luke’s focus from the growth of the church among the Jews to the growth of the church among the Gentiles. Agreement on the requirements for Gentiles to enter the church represented the one final “hurdle” for Paul’s mission to the Gentiles, representing a defining moment for the young church. Bruce agrees that this event is important, calling it “epoch-making” and was as equally important to Luke as was the conversion of Paul.

relied on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Each of these aspects of the Jerusalem council reveals a necessary piece of performing the role of elder.

The Jerusalem or “Apostolic Council” was held in response to teaching from visitors to the church at Antioch. The specific teaching was that Gentile Christians must undergo circumcision to be saved (Acts 15:1-2). Luke refers to these visitors as coming from the “party of the Pharisees” and were adding to the requirements for Gentiles for salvation (v. 15:5). Luke’s description of the council establishes the critical role of the church elder in settling questions of doctrine.

While Acts 15 affirms the authority of elders, the passage also describes how the elders acted as a plurality in making a judgment on doctrine rather than relying solely on the decision of one person. Within the description of the plurality, Luke also reveals the transition of power from the apostles to the elders.<sup>15</sup> Bock points out that the development is evident in Luke’s depiction of the apostles and the elders meeting to discuss the matter (Acts 15:6), whereas previously (Acts 6) only the apostles are involved in the “deliberation” about neglected widows.<sup>16</sup> Luke records in Acts 15 that elders (appointed by the apostles) were participants in the council in addition to the apostles. As Luke records that all present shared their voice (Acts 15:6-7), one can conclude that it was not only the apostles that spoke, and therefore the apostles recognized the authority of the elders in the Jerusalem Council.<sup>17</sup>

Although the elders met and recognized the benefit of discussing the doctrinal issue in a plurality, they do not rely solely on their intellect to find a resolution. The plurality, or council, made their decision after consulting what Scripture had to say on the requirements for salvation for Gentiles. Following the testimonies by Peter, Paul, and

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<sup>15</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 301.

<sup>16</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 499.

<sup>17</sup> Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 127.

Barnabas, James took the opportunity to share his thoughts on the question. James had a senior position or at least commanded the respect of the church at Jerusalem, so his conclusions on the matter seemed to carry weight.<sup>18</sup> James interpreted Peter's speech in light of what the Old Testament has promised about the nation of Israel.<sup>19</sup> Using a passage from the book of Amos, James built a case for the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church based on what God had foretold through the prophets about the restoration of Israel.<sup>20</sup> James interpreted Amos 9:12 to speak of Gentile nations that will be a part of the recovery of the "tent of David."<sup>21</sup> James's speech reveals his conclusion that what Peter has seen and Peter's analysis of his events is consistent with what God has shown in His word, a pattern that church elders should follow today.<sup>23</sup> James was confident based on the word of God that the Gentiles should carry no extra burden for salvation or church membership as God's plan was always to include Gentiles in the restoration of Israel.

In addition to consulting Scripture, Acts 15 shows how elders must rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit for discernment as they did so in resolving a doctrinal issue. According to Wayne Grudem, one of the benefits of coming to saving faith in Christ is a renewed mind that can have the ability to discern the Spirit's leading.<sup>24</sup> Grudem notes several examples in the book of Acts where church leaders were confident in being led by the Holy Spirit, either through a feeling from the Spirit or some other means.<sup>25</sup> Dependence on the Holy Spirit is illustrated in Acts 10, an episode that Peter shared in

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<sup>18</sup> Larkin, *Acts*, 222.

<sup>19</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), sec. E.

<sup>20</sup> Larkin, *Acts*, 223.

<sup>21</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 303.

<sup>23</sup> Larkin, *Acts*, 225.

<sup>24</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 643.

<sup>25</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*.

Acts 15, in which the Holy Spirit told Peter that the three men who were looking for him were from a man called Cornelius. Peter was confident in going with the men because the Holy Spirit told him to, and in turn, confident in sharing his view on Gentile church membership. However, the Spirit was working differently through Peter at the Jerusalem council than he did in the ministry to the Gentiles. At the Council, the Spirit is working through testimony rather than actual signs, as noted by Derek Tidball.<sup>26</sup> Bruce states that the letter that was written by the council mentioned in Acts 15:22-29 affirms that the Holy Spirit was the “chief author” of the council’s decision.<sup>27</sup> By writing such, the council believed that they were all “possessed” or “controlled” by the Holy Spirit.<sup>28</sup> Polhill agrees that the role of the Holy Spirit is clear and that Luke’s point is that the same Holy Spirit that led to the inclusion of Gentiles is also directing the decisions of the council.<sup>29</sup>

**Acts 20:17-38—The Miletus discourse.** Acts 20:17-38 is known in the literature as the Miletus Discourse and records Paul’s direct instruction to a group of elders from the church at Ephesus. The Miletus Discourse recorded in Acts 20 is a farewell speech and is the only speech of Paul’s to Christians recorded in the book of Acts.<sup>30</sup> The discourse is important to the understanding of elders for several reasons. Paul’s speech to the Ephesian elders at Miletus aids in understanding the title of elder and its relationship with the title of *overseer*. Paul also described the important function of the elder by calling it *shepherding*, revealing the nuances and nature of the office. The speech

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<sup>26</sup> Derek Tidball, *Ministry by the Book: New Testament Patterns for Pastoral Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 88.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, sec. E.

<sup>28</sup> Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, sec. E.

<sup>29</sup> Polhill, *Acts*, 307.

<sup>30</sup> Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, sec. E.

is one of the instances in the book of Acts that refers to church elders outside of ones noted at the church at Jerusalem.<sup>31</sup>

Here Paul uses the Greek word *presbuteros* (“elder”) for the leaders of the church at Ephesus (Acts 20:17).<sup>32</sup> However, later in verse 28, Paul referred to the leaders using the word *episkopos* which translates to *overseer* or *bishop*. The use of these terms is significant because it provides evidence that the overseer and the elder in the New Testament are describing the same office. Although Merkle argues that overseer in this instance is referring to function rather than an office, it is consistent with other passages in the New Testament that use the term *elder* as an office (Phil 1:1, 1 Tim 3:1-7, and Titus 1:7-9).<sup>33</sup>

Bernard Aubert draws particular attention to the role of an elder as a shepherd.<sup>34</sup> Paul reminds the elders of their role by recounting how he has lived his own life by preaching and cannot be blamed for the waywardness of anyone as he has done his God-appointed duty.<sup>35</sup> In sharing how he approached his ministry, Paul gave an overview of the job of the church elder in protecting the church from various threats, by first explaining that the elders must watch over themselves if they are to be effective in shepherding the flock.<sup>36</sup> Church elders must take care that their spiritual wellbeing and

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<sup>31</sup> The other instance being the appointed elders on the return from Paul and Barnabas’s first missionary journey in Acts 14. There is scholarship that questions whether or not this speech is actually more Pauline or more Lukan. The questions some scholars raise in this speech is how much knowledge that Luke had of other Pauline writings and whether or not Luke imposes the Pauline view from the Pastoral epistles into the Miletus speech. Bruce accepts the Pauline origin of the speech as do Williams and Neal. Walton provides helpful commentary on the parallels between the Miletus speech of Acts 20 and passages from the Gospel of Luke as well as 1 Thessalonians.

<sup>32</sup> Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer*, 60. Verse 17 also refers to the elders in the plural, giving further evidence that there was a plurality of elders in the early churches.

<sup>33</sup> Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer*, 62.

<sup>34</sup> Bernard Aubert, *The Shepherd-Flock Motif in the Miletus Discourse (Acts 20:17-38) against Its Historical Background*, Studies in Biblical Literature, 124 (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

<sup>35</sup> Marshall, *Acts*, 262.

<sup>36</sup> Aubert, *The Shepherd-Flock Motif*, 261.



morality are taken seriously if they are to care for the congregation. The elders are called to shepherd the flock (or congregation) by protecting the flock from wolves (false teachers) that may come for either outside or inside the church that would seek to ravage the sheep.<sup>37</sup>

**Acts 21—Jerusalem elders and Paul’s return.** The authority of church elders is visited again in Acts 21. Paul was welcomed by James and the other elders of the church in Jerusalem upon his return to Jerusalem (vv. 17-18). James shared with Paul that he had been accused by “zealots of the law” of encouraging Jewish Christians to completely abandon the law and tells Paul to pay for the completion of a Nazarite vow for four people as well as purifying himself to show that he was still keeping the Jewish customs (vv. 17-24).<sup>38</sup> Paul’s presence in Jerusalem would likely cause an issue among the Jewish zealots, and Paul’s life may have been threatened as there were many Jews who wanted him dead.<sup>39</sup> Paul submitted to the authority of the church elders although the things that he was accused of doing were untrue and the rites themselves were not needed for salvation.

### **Church Elders in the Pauline Epistles**

The book of Acts is helpful for describing how elders functioned in the early church. However, the letters of the New Testament provide explicit instructions not furnished by Acts. In Ephesians, for example, Paul lays out a more prescriptive approach to the explanation of the function of church elders.

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<sup>37</sup> Marshall, *Acts*, 264.

<sup>38</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 647. Bock notes that the language being used by Luke conveys the gravity of accusations. Bock explains that Paul is being accused of telling Jewish Christians to commit apostasy. The zealots would have likely viewed this in similar fashion. Bock contends that it is more likely that Paul would have stressed the non-importance of the Jewish customs, but would have allowed the Jewish Christians to continue to practice them based on Paul’s writing in Gal 2:12-14 and 1 Cor 10:25,27.

<sup>39</sup> Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, sec. iii; Polhill, *Acts*, 407.

**Ephesians 4.** In Ephesians 4 Paul includes the pastoring or shepherding among the spiritual gifts. Rather than describing the gifts given to individual Christians, as in 1 Corinthians, in Ephesians 4:11 Paul describes the people themselves as gifts to the church for the purpose of furthering the church’s ministry.<sup>40</sup> While Paul emphasizes the gifts given by the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12, he calls the gifts in Ephesians 4 gifts that Christ has given the “prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers (vv. 9-14).” F. F. Bruce contrasts these two passages by saying,

Whereas in 1 Cor. 12:4–11 the “varieties of gifts” are the diverse ministries allocated by the Spirit to individual members of the church, together with the ability to exercise those ministries, here the “gifts” are the persons who exercise those ministries and who are said to be “given” by the ascended Christ to his people to enable them to function and develop as they should. It is not suggested that such “gifts” are restricted to those that are specifically named; those that are named exercise their ministries in such a way as to help other members of the church to exercise their own respective ministries (no member is left without some kind of service to perform).<sup>41</sup>

Merkle argues that the term *shepherd* or *pastor* is interchangeable with *elder/overseer*.<sup>42</sup> The noun *pastor* is only used once in the New Testament, but the function of shepherding is mentioned in several places (e.g., Acts 20; 1 Pet 5).<sup>43</sup> While the terms *shepherd* and *teacher* are related, the two terms are not the same. The use of the shepherd metaphor entails more than the responsibility of teaching, and Strauch states that while all teachers may not be elders, all elders would be teachers.<sup>44</sup> The function of the elder or pastor in Ephesians 4 is for the “equipping of the saints for ministry.”

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<sup>40</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), sec. iii.

<sup>41</sup> Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, sec. iii.

<sup>42</sup> Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008), 56.

<sup>43</sup> Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*.

<sup>44</sup> Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 210.

**First Timothy 3:2—elders teach.** Strauch claims that the letter of 1 Timothy is crucial in understanding Scripture’s teaching on church elders because of the time and explanation that Paul gives to Timothy.<sup>45</sup> Paul instructs Timothy to ensure that elders within the church possess the ability to teach. Paul gives Timothy the qualifications of an elder in 1 Timothy 3, and one of the qualifications that speak directly to an elder’s job is the ability and desire to teach (v.3).<sup>46</sup> While all of the qualifications that are listed have a moral component, teaching is the only qualification listed that requires a skill.<sup>47</sup> Phillip Towner argues that teaching would include the communication of Christian truth as well as maintaining discipline among the congregation.<sup>48</sup> Thomas Lea and Hayne Griffen agree, stating that this competency is needed as the elder must have “intellectual and didactic ability.”<sup>49</sup> In addition to teaching sound doctrine, the ability to identify doctrinal errors within the congregation is also necessary. Strauch notes that this does not necessarily require the elder to have a notable rhetorical skill, but rather that he can understand and teach from the Bible as the Christian faith is communicated from the written Word.<sup>50</sup>

Thabite Anyabiwile argues that by teaching the elder fulfills the exhortation that Paul gives to Timothy to “command and to teach.”<sup>51</sup> The power to command does

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<sup>45</sup> Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*.

<sup>46</sup> Paul provides the qualifications of an elder in 1 Tim 3 and Titus 1. While these qualifications are essential to the understanding of church leadership, they will not be examined in depth for this chapter. The qualifications that will be examined are those that directly describe a job of the elder (teaching, leading) rather than all of the qualifications that make someone eligible to be an elder.

<sup>47</sup> Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), sec. ii.

<sup>48</sup> Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas D Lea and Hayne P Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, New American Commentary, vol. 34 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 7.

<sup>50</sup> Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 195.

<sup>51</sup> Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*, IX Marks Series (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 127.

not come from the elder himself but comes from God, as the elder possesses “the already given commands” of Christ himself.<sup>52</sup>

### **Church Elders in the General Epistles**

In similar fashion to Paul’s letter to the Ephesian church, the letters written by Peter and James contain specific instructions that pertain to the function of church elders. The following section will examine the passages that contain the instructions in these letters by beginning with Paul’s first letter to Timothy.

**First Peter 5:1-5—elders lead and shepherd.** Paul is also clear in his letters that elders must lead and shepherd their congregations in addition to teaching. Peter writes his letter to the church amid persecution and suffering, a theme that influences Peter’s exhortations to the church elders.<sup>61</sup> Lest the elders or other members of the church think that suffering would pass them, Peter reminds them that he was witness to Christ’s suffering, which assures the elders that they will suffer as well (v.1). Timothy Laniak suggests that Peter’s references to suffering and the eternal glory is perhaps apocalyptic, or at least eschatological, as it assures the elders that they will be partakers of glory with Christ as they.<sup>62</sup> Wayne Grudem writes that Peter is an elder that has “sinned, repented, and been restored,” and Peter is asserting his right to exhort other elders.<sup>63</sup> Peter addresses the elders first by showing his solidarity with the group as an elder himself, and then by reminding the elders that the flock they shepherd is God’s, not their own. The

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<sup>52</sup> Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*. Anyabwile also refers to 1 Thess 4:2 when Paul refers to the commands “we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.”

<sup>61</sup> Thomas R Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, The New American Commentary, vol. 37 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), sec. iv.

<sup>62</sup> Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds after My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 20 (Leicester : Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 232–33.

<sup>63</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, *1 Peter: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 17 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 197.

flock they shepherd is Christ's, purchased with Christ's blood (cf. Acts 20:1-2). First Peter 5:1-5 refers back to 1 Peter 2 in which Peter refers to people as being like sheep who require a shepherd to guide and tend to them.

Using similar language to that in Acts 21, Peter reminds the elders how to shepherd by giving them three things that they should not do as shepherds: serve under compulsion, serve for their shameful gain, and serve in a domineering way (vv. 2-4).<sup>64</sup> Peter understands that if a man serves because he feels obligated and not because he has a burning desire, the persecution and suffering that will inevitably accompany the job of the elder will cause the man to be discouraged, potentially causing harm to the church. Strauch remarks that a joyful willingness to serve mimics the joyful willingness of our Lord.<sup>65</sup> Gene Getz adds that Peter may well have remembered Jesus willingly washing Peter's feet in the Upper Room just before the crucifixion.<sup>66</sup>

Peter then warns the elders that they must not seek their position to make themselves wealthy, a warning that is given to the condemned shepherds of Israel (Ezek 34).<sup>67</sup> Schreiner notes that the New Testament condemns leaders that are lovers of money and that a result of an eagerness to serve helps to curb the temptation to "skim money of the people."<sup>68</sup> However, this does not mean that an elder should not be paid for his service to the church. Paul instructs Timothy to give elders that serve well in "preaching and teaching" a "double honor," which is taken to mean monetary remuneration.<sup>69</sup>

Peter then tells the elders to shepherd in such a way that recognizes their

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<sup>64</sup> Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, sec. iv.

<sup>65</sup> Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 246.

<sup>66</sup> Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders: God's Plan for Leading the Church, A Biblical, Historical, and Cultural Perspective* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003), 149.

<sup>67</sup> See Ezek 34:1-9.

<sup>68</sup> Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, sec. iv. Peter uses *poimano*, the same word Luke uses for *shepherd* in Acts 21.

<sup>69</sup> Grudem, *1 Peter*, 196.

authority as authority to serve rather than dominate. Duane Watson and Terrance Callan compare this to Jesus' teaching that secular leaders were known for the dominance of those underneath them, while Christ himself is the example of a humble servant.<sup>70</sup> If an elder functions in a domineering or autocratic way, it will make it difficult for those in the congregation to submit willingly to that elder's leadership. Michael Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones explain that an elder must maintain a proper attitude by remembering Peter's teaching that church elders are stewards of God's flock and not their own.<sup>71</sup> Wilder and Jones call this stewardship a "divine assignment" in which the elder leads by example rather than for personal gain.<sup>72</sup>

**James 5:14—elders pray and anoint the sick.** The letter to James contains a function of an elder that is not listed as a qualification but is nevertheless essential to understanding an elder's role.

James 5 instructs the elder to be willing to shepherd the sick through prayer and through anointing with oil. James does not give more explanation as to why oil is to be used in the prayer for healing, but there are two predominant explanations. Douglas Moo argues that it may be a symbolic gesture that emphasizes the role of prayer and the desire of God to heal those that are sick.<sup>75</sup> Perhaps the physical act of applying oil to someone who is suffering is meant to stimulate the person's faith, and this certainly would be something that an elder must do in shepherding.<sup>76</sup> He also considers the

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<sup>70</sup> Duane Frederick Watson and Terrance Callan, *First and Second Peter*, Padeia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 118. The passages they cite for this teaching are Mark 10:42-45, Matt 20:25-28, and Luke 22:25-27.

<sup>71</sup> Michael S. Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones, *The God Who Goes before You: Pastoral Leadership as Christ-Centered Followership* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2018), 182.

<sup>72</sup> Wilder and Jones, *The God Who Goes before You*, 183.

<sup>75</sup> Douglas Moo, *James: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 16 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015). 224

<sup>76</sup> Moo, *James*.

possibility of the medicinal properties of oil as they are used throughout the New Testament to aid in healing.<sup>77</sup>

The New Testament provides examples of the roles that elders played in the early church in the book of Acts, while the New Testament epistles give instructions for church elders. Elders minister and shepherd in many different ways. However, elders function differently within their churches based on church polity. The next section will explain different forms of church polity and the roles elders play within those systems.

### **Types of Church Polity**

Chad Brand and Stan Norman define polity as the “organization or governmental structure of a church or fellowship of churches.”<sup>78</sup> Brand and Norman discuss the importance of polity as it directly relates to the role of the elder in a church.<sup>79</sup> The system of polity adopted by a church affects what the offices of a church are and the selection of church officers or leaders. While the New Testament provides counsel for types of polity and church offices, there are different interpretations as to what exactly Scripture is counseling in terms of church polity. Polycarp described an early two-tier system of church polity that included a plurality of elders or bishops, which served over a plurality of deacons.<sup>81</sup> Clement of Rome seems to equate the bishop and elder, while Ignatius views the office of bishop and elder as separate.<sup>82</sup> However, as different challenges to the church arose, different forms of polity began to emerge. The following section will examine three common evangelical forms of polity: Episcopalian,

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<sup>77</sup> Moo, *James*.

<sup>78</sup> Stanton Norman and Chad Brand, “Is Polity That Important?,” in *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, ed. Chad Brand and R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2004), 14.

<sup>79</sup> Norman and Brand, “Is Polity That Important?”

<sup>81</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine: A Companion to Wayne Grudem’s Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 589.

<sup>82</sup> Norman and Brand, “Is Polity That Important?,” 21.

Presbyterian, and Congregationalism.<sup>83</sup>

### **Episcopal/Anglican Polity**

Episcopal or Anglican polity uses a three-tiered system. Greg Allison explains that the three tiers begin with a bishop at the top level, a middle level with a plurality of elders, and a bottom level with a plurality of deacons.<sup>84</sup> The national level of the American church is made up of a diocese in which the bishops serve, while each diocese is made up of parishes governed by presbyters and deacons.<sup>85</sup> As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the early church generally operated under a two-tiered system. However, Allison points out that Ignatius prescribed the Episcopal form of polity in order to prevent disunity within the church in the face of new heresies.<sup>86</sup> The central authority found in the bishop provided a consolidated way to avoid the spread of heresy.

Roger Beckwith explains that the development of the three-tiered system finds its roots in the Jewish tradition of the synagogue where a synagogue ruler was appointed to have the final say in things such as conflict resolution.<sup>87</sup> He suggests that the separate bishop emerged in order to preserve the right of the ordination of new bishops or presbyters within one person or office.<sup>88</sup> By restricting the right to ordain new officers to

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<sup>83</sup> Care will be given in this section not to equate denomination and polity, although there are distinctives in polity found among denominations. There are some denominations that use these forms of polity that will not be examined in this section. For example, the United Methodist church runs under a form of Episcopalian polity yet does not have “Episcopalian” in its name. The Reformed Church of America is similar in that it operates under Presbyterian polity, but does not have “Presbyterian” in its name.

<sup>84</sup> Allison, *Historical Theology*, 591.

<sup>85</sup> Peter Toon, “Episcopalianism,” in *Who Runs the Church? 4 Views on Church Government*, ed. Paul E. Ingle and Steven B. Cowan, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), chap 1, “The Anglican Communion of Churches.”

<sup>86</sup> Allison, *Historical Theology*, 590.

<sup>87</sup> Roger T. Beckwith, *Elders in Every City: The Origin and Role of the Ordained Ministry* (Carlisle, England: Paternoster Press, 2003), 56.

<sup>88</sup> Beckwith, *Elders in Every City* 56.



one person, it would, in theory, prevent heretics from ordaining other heretics.<sup>89</sup> Beckwith also notes the importance of the Eucharist in the early church was likely another reason for the separation of the presbyter and the bishop.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, according to Beckwith, placing the responsibility for administering the Eucharist to a sole bishop would help to prevent excommunicated members of the congregation from setting up their own communion tables.<sup>91</sup>

Peter Toon acknowledges that Anglicans do not see a distinct form of church government commanded in Scripture, but instead believe that Scripture allows different systems.<sup>92</sup> Anglicans appeal to both Scripture and tradition as roots to their form of church polity. Toon states that Anglican, or Episcopalian, has three houses within a synod: a house of bishops, a house of clergy, and a house of laity. One of the concepts that Toon develops is the concept of how the “well-being” or the “*bene esse*” of the church and the relationship of the episcopal system with this “well-being.”<sup>93</sup> Toon notes that many in the episcopal tradition insist that the pure *esse* of the church is one that operates under the episcopal form of polity, but Toon rejects this argument.<sup>94</sup> He states that while he believes that all forms of polity are inadequate in reaching all marks established for the church, the episcopal form of polity is best because it represents the headship of Christ and finds its roots in “apostolicity.”<sup>95</sup> Apostolicity is the

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<sup>89</sup> Beckwith, *Elders in Every City*.

<sup>90</sup> Beckwith *Elders in Every City*.

<sup>91</sup> Beckwith *Elders in Every City*.

<sup>92</sup> Toon, “Episcopalianism,” chap 1, “The Scriptures and the Fathers.”

<sup>93</sup> Toon, “Episcopalianism,” chap 1, “The Bene Esse.”

<sup>94</sup> Toon, “Episcopalianism,” chap 1, “The Bene Esse.” Toon explains that “being” or nature of the church as represented in the Latin phrase, “*esse*.” The fullness of the church is described by the phrase *plene esse*. Toon believes that the *bien esse* of the church, or the “well-being” of the church is best realized in the episcopal system and he rejects the extreme view of episcopal polity as the *plene esse* of the church. The extreme view is simply that the episcopal polity is the *plene esse* or “essential being” of the church and all other systems of polity are not a part of the true church.

<sup>95</sup> Toon, “Episcopalianism,” chap. 1, “Bishops and their Place in Episcopalianism.”

acknowledgment that the primary leader in the Anglican Church is the Bishop, who has the responsibility to oversee the other offices and find his authority as a continuation of the office of apostle.<sup>96</sup>

Paul Zahl also rejects the *esse* view of the church some Anglicans hold.<sup>97</sup> He argues that the church's essence is not found in episcopal polity, which could be argued from Scripture from other forms, such as Baptist or Presbyterian.<sup>98</sup> Zahl agrees with Toon in that the Anglican or episcopal form of polity establish the *bien esse* or wellbeing of the church.<sup>99</sup> He traces the development of Anglican polity to the results of the Reformation in England and the desire of Queen Elizabeth to unify her country under her Protestant "DNA." Zahl states that Elizabeth's Anglicanism is a "wax nose," which can be pointed in the direction of Catholicism or Protestantism. He describes Anglicanism as a house with one roof that covers three different traditions: Anglican-Protestant, Anglican Catholic, and Anglican Liberal.

Zahl states that while there are three orders in the episcopal tradition, functionally, there are only two orders.<sup>100</sup> The deacon's job is to help support the presbyter in his/her job. Furthermore, the deacon is not truly an ordained order, leaving only the presbyter and bishop as the ordained members of the clergy.<sup>101</sup>

Jason Duesing argues that the three branches of Anglicanism have emerged in the modern era.<sup>102</sup> The Anglo-liberal branch has grown "indifferent" to leadership and

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<sup>96</sup> Toon, "Episcopalianism." chap. 1, "Bishops and their Place in Episcopalianism."

<sup>97</sup> Paul F. M. Zahl, "The Bishop Led Church: The Episcopal or Anglican Polity Affirmed, Weighed and Defended," in Brand and Norman, *Perspectives on Church Government*, 169.

<sup>98</sup> Zahl, "The Bishop Led Church," 171.

<sup>99</sup> Zahl, "The Bishop Led Church," 171-173.

<sup>100</sup> Zahl, "The Bishop Led Church," 173.

<sup>101</sup> Zahl, "The Bishop Led Church," 175.

<sup>102</sup> Jason Duesing, "The Cousin of Catholicism: The Anglican Understanding of Church Leadership," in Merkle, and Schreiner, *Shepherding God's Flock*, 244.

doctrine, which has led to a movement away from historical Scriptural teaching. The more Catholic leaning Anglicans have continued to emphasize the apostolic succession of church leadership and continue to hold tradition on equal footing with Scripture in its authority. He states that the modern evangelical Anglicans find their roots in the movements of George Whitefield, Charles Wesley, and J. C. Ryle, who affirmed the three-fold structure to church leadership but distinguished themselves from Catholicism by refusing to state that the bishop was infallible.<sup>103</sup>

John Webster argues that the church must use Anglicanism in order for the church to be “evangelical,” as any evangelical theology is accountable to the gospel.<sup>104</sup> Webster asserts that the arguments based on the tradition of apostolic succession are driven by human interests rather than the gospel formation of community. Webster states that the apostolic nature of the church is found in its mission and “assenting to the apostolic nature of the resurrection.”<sup>105</sup> He acknowledges that Christ is the head of the church and all church ministry is subordinate to Christ.<sup>106</sup> The bishop’s role in the Episcopate is to oversee and claims that the mission of the church requires oversight. Webster states that the church is free to choose for itself the type of oversight it needs but is obligated to choose for itself a structure that will rightly guard the truth the church is to proclaim, a structure he believes is provided in the Episcopal polity.<sup>107</sup>

Zahl notes that the role of the presbyter or elder in the Episcopal or Anglican polity is to provide oversight to the local parish through the ministry of the Word and the

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<sup>103</sup> Duesing, "The Cousin of Catholicism," 244–45.

<sup>104</sup> John Webster, “The ‘Self-Organizing’ Power of the Gospel: Episcopacy and the Formation of Community,” in *Community Formation in the Early Church and the Church Today*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 184.

<sup>105</sup> Webster, “The ‘Self-Organizing’ Power of the Gospel,” 190–91.

<sup>106</sup> Webster, “The ‘Self-Organizing’ Power of the Gospel,” 188.

<sup>107</sup> Webster, “The ‘Self-Organizing’ Power of the Gospel,” 191.

sacraments.<sup>108</sup> Toon states that the presbyters are also tasked with implementing directives from the dioceses as given from the presiding bishops.<sup>109</sup>

### **Presbyterian Polity**

Contrary to the monarchical Episcopalian form of polity, the Presbyterian form of polity has a blend of congregational and elder influence. Robert Reymond states that while the congregation elects church elders, they are not to serve at the whim of the members of the congregation. He argues that elders in the Presbyterian form of polity are to rule the congregation, and the congregation is to submit to the authority of the elders.<sup>110</sup> The authority that the elders have is from Christ, not the people that elect them. Reymond states the elders are to shepherd the members of the congregation or “flock.” Shepherding is accomplished by preventing members from “going astray” through correction and discipline. The elders also protect the flock from outside “wolves” and nourish the flock through teaching.

Roy Taylor compares the Presbyterian form of church government to a “representative democracy” between the monarchy of Episcopalianism and pure democracy in congregationalism.<sup>111</sup> He argues that the office of elder began in the Old Testament under Moses, but grew as the synagogue system grew following the Jewish exile. Elder leadership continued as the church grew following the ministry of Christ, particularly after the death of James in Acts 12. Taylor argues that the apostolic council of Acts 15 is the biblical prescription for Presbyterian government. He claims that a plurality of elders for church leadership is described in the New Testament, as well as

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<sup>108</sup> Zahl, “The Bishop Led Church: The Episcopal or Anglican Polity Affirmed,” 174.

<sup>109</sup> Toon, “Episcopalianism,” 32.

<sup>110</sup> Robert L. Reymond, “Presbytery Led Church: Presbyterian Church Government,” in *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, 82.

<sup>111</sup> Roy L. Taylor, “Presbyterianism,” in Ingle and Cowan, *Who Runs the Church?* chap 2, “Types of Church Government.”

“non-canonical” sources of church practice. Contrary to the Episcopal view, Presbyterian polity views bishop and elder as the same office.

While Presbyterian elders function similarly to Episcopal elders, Presbyterian elder bodies may be made up of paid and unpaid elders. Unlike the Episcopal Church which only has only paid elders with lay leaders only serving in the diaconate. Cornelis Van Dam argues that as the New Testament church “inherited” the office of the elder from the Jewish tradition, there are two distinct elders described in the New Testament: ruling elders and teaching elders.<sup>112</sup> The verse used for the distinction is 1 Timothy 5:17, which Van Dam argues stipulates payment for those who rule and teach well is prescribed.<sup>113</sup> Van Dam notes that the ruling elders are described separately in Romans 12:7-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:28 thus indicating that elders should be leading in the area where they are gifted.<sup>114</sup> Van Dam states that an elder must show “loving leadership” as he stewards the house of the Lord. Elders have the responsibility to preach the Word of God as they have been entrusted with the gospel. However, the ruling elders’ job of teaching entails protecting the purity of sound teaching rather than the act of preaching. The ruling and teaching elders also nurture the flock or congregation from the Word of God and must make regular visits to church families. Elders must also take a role in church discipline. Van Dam states that the command from Jesus in Matthew 18 to “take it to the church” means that when calls for an individual to repent go unheeded, it must go to church leaders.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Cornelis Van Dam, *The Elder: Today’s Ministry Rooted in All of Scripture*, Explorations in Biblical Theology (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishers, 2009), 104–5.

<sup>113</sup> Van Dam, *The Elder*.

<sup>114</sup> Van Dam, *The Elder*, 105. Van Dam argues that the elders that are gifted to rule should rule, and those that are gifted to teach should teach. The ruling elder and the teaching elder are two distinct offices.

<sup>115</sup> Van Dam, *The Elder*.

## Congregational Polity

If Presbyterian polity is somewhat similar to Episcopal in that there is some hierarchy beyond the local church, then congregational stands at the other extreme of the polity spectrum from Episcopalians. Milliard Erickson defines congregational polity as a system in which the congregation is the “seat of authority.”<sup>116</sup> According to Erickson, congregationalism is founded upon two prevailing principles: autonomy and democracy.<sup>117</sup> Congregationally ruled churches are self-governing and make their own decisions, regardless of cooperation or association with other churches.<sup>118</sup> Congregational rule is democratic in that individual members rather than clergy have the “power” in the church.<sup>119</sup>

Stephen and Kirk Wellum write that congregationalism is the result of God’s New Covenant through Christ.<sup>120</sup> They argue that in the Old Testament, God related to Israel through concentrated leadership of a few people, and the whole community suffered or benefited based on community leadership.<sup>121</sup> The New Covenant is a “mediated covenant” through God’s Spirit, who gifts each believer to enable them for service, not just “priests, kings, and prophets.”<sup>122</sup>

James Leo Garrett, Jr. agrees with Erickson’s definition. He states that congregational polity is a polity where the final decision making rests with the

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<sup>116</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 998.

<sup>117</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*.

<sup>118</sup> Erickson. *Christian Theology*.

<sup>119</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1000.

<sup>120</sup> Stephen J. Wellum and Kirk Wellum, “The Biblical and Theological Case for Congregationalism,” in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2015), 81.

<sup>121</sup> Wellum and Wellum, “The Biblical and Theological Case for Congregationalism.”

<sup>122</sup> Wellum and Wellum, “The Biblical and Theological Case for Congregationalism.”54.

congregation whenever the congregation is “gathered for decision making.”<sup>123</sup> The only time the congregation does not make a final decision is when a particular decision is delegated to a group within the church or a person within the church.<sup>124</sup> Garrett identifies the priesthood of the believer as a critical doctrine for justification of the congregational polity.<sup>125</sup> Garrett argues that since Christians have unhindered access to God without the need for a priest’s mediation, all church members should have decision making power in their church.<sup>126</sup> Another key to the success of congregational polity is the spiritual maturity of the members of the church.<sup>127</sup> Garrett exhorts congregationally ruled churches to disciple members toward maturity so that they may govern well. However, Garrett’s definition does not preclude the role of a pastor or elder. Garrett explains that the pastor and congregational leadership are compatible as the authority of the pastor or elder is derived through “influence” rather than “an authority of office.”<sup>128</sup>

Jonathan Leeman qualifies the democratic explanation of congregationalism.<sup>129</sup> While congregationalism sounds like pure democracy, Leeman suggests that congregationalism is actually a mixed form of governing.<sup>130</sup> According to Leeman, the

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<sup>123</sup> James Leo Garrett Jr., “The Congregation Led Church: Congregational Polity,” in Brand and Norman, *Perspectives on Church Government*, 125. Garrett explains congregational polity from a Baptist perspective. For a helpful discussion of other denominations that use congregational polity, see *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* edited by Robert Olson.

<sup>124</sup> Garrett, “The Congregation Led Church: Congregational Polity.” Garrett uses six major texts from Scripture in defense of congregationalism: Matt 18:15-20; Acts 6:3, 13:2-3; 1 Cor 5:2; and 2 Cor 2:6.

<sup>125</sup> Garrett, “The Congregation Led Church: Congregational Polity,” 144. Garrett uses 1 Pet 2:9 as his evidence in which Peter refers to Christians as a “royal priesthood.”

<sup>126</sup> Garrett, “The Congregation Led Church.”

<sup>127</sup> Garrett, “The Congregation Led Church,” 145.

<sup>128</sup> Garrett, “The Congregation Led Church.” While Garrett does not speak to the role of unpaid elders in congregational churches, he does explain how deacons have performed the function of unpaid elders in the Baptist tradition. He states that the movement of deacons toward helping the main elder or pastor with spiritual matters became more prevalent in the latter half of the twentieth century.

<sup>129</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *Understanding the Congregation’s Authority* (Nashville: B & H Group, 2016), 7.

<sup>130</sup> Leeman, *Understanding the Congregation’s Authority*, 7–8.

role of “ruling” in the church belongs to the congregation while the role of training belongs to the elders.<sup>131</sup> The elders’ job is to train the congregation so that the congregation rules well. Using Matthew 18, Leeman argues that Christ has given the congregation the ability to discern those who belong to the kingdom as well as affirming correct doctrine.<sup>132</sup> The congregation and elders are different in congregationalism in that the congregation has the authority of command, while the elders possess the authority of counsel.<sup>133</sup> The elders in congregational rule give counsel by teaching and living lives that are examples to the rest of the congregation.<sup>134</sup> The congregation exercises the authority of command through decision making.<sup>135</sup>

John Hammett emphasizes the role of a regenerate membership for effective congregational governance.<sup>136</sup> He argues church membership as *corpus permixtum* is contrary to the teaching of Scripture.<sup>137</sup> For Hammett, a person who is unregenerate cannot be trusted to govern well in a congregational setting.<sup>138</sup> An unregenerate person is not indwelt with the Holy Spirit, which is required to have the necessary wisdom to

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<sup>131</sup> Leeman, *Understanding the Congregation’s Authority*, 39–45.

<sup>132</sup> Leeman, *Understanding the Congregation’s Authority*, 46.

<sup>133</sup> Leeman, *Understanding the Congregation’s Authority*.

<sup>134</sup> Leeman, *Understanding the Congregation’s Authority*.

<sup>135</sup> Leeman *Understanding the Congregation’s Authority*.

<sup>136</sup> John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2005), 84.

<sup>137</sup> Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 87–89. The *corpus permixtum* is the statement that the church is made up of both believers and non-believers. The idea began when Constantine was converted to Christianity in 312. Augustine taught that the holiness of the church was not dependent upon its individual members, but that by the church’s connection with Christ. Therefore, believers and non-believers alike could be considered members of the universal church. Hammett also notes that Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli believed in the *corpus mixtum*, but acknowledges that the time in which these men lived there was little separation of church and state. Therefore, living in a town or city made one a member of the church. Hammett shows Scriptural evidence for regenerate membership in Rom 12:5, Eph 4:5-6, and 1 Cor 5:1.

<sup>138</sup> Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 101.



sense God’s leading.<sup>139</sup> In this form of government, the congregation is the final authority over elders, but Hammett notes that this has not been practiced in this exact fashion, as deacons and senior pastors have assumed sole leadership in many Baptist churches.

Cowen states that the terms of “elder” and “pastor” are interchangeable while describing the authority of the church elder.<sup>140</sup> In his view the congregation has the final say in church discipline. However, Cowen speaks only to the role of lay elders in the elder rule system of polity and does not speak to the possibility of lay elders in the congregational form of church government.

### **Elders in Congregational Churches**

The literature on elders in congregationally ruled churches discusses many prescriptive ways that elders should lead their congregations. These prescriptions include structure and function. This section will discuss each of these prescriptions and will also discuss what the literature has discussed for unpaid elders in congregational congregations. Mark Dever notes that there is a growth in congregationally ruled churches, particularly Baptist, in a plurality of paid and unpaid elders.<sup>141</sup>

### **Unpaid Elders**

Benjamin Merkle discusses the advantages of having unpaid elders and provides a logical, biblical defense of churches having unpaid elders. Merkle uses the example of Paul as one who had the right to make his living from the church but instead

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<sup>139</sup> Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*.

<sup>140</sup> Cowen, *Who Rules the Church?*, 13.

<sup>141</sup> Mark Dever, *By Whose Authority: Elders in Baptist Life* (Washington, DC: 9Marks, 2006), 22. Dever believes this movement among Baptists to be related to the inerrancy controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention in the early 1980s. The inerrancy controversy led many Baptists to interact with the broader evangelical world as conservative Baptists often went to non-Baptist seminaries and read authors that were conservative outside of the Baptist tradition. Dever argues that the conservative resurgence caused Baptists to examine their past, which included a plurality of elders in leadership. Dever also states that the growth in reading those outside of the Southern Baptist tradition such as John MacArthur, John Piper, Wayne Grudem, and Millard Erickson revived interest in elder leadership.

chose to serve the church while making his living as a tentmaker.<sup>142</sup> Scripture provides “permission” for the church to pay its elders in 1 Timothy, allowing payment to the elder for the hard work of teaching and preaching. Merkle argues that allowing elders to serve while receiving income from other means allows the church to have a higher number in their plurality, thus supplying stronger leadership to the church without straining its resources.<sup>143</sup> Dave Harvey agrees with Merkle’s idea that unpaid elders are of great help to the local church’s ministry. Harvey notes that pastoral vocational ministry has developed a career-driven dynamic where vocational pastors are often remain in their roles for a short time.<sup>144</sup> He wisely points out that a body of unpaid elders provides stable, committed leadership to a single church body.<sup>145</sup>

Paul Stevens argues from Ephesians 4 that the equipping of the saints for ministry includes raising them to leadership or servant positions within the church body.<sup>146</sup> Rather than merely allowing the single pastor to do all the work, Stevens states that laypeople must be “liberated” to serve.<sup>147</sup> Using the apostle Paul’s method as an example, Stevens shows that elders in the early church were chosen from the congregations to help so that the elders were at “home,” and the members of the congregation knew them.<sup>148</sup> While Stevens spends more time discussing the equipping of the laity for ministry rather than preparing them to shepherd, Melvin Steinbron speaks to

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<sup>142</sup> Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008), 217.

<sup>143</sup> Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*.

<sup>144</sup> Dave Harvey, “Lay Elders Are Not the Shepherding JV Team,” *The Gospel Coalition*, September 8, 2017 <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/lay-elders-are-not-shepherding-jv-team/>.

<sup>145</sup> Harvey, “Lay Elders Are Not the Shepherding JV Team.”

<sup>146</sup> R. Paul Stevens, *Liberating the Laity: Equipping All the Saints for Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 26.

<sup>147</sup> Stevens, *Liberating the Laity*.

<sup>148</sup> Stevens *Liberating the Laity*.

how pastors should equip lay people to pastor.<sup>149</sup> Steinbron's definition of pastoring however is more limited than what others have written as it pertains to unpaid pastors as he seems to distinguish between the terms pastor and elder.<sup>150</sup>

## **Roles**

Whether the elder is paid or unpaid, the responsibilities of the elder remain the same. While elders may be more gifted to perform one task over another, the tasks are the same whether the elder receives compensation from the church or from outside the church. Briggs states that church elders' focus is to determine how to keep the church on the mission that God has set before the church.<sup>151</sup> Briggs describes a mission-aligned church as one that is dependent upon prayer and sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit.<sup>152</sup> A mission-aligned church is more concerned with the number of people sent from their church rather than attendance.<sup>153</sup> As J.R. Briggs points out, the mission of the church is quickly defeated when the congregation is inundated with congregational sin as well as a pragmatic approach to ministry rather than prioritizing what God has called them to accomplish.<sup>154</sup>

Newton describes the elder's leadership of the congregation as a "concert" marked by the willingness of the elders to lead and the congregation to follow.<sup>155</sup> Newton relies on the description of leaders in Hebrews 13 regarding how the elders should lead

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<sup>149</sup> Melvin J. Steinbron, *Can the Pastor Do It Alone? A Model for Preparing Lay People for Lay Pastoring* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1987), 93.

<sup>150</sup> Steinbron, *Can the Pastor Do It Alone?*, 26.

<sup>151</sup> J. R. Briggs and Bob Hyatt, *Eldership and the Mission of God: Equipping Teams for Faithful Church Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 26.

<sup>152</sup> Briggs and Hyatt, *Eldership and the Mission of God*.

<sup>153</sup> Briggs and Hyatt, *Eldership and the Mission of God*, 30.

<sup>154</sup> Briggs and Hyatt, *Eldership and the Mission of God*.

<sup>155</sup> Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life*, 79.

the congregation.<sup>156</sup> The elders' leadership must be characterized by a watchful spirit and must be mindful that he is accountable to God for how he leads the congregation.<sup>157</sup> The congregation must respond to the elders' leadership through "obedience and submission" so that the elders may do their job "with joy and without grief."<sup>158</sup> Strauch argues that this type of leadership is accomplished through servant leadership, which is called for in Scripture as well.<sup>159</sup> Elders are to follow the example of Christ, who served the people he led through humility and sacrifice.<sup>160</sup> The apostle Paul was also a humble servant as he sought to promote Christ and not himself, often sacrificing his wellbeing for the good of those he led.<sup>161</sup>

Shepherding is the overarching description of what an elder does for the church, and several tasks fall under the shepherding umbrella.<sup>162</sup> Timothy Laniak writes that the shepherd is an appropriate metaphor for church leadership because "both occupations have a comparable variety of diverse tasks that are constantly negotiated."<sup>163</sup> Shepherds in the ancient world had the responsibility to protect their sheep from many threats in the environment. According to Laniak, disease was a constant threat that had to be eradicated from the flock so the rest of the flock could avoid infection.<sup>164</sup> In addition to the threat of drought, animal predators, as well as thieves, would potentially steal the

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<sup>156</sup> Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life*, 81.

<sup>157</sup> Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life*, 85–87.

<sup>158</sup> Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life*, 88–92.

<sup>159</sup> Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 85.

<sup>160</sup> Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 86–87.

<sup>161</sup> Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 93–94.

<sup>162</sup> Jeramie Rinne, "A Job Description for Lay Elders," *9Marks*, Lay Elders: A User's Guide Part 1 (December 2012), <https://www.9marks.org/article/journaljob-description-lay-elders/>.

<sup>163</sup> Laniak, *Shepherds after My Own Heart*, 40.

<sup>164</sup> Laniak, *Shepherds after My Own Heart*, 55.

entire flock.<sup>165</sup> Merkle applies the work of shepherding to the church elder by calling elders to attend to the physical and spiritual needs of the members of the congregation.<sup>166</sup>

Michael Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones note that the example of shepherding for elders to follow is the Shepherd, Jesus, who calls church elders to “follow, feed, and die.”<sup>167</sup> Wilder and Jones state that the New Testament teaches that elders lead by following Jesus, feeding the flock, and dying for the flock.<sup>168</sup>

### **A Plurality of Elders v. Single Elder**

The New Testament writers supply many pieces of evidence for a plurality of elders in church governance. In Acts 15, Luke records the meeting of church elders from Jerusalem and Antioch to decide the controversy regarding the requirements for Gentiles joining the church. Luke also records the meeting of Paul with the elders from Ephesus at Miletus in Acts 20, while James instructs those that are sick to approach the elders (plural) for anointing in healing, and Peter refers to the scattered elders (plural) in 1 Peter. While these are a few instances, there are other passages in the New Testament that testify to the plurality of elders that governed the local church.<sup>169</sup> The plurality of shared leadership provides the opportunity for different viewpoints and allows for gifts as well as competencies to be complimented. Joseph Hellerman argues for shared leadership on theological grounds, saying that Paul followed Christ’s example of humiliation as a

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<sup>165</sup> Laniak, *Shepherds after My Own Heart*.

<sup>166</sup> Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, 91.

<sup>167</sup> Wilder and Jones, *The God Who Goes before You*, 167.

<sup>168</sup> Wilder and Jones, *The God Who Goes Before You*, 168. Wilder and Jones trace this theme through the ministry of Peter as recorded in the Gospel of John.

<sup>169</sup> Also see Acts 14:23, 19:22; Phil 1:1; and Titus 1:5. Johns argues that shared leadership is also described in Rom 16:1-16, 23; Col 4:1-4; 2 Tim 4: 10-13 and Luke 6:12-16. While these passages do not describe elders in shared leadership, they do help to establish a pattern for shared leadership in the New Testament.

model for “other-centered” leadership.<sup>170</sup> According to Hellerman, Paul utilized shared ministry in the church at Philippi to develop community and family within the church so that ministry was an equal partnership.<sup>171</sup>

Gerald Cowen discusses the call of the “pastor-elder” and convincingly defends congregational polity from Scripture, but argues that leadership by a single elder was normative in the early church.<sup>173</sup> Cowen states that it is impossible to know the number of elders that were present in Jerusalem or other churches, but claims that the model described in the New Testament is one church made up of different house churches, each with its singular leader.<sup>174</sup> Cowen argues that James was the singular leader that led the Jerusalem Council to a decision in Acts 15.<sup>175</sup> Alastair Campbell follows the same logic as Cowen, noting that house churches seemed to exist in the early church, each with its own leader, but does so using Paul’s speech to the Ephesian elders at Miletus in Acts 20.<sup>176</sup> Campbell believes that the plural use of “elders” in Acts 20 is speaking to the elder of each house church at Ephesus, all of which make up the “church at Ephesus.”<sup>177</sup>

Daniel Akin writes that while the New Testament “data” points to a congregational polity, the number of elders in a congregation is not stated and that while he believes a plurality is best, it is biblically permissible for there to be a single elder

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<sup>170</sup> Joseph H. Hellerman, *Embracing Shared Ministry: Power and Status in the Early Church and Why It Matters Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2013), 160–70.

<sup>171</sup> Hellerman, *Embracing Shared Ministry*, 198.

<sup>173</sup> Cowen, *Who Rules the Church?*, 17–25.

<sup>174</sup> Cowen, *Who Rules the Church?*, 16.

<sup>175</sup> Cowen, *Who Rules the Church?*

<sup>176</sup> R. Alastair Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christianity*, Studies of the New Testament and Its World (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 172.

<sup>177</sup> Campbell, *The Elders*.

governing a congregation.<sup>178</sup> Akin notes that in the Old Testament, there were instances where even the plurality of leadership was governed by a “first among equals” system as one elder was the principal leader among the entire group.<sup>179</sup> He notes that in American history that there were times where single-elder models were pragmatic, albeit far from perfect solution as churches were forced to rely on circuit riders if there were no men qualified to serve as church elders.<sup>180</sup>

Strauch agrees with the first among equals dynamic described by Akin but writes in support of a defined plurality of elders.<sup>181</sup> Strauch states that a plurality of elders is not only biblical but practical, since it helps to share in the workload by allowing elders who are gifted in different areas of leadership to serve together.<sup>182</sup> Phil Newton argues that a plurality of elders is undoubtedly compatible with congregational polity.<sup>183</sup> Newton uses the example of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 to demonstrate how the congregation chose to send representatives to Jerusalem and while the entire congregation was not present for the debate, they did affirm the decision made by the council.<sup>184</sup> Newton believes that a plurality of elders protects a single elder from succumbing to the temptation to become authoritarian with the congregation and it will also provide a model of unity for the congregation.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Daniel L. Akin, “The Single Elder Led Church: The Bible’s Witness to Congregational/Single-Elder-Led-Polity,” in Brand and Norman, *Perspectives on Church Government*, 23.

<sup>179</sup> Akin, “The Single Elder Led Church,” 59. Akin states that the elders appointed by Moses were still subject to Moses and his judgements. Akin also points out that Eph 4:11 only gives one office, which leads him to conclude that the single elder system is permissible.

<sup>180</sup> Akin, “The Single Elder Led Church,” 58.

<sup>181</sup> Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 45.

<sup>182</sup> Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 42–4.

<sup>183</sup> Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life*, 58.

<sup>184</sup> Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life*. Newton writes that the phrase “it seemed good” was a political term in the Greek world which means that was a “passing measure” in a Greek assembly.

<sup>185</sup> Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life*, 61.

While the authors above argue that a plurality of elders was present and leading in the early church, there is no definition of shared leadership or the function of elders within a plurality given in Scripture. Craig L. Pearce and Jay Alden Conger provide a contemporary definition of shared leadership, as a

dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of a group or organizational goals or both. This influence process often involves peer or lateral, influence at other times involves upward or downward hierarchical influence.<sup>186</sup>

Pearce and Conger argue that shared leadership has emerged in modern organizations because of the need for an efficient flow of information and the need for quick responses to organizational needs.<sup>187</sup> Reliance on a traditional hierarchal system of leadership prevents quick response as much time is often needed for information to flow back to the top of the hierarchy and conversely for decisions to flow back to the bottom.<sup>188</sup> The first among equals that Strauch describes is consistent with the occasional hierarchical influence that Pearce and Conger identify.

Sheldena Johns notes the theological nature of a plurality of shared leadership by pointing out that the most excellent example of shared leadership is God, as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.<sup>189</sup> The “working theology” of the communal nature of the Trinity will have a direct impact on the norms of a church’s leadership.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Craig L. Pearce and Jay Alden Conger, “All Those Years Ago: The Historical Underpinnings of Shared Leadership,” in *Shared Leadership: Reframing the Hows and Whys of Leadership* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003), 1.

<sup>187</sup> Pearce and Conger, “All Those Years Ago,” 2–3.

<sup>188</sup> Pearce and Conger, “All Those Years Ago,” 2–14.

<sup>189</sup> Sheldena Juanette Johns, “Shared Leadership: Best Practice in a Ministry Context” (EdD thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015), 27–28.

<sup>190</sup> Johns, “Shared Leadership, Best Practice in a Ministry Context.”



## Selection of Church Elders

The selection of church elders in congregational churches is essential to understanding the role elders have in the church. The selection of a qualified elder can only take place when there is a strong understanding of the role an elder has as well as the qualifications needed for serving as an elder. Gene Getz describes from his own experience how churches should examine elder candidates to discern whether or not a potential elder meets the qualifications specified in the New Testament.<sup>195</sup> Getz advises churches to determine the length of time a candidate has been a Christian and to assess other competencies, but does not provide a framework to assess these things.<sup>196</sup> Anyabwile gives excellent detail and a helpful explanation of the qualifications of an elder why they are essential to the job of an elder, but gives little detail as to how a church should engage in the selection process.<sup>197</sup> Briggs and Hyatt are more descriptive in their selective process, prescribing an intentionally long process that stresses the importance of a perpetual “cultivation” of potential elders that are being developed as leaders years before they may assume the role.<sup>198</sup> Briggs and Hyatt state that an interview process should follow the determination of the candidate's qualifications and willingness to serve, followed by a vote of the congregation.<sup>199</sup> Merkle agrees that in the congregational setting, the group must vote for its elders; however, he notes that the potential unwieldy nature of an open vote similar to the American political system.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Getz, *Elders and Leaders*, 243–45.

<sup>196</sup> Getz, *Elders and Leaders*, 246.

<sup>197</sup> Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*.

<sup>198</sup> Briggs and Hyatt, *Eldership and the Mission of God*, 87.

<sup>199</sup> Briggs and Hyatt, *Eldership and the Mission of God*, 91–94.

<sup>200</sup> Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, 201.

Merkle does state that there is wisdom in the church's current elders playing a significant role in vetting candidates for the congregation to choose.<sup>201</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The increased interest in unpaid elders in congregational churches is represented in the prescriptive literature. The New Testament provides the reason for the existence of church elders in the church, and while it is not exhaustive in its description of the role of elders, it does provide a basis for understanding the office. It is also essential to know how a church's system of polity affects the role through function and selection. The growth in the interest and use of a plurality of unpaid elders in congregational churches shows a need for understanding how unpaid elders function.

The gap in the literature is apparent when searching for empirical research on the role that unpaid elders have in Southern Baptist churches. The literature base has many prescriptive sources. However, a search through journals and books reveals extraordinarily little research in how congregational churches are applying the Scriptural counsel and prescription from scholarship into practice in their churches.

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<sup>201</sup> Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

Chapters 1 and 2 of this study identified a gap in the research literature that identifies how unpaid elders are functioning in Southern Baptist churches. The literature review found that many authors have explained Scripture's teaching on elders, but the body of literature remains prescriptive as to how unpaid elders function in Southern Baptist churches. This study was designed to add to the research body a baseline of understanding of what unpaid elders actually do in Southern Baptist churches. This chapter presents the design overview, population, sample, delimitations, research instrumentation, and research procedures for this study.

#### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this explanatory sequential, mixed-method study was to understand the role of the unpaid elder in Southern Baptist churches. The study involved collecting quantitative data first, then explaining the quantitative results with qualitative data.<sup>1</sup> In the quantitative phase of the study, survey data was collected from church elders at eligible churches to explain the roles of the unpaid elders. Unpaid and paid elders were interviewed during the qualitative phase. The qualitative data (interviews) from Phase 2 was compared with the quantitative data (surveys) from Phase 1. The study was a team study conducted by two EdD students at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

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<sup>1</sup> John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 3rd ed (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2018), 190-91.



Figure 1. Sequential explanatory mixed-methods design

### **Research Questions**

The literature review led to the development of six research questions. The research questions will include quantitative and qualitative questions.

#### **Quantitative**

1. What are the distinct roles assumed by paid and unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches?
2. What competencies do churches expect unpaid elders to have?
3. What are the formal and informal boundaries of decision making for elder teams?

#### **Qualitative**

4. What does the church do to prepare unpaid elders to serve?
5. How does the church select unpaid elders?
6. How are unpaid elders engaged in teaching and shepherding the congregation?

### **Design Overview**

The study used a mixed-method methodology to learn the roles of unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches. Mixed-method study is a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.<sup>2</sup> Mixed-methodology is used when the

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<sup>2</sup> Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 5.

combination of both methods of study provide a better explanation than either method on its own.<sup>3</sup> A team of two researchers conducted the study. The focus of this thesis was on how unpaid elders are specifically involved in the shepherding and teaching of the congregation.

The first phase was conducted by using a quantitative survey developed by the researchers to gather information from the participants regarding the role of the unpaid elders in their churches. The second phase involved both paid and unpaid elders from the participating churches. The second phase was conducted by identifying elders from the participating churches to be interviewed for an explanation of the quantitative results from the second phase. The following sections explain the purpose and design of each phase.

## **Quantitative Strand**

The research team jointly conducted the quantitative strand of the study.<sup>4</sup> The quantitative strand answered quantitative research questions.

**Phase 1.** The purpose of Phase 1 was to collect quantitative data on unpaid elders from Southern Baptist churches. The collection of data for this phase was conducted by the research team. The research team's initial plan was to send a survey to each Southern Baptist Church that completed the Annual Church Report (ACP) for 2018. The ACP identifies churches that gave to the Cooperative Program and completed the ACP. However, the research team was unable to secure the ACP data.<sup>5</sup> The research team

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<sup>3</sup> Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*.

<sup>4</sup> Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 225. Creswell and Plano-Clark state the quantitative strand of the study identifies the participants for the qualitative phase

<sup>5</sup> The research asked Lifeway Research for the names of the churches that had completed the

then decided to send a survey to random sample of SBC churches from a database created from the Southern Baptist Convention's website.<sup>6</sup> The demographic questions in the first section of the survey asked if the church fits the criteria for the study. Survey item 10 asked respondents if their church used unpaid elders. If they responded "Yes," the survey continued. If they responded "No," the survey automatically ended.<sup>7</sup>

The survey from Phase 1 consisted of mostly close-ended questions that focused on the quantitative research questions as well as open-ended questions at the end of the survey that allowed for comments from the respondents.<sup>8</sup> The respondents who were eligible and completed the survey were also eligible to participate in the second phase. The questions included demographic questions and questions that sought to find the ways unpaid elders are serving in the congregation. The surveys were conducted using the internet collection software Survey Monkey. Data analysis was conducted by compiling the survey results that pertain to the roles of shepherding and teaching by unpaid elders. The purpose of this analysis was to aid in the purposeful sampling of respondents for the qualitative phase and to determine the questions to be answered related to unpaid elders that merit further explanation within the qualitative phase.<sup>9</sup>

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ACP. The team gave sent two email and three phone calls to Lifeway, but Lifeway was unable to provide the names of the churches who had completed the ACP. Lifeway Research was unable to provide the church information due to the privacy of the churches.

<sup>6</sup> A more detailed explanation of the compilation protocol is provided in chapter 4.

<sup>7</sup> The demographic section of the survey will contain clarification and definitions of congregational polity and unpaid elders. Survey item 10, "Does your church use unpaid elders?"

<sup>8</sup> Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2016), 178.

<sup>9</sup> Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 234.

## Qualitative Strand

Each member of the research team individually conducted the second phase based on the member's area of emphasis.

**Phase 2.** The qualitative phase consisted of semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions with elders of churches from a purposeful sample from those churches that took part in the quantitative phase.<sup>10</sup> The sample selected for interviews was chosen based on the following criteria (1) completion of the survey, (2) answering "Yes" to survey item 10, (3) answering "Yes" to survey item 11,<sup>11</sup> (4) indicating time spent on teaching, oversight, or preaching on survey items 13-22. The interviews were conducted with at least one paid elder and at least one unpaid elder from each church using an interview protocol developed by the researchers.<sup>12</sup> The interview protocol was developed after the analysis of the data from the quantitative strand was completed. Zoom video conferencing software was used to conduct the interviews with the paid and unpaid elders.<sup>13</sup> The interviews were transcribed and coded for content analysis as well as the integrated analysis between the quantitative and qualitative phases.<sup>14</sup> The results of qualitative phase were themes and categories that "emerged" from the data to help in the

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<sup>10</sup> Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 191. Creswell and Plano Clark recommend for the sample for the qualitative phase to be purposely selected from the participants that represent the significant or surprising results in the quantitative

<sup>11</sup> Survey item 11, "Are you willing to participate in follow up interview regarding the role of unpaid elders in your church?"

<sup>12</sup> Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 180. Creswell and Plano Clark describe the interview protocol as the record which includes the "major open-ended" questions that will be asked of the participant

<sup>13</sup> For more information on Zoom and its capabilities see [www.zoom.us](http://www.zoom.us).

<sup>14</sup> Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 289.

understanding of the role of unpaid elders.<sup>15</sup> The survey in the quantitative phase included questions about their willingness to take part in follow-up interviews.

## **Interpretation**

The final component of the study was an interpretative phase in which the qualitative data was examined to see how it explained the quantitative data.<sup>16</sup> The purpose of this phase was to summarize the research findings from the quantitative and qualitative phases as well as answering the research questions.

## **Population**

The population to be generalized in this study was Southern Baptist churches in the United States that are led by a plurality of elders that includes unpaid elders.

## **Sample/Delimitations**

The research was delimited to Southern Baptist churches (SBC) that are listed on the SBC website, use a plurality of elders, and include unpaid elders in their plurality. The Southern Baptist Convention is the largest Protestant-evangelical denomination in the United States<sup>17</sup> and also meets the definition of evangelical as described by the National Association of Evangelicals.<sup>18</sup> Southern Baptists are also congregationally

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<sup>15</sup> Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 214–15.

<sup>16</sup> Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> *U.S. Religious Census 2010: Overview*. SBC churches make up 6.4 percent of evangelical churches in the United States.

<sup>18</sup> “What Is an Evangelical?,” National Association of Evangelicals, accessed February 7, 2019, <https://www.nae.net/what-is-an-evangelical/>. The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) define evangelicals as those who affirm the following: 1. Conversionism: the belief that lives need to be transformed through a “born-again” experience and a life long process of following Jesus 2. Activism: the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts 3. Biblicism: a high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority 4. Crucicentrism: a stress on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as making possible the redemption of humanity. Southern Baptists affirm each of these in the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000* in Section I-*Scripture*, Section IV-*Salvation*, and Section XI-*Evangelism and Missions*. For more information on how the NAE arrived at these definitions, see <http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/NAE-LifeWay-Research-Evangelical-Beliefs-Research-Definition-Methodology-and-Use.pdf>.



governed as noted by their support of the Baptist Faith and Message.<sup>19</sup> It was also delimited to churches who agreed to take part in the study. The qualitative phase was delimited to those churches that participated in the qualitative interviews. The design for this study followed four points of delimitation of churches to arrive at the research sample. The first point of delimitation took place before Phase 1. Churches that were not aligned with the SBC and were not listed on the SBC website were not included in the study. The second point of delimitation occurred when the research team drew a random sample of 5,000 churches from a database of 43,961 churches prior to conducting Phase 1. It was anticipated that these results would yield a 95 percent confidence level and a 5 percent confidence level. The third point was completed when the churches took the survey. As churches began the church demographic section on the survey, they answered whether or not the church included unpaid elders in their plurality of elders.<sup>20</sup> If the church did not include unpaid elders, then they were not included in the study.

The fourth point of delimitation took place before the qualitative Phase 2.<sup>21</sup> The selection of the participants for the qualitative Phase 2 was determined after analysis of the quantitative Phase 1.<sup>22</sup> Churches were to have indicated a desire to participate in the qualitative interviews by answering “Yes” on survey item 11. The sample for Phase 2 was purposely selected based on how the church’s experience with unpaid elders helped to explain the quantitative results.

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<sup>19</sup> See “Southern Baptist Convention: The Baptist Faith and Message,” Keith Harper and Amy Whitfield, *SBC FAQs: A Ready Reference* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2018), 8. Harper and Whitfield note that SBC churches must have “faith and practice that closely identifies with the Convention’s adopted statement of faith” in order to maintain “friendly cooperation.”

<sup>20</sup> See Footnote 6 of chapter 3 for clarification.

<sup>21</sup> Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 187. Creswell and Plano Clark suggest a small sample for the qualitative phase derived from the same sample as the quantitative phase for sequential mixed-method study

<sup>22</sup> Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 191. Creswell and Plano Clark recommend using participants in the qualitative phase that represent “statistically significant results, statistically insignificant results, outlier or extreme results” for explanation. The quantitative results to be explained was determined after analysis of the data from the quantitative Phase 2.

### **Limitations of Generalizations of Findings**

The population and sample were derived from SBC churches from the United States. The quantitative research results were limited to SBC churches in the United States that are congregationally ruled and have unpaid elders that completed the quantitative survey. The qualitative results were only generalized to those churches that took part in the qualitative phase. However, the intent was that the combined quantitative and qualitative findings may be transferable to other evangelical churches that use elder polity regardless of theological persuasion. It may also be possible for the study to be replicated for churches that are elder ruled but use unpaid elders.

### **Instrumentation**

Instrumentation for this mixed-method study used two primary instruments. The quantitative phase used a survey generated by the research team and the qualitative phase used a researcher-developed interview protocol.

### **Quantitative Survey**

The quantitative survey was designed to supply answers to Research Questions 1-3 and to supply the basis for the sample for qualitative Phase 2. The surveys also supplied the basis for the statistical analysis that informed the researchers of the outliers, surprises, or confirmations that the researchers will explore through the interviews conducted during Phase 2. The details of the survey design are in the following section.

**Design.** The survey was administered using an online delivery system Survey Monkey. Online or website administration of the survey offers several advantages.<sup>23</sup> Online surveys are helpful for getting information returned quickly and also for providing

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<sup>23</sup> Lesley Andres, *Designing & Doing Survey Research* (London: SAGE, 2012), 86.

the respondent with “skip instructions” if the question does not pertain to the respondent.<sup>24</sup>

**Content.** The first section of the survey contained demographic information about the respondent and the church. The second section of the survey asked the respondent for contact information. The following sections of the survey had questions that sought answers to the quantitative research questions about the role of unpaid elders in their church (Research Questions 1-3). Each question in the survey directly corresponded to one of the quantitative research questions.

The survey consisted of 45 questions in 6 sections. The first section was a demographic section that consisted of 9 questions related to the respondent and their church. The second section asked for contact information. Sections 4-6 contained questions directly related to how unpaid elders were serving in their churches and the authority they had.

**Administration.** Each member of the research team worked collectively in the administration of the survey. An email invitation was sent to 2,881 SBC churches. Follow-up emails were sent to those churches that did not respond within seven days. Two more follow-up emails were sent in subsequent weeks to increase the research sample.

**Validation and Reliability.** The research team sent the survey to an expert panel of pastors and practitioners for feedback and approval.<sup>25</sup> The survey was also pilot-

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<sup>24</sup> Andres, *Designing & Doing Survey Research*. The survey for this study included paid elders and unpaid elders. The survey also used “skip logic” for respondents from churches that did not have unpaid elders or did not agree to participate in the study.

<sup>25</sup> The expert panel consisted of Benjamin Merkle, Professor of New Testament and Greek at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and author of *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church*; John Hammett, Senior Professor of Systematic Theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and author of *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology*; Alexander Strauch, author of *Biblical Eldership*; and Brian Legg, author of “Transforming the Discipleship

tested with church elders who were not in the random sample developed by the research team.<sup>26</sup>

### **Qualitative Interviews**

Phase 2, or the qualitative phase, was conducted using electronic interviews with a sample of respondents from the qualitative phase as the data collection instrument. While the entire research team conducted the quantitative phase, members of the research team individually conducted interviews based on their area of emphasis. The purpose of the interviews was to collect data to answer Research Questions 4-6.

**Content.** The Phase 2 qualitative interview questions combined demographic information and open-ended questions (see appendix 4). The first section was composed of six demographic questions. The second section asked eight questions related to shepherding and teaching. Each of the open-ended questions related to one more of the research questions.

**Administration.** The timeline for each interview consisted of 6 points of contact. The following list contains all points of contact:

1. Email to the selected respondent requesting an interview
2. Follow-up phone call made to the selected respondent to schedule an appointment for the interview.
3. Email containing informed consent, interview questions, and Zoom meeting invitation.
4. Thank-you email sent with interview transcript and instructions on verification of the transcript.

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Culture in Church Revitalization: A Mixed-methods Study” (EdD Thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017).

<sup>26</sup> Leedy and Ormrod recommend asking volunteers to pilot test the survey so that the designer may address any weaknesses within the survey before it is distributed.

5. Email sent with preliminary analysis and instructions for verification.

**Validation and reliability.** The qualitative interviews used several means of assurance for validation and reliability. The questions for the interview protocol were screened by an expert panel.<sup>27</sup> The researcher also kept a research journal of activity that included times, dates, and observations. The data was also triangulated with input from the research team and the thesis supervisor. Two pilot interviews were also conducted to ensure that equipment functioned properly and to gain feedback on the interview protocol. Member checking was also used as those individuals taking part in the interviews received a copy of an interview transcript for their approval and were given five days to make corrections.<sup>28</sup> The participants also received a copy of the interpretation of the interview data and were given the opportunity to provide feedback.

Researcher bias was also clarified as a means of ensuring reliability and validity.<sup>29</sup> I acknowledged three areas that may influence interpretation of the data. The researcher is a student at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, has served as an unpaid elder at a Southern Baptist Church, and currently serves as a paid elder at a Southern Baptist Church.

### **Procedures**

The research methodology for this thesis was reviewed and approved by the ethics committee at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. A risk assessment

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<sup>27</sup> The expert panel consisted of Dr. Brian Brabhm, Professor at Baylor University and John Hammett, Senior Professor of Systematic Theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and author of *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology*.

<sup>28</sup> John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, Fourth edition (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2018), 261.

<sup>29</sup> Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 261. Creswell and Poth recommend clarifying the researcher's experiences and biases they may bring to the project so that a reader "understands the position from which the researcher undertakes the inquiry."

profile was created for research involving human subjects and all interview subjects were issued an informed consent statement.

### **Profile of the Current Study**

The study used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods methodology to determine what roles unpaid elders play in Southern Baptist churches.<sup>30</sup> The current study was intended to gain an understanding of the role of unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches. The quantitative knowledge gained through surveys was further explained by qualitative interviews, thus providing the researchers with a more robust understanding of the role of unpaid elders.

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<sup>30</sup> Creswell and Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 7–8. Creswell and Plano Clark explain that the decision to use mixed-methods is based upon the research problem. Creswell and Plano Clark state that the limitations of quantitative and qualitative research on their own may be “offset” by combining the strength of both approaches.

## CHAPTER 4

### ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this sequential, explanatory mixed-method study was to understand the role of the unpaid elder in Southern Baptist churches. This chapter provides detailed descriptions of the research protocols, the demographics of the research participants, and explanations of the quantitative and qualitative phases. The strengths and weaknesses of the research design will be discussed, as well.

#### **Compilation Protocols**

The research design of this sequential explanatory mixed-methods study was carried out in two distinct phases. Phase 1 data collection began by sending surveys to a random sample of Southern Baptist churches available on the Southern Baptist Convention's website listing of Southern Baptist churches.<sup>1</sup> The survey was sent to 2,881 Southern Baptist churches. The survey consisted of 45 questions that included 10 demographic questions and questions specific to whether or not the church used unpaid elders in their church leadership. If the church answered "No," the survey ended. If the church answered "Yes," the survey continued and asked specific questions about whether or not the church would be willing to participate in a Phase 2 interview. All churches chosen for the qualitative Phase 2 met the following criteria: (1) a general requirement of completing the survey, (2) had unpaid elders in their leadership, (3) answered all open-ended questions on the survey pertaining to church elders, (4) and chose teaching in their survey items 13-22. A total of 5 churches and 9 elders were selected for the qualitative

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<sup>1</sup> The website of the Southern Baptist Convention is [www.sbc.net](http://www.sbc.net).

Phase 2. The interviews were conducted over Zoom. The 9 interviews were transcribed and coded using Dedoose software. The codes were then analyzed to understand the roles that unpaid elders play in Southern Baptist churches.

### **Phase 1**

Requests were made to Lifeway Research for the data from the Annual Church Profile (ACP). Lifeway denied each request due to the privacy concerns of the churches that had completed the ACP. In response, the research team decided to use a different method to compile the data. The research team created a database of Southern Baptist churches using information from the Southern Baptist Convention website. The database consisted of 43,961 Southern Baptist churches. The database was randomized and the first 5,000 churches were pursued for the initial sample. The research team sought to confirm contact information for the 5,000 churches using web searches and Facebook. The contact information included pastors, church assistants, and information email addresses found on church websites. The research team was able to confirm contact information for 2,347 churches and sent 2,881 total survey invitations. Individual email invitations were issued to 2,347 individuals to complete the survey were sent using Survey Monkey.<sup>2</sup> Facebook was used to send 358 invitations, and 176 email invitations were sent using general information emails found on church websites.<sup>3</sup> Two email reminders were sent in the following weeks to encourage more participation. The research team also entered respondents into a drawing for an Amazon gift card if the respondent completed the survey and agreed to be considered for an interview for Phase 2.

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<sup>2</sup> All surveys were conducted using Survey Monkey. If the team found an individual email address for a pastor, church staff, or information it was loaded into Survey Monkey for distribution. A link to the survey from Survey Monkey was sent through Facebook or the church website information portal.

<sup>3</sup> This method was utilized if there was no other option than to contact the church through a contact portal found on the church's website.



The survey asked churches if they had unpaid elders as part of their church polity. If the church answered “Yes,” then they were able to continue the rest of the survey. If the church responded “No,” then the survey ended. Initially, 307 churches completed the survey, with 125 of those churches having unpaid elders. There was a small representation of unpaid elders having completed the surveys on behalf of the church. The research team then contacted the elders who had completed the surveys and asked them to send the survey to the unpaid elders in their churches. Asking the respondents to send the survey to his unpaid elders resulted in a final number of 332 completed responses, and 146 surveys completed by elders at churches with unpaid elders, which yielded an 8.11 confidence interval.

## **Phase 2**

The qualitative interviews began with 9 interviews of paid and unpaid elders from 5 churches.<sup>4</sup> The churches were purposely selected from the survey respondents who indicated a willingness in the survey to participate in a follow-up interview.<sup>5</sup> An email invitation was sent to 6 churches representing diverse backgrounds and locations according to the Phase 2 selection criteria. Initially, one paid elder responded to the email invitation, and an interview appointment was secured. Contact information for an unpaid elder also resulted in a secured interview appointment. Follow-up phone calls were made to the other churches, which resulted in securing three more interview appointments (2 with paid elders, 1 with an unpaid elder). Of the initial invitations to interview, one

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<sup>4</sup> John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 3rd ed (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2018), 190-91. Creswell and Plano Clark state that the qualitative phase should be made up of those who participated directly in the quantitative phase as the purpose of the qualitative phase is to help explain the findings in the quantitative phase. However, there were few pairs of paid and unpaid elders who completed the survey. The majority of those completing the survey were paid elders. Therefore, a request was made in the initial contact for both a paid elder and unpaid elder to participate in the interview, even if one did not complete the quantitative survey as the population being reached was churches, not elders.

<sup>5</sup> Chosen participants answered “Yes” to survey item 11, “Are you willing to participate in a follow-up interview regarding the role of the unpaid elder in your church?”

church declined, and three more never responded to the email invitation, follow up emails, or voicemails left by the researcher. Three more invitations were sent to eligible churches to secure the desired number of churches for Phase 2. The invitations resulted in four more interviews (2 with paid elders and 2 with unpaid elders). One unpaid elder did not respond to an initial email, follow-up email, or voicemail requests for an interview. A total of 9 interviews were secured for the study. A paid and unpaid elder was interviewed at 4 churches, while only a paid elder was interviewed at one church (church 3).

Upon scheduling the interview, each interviewee received an email with the informed consent form (see appendix 3) and the interview questions (see appendix 4).

All 9 interviews were conducted using Zoom Meeting software. Zoom software provided a simple means of scheduling as well as multiple means of access to the online meeting.<sup>7</sup> All 9 interviews were conducted using a video call with the video option enabled and were recorded with the participant's knowledge by the Zoom conferencing software. The interviews lasted between 27 and 92 minutes.<sup>8</sup> The interviews were transcribed using Dedoose software.<sup>9</sup>

Prior to the interviews with the paid and unpaid elders, pilot interviews were conducted with paid and unpaid elders that were not a part of the Phase 2 sample. Pilot testing allowed for testing of the interview questions and the usability of the Zoom software. It also gave the researcher a reasonable expectation for transcription time and time needed for member testing to ensure validity.

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<sup>7</sup> Zoom provides a URL address to access the meeting "room" and a phone number for the participant to call to participate with audio only.

<sup>8</sup> The interview had two parts: demographic questions and questions dealing specifically with the role of the unpaid elder in the church. Six hours of audio were recorded, transcribed, and coded. However, due to the private nature of the information within the interviews the full transcriptions were not included with this thesis. Rather, summaries of responses and themes from the interviews are used. Quotes from these interviews are included when deemed necessary as it impacts research findings. See appendix 4 for the interview questions. Any information that may potentially identify a respondent is not included.

<sup>9</sup> Dedoose software is designed to aid researchers in the analysis of qualitative and mixed-methods research. For more information on Dedoose, see [www.dedoose.com](http://www.dedoose.com).

Following interviews and transcription, the participants were emailed a copy of the transcription for validation. Each participant was given five calendar days to respond with any edits or corrections. Two participants made edits to the transcript of their interviews. The transcripts were then coded and analyzed using the research questions and precedent literature using Dedoose software. The tentative analyses were sent to the participants. The participants were given five calendar days to respond with any comments or feedback.

### **Findings**

The research findings for Phases 1 and 2 are reported below. Phase 1 shows the results of the quantitative survey. Phase 2 shows the results from qualitative interviews with purposely selected elders focusing on their experiences as paid and unpaid elders.

#### **Phase 1**

Phase 1 consisted of a survey sent to a random sample of Southern Baptist churches. The survey instrument covered three sections of emphasis for unpaid elders—roles, skills and competencies, and decision making.<sup>10</sup>

**Demographics.** All of the surveys were completed by pastors, while over 50 percent of the completed surveys were completed by either a Senior or Lead Pastor (see table 1).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Not all respondents answered each question in the Phase 1 survey. The statistics represented in the tables are accurate based on the number of respondents.

<sup>11</sup> The cover letter on the invitation for the survey asked that if the recipient was not an elder or pastor to please send the survey to a pastor or elder at the church.

Table 1. Respondents' current roles<sup>12</sup>

	Number of Respondents	Respondents' Current Role %
Pastor	72	49.32
Senior Pastor	42	28.77
Lead Pastor	32	21.92

In survey item 2, respondents were asked how long they had been in their current position. Almost 40 percent of the respondents have been in their role less than five years, while just below 5 percent indicated that they had served in their current position for 16-20 years (see table 2).

Table 2. Length of tenure<sup>13</sup>

Length of Tenure	Respondents Length of Tenure %
Less Than Five Years	39.04
5-10 years	26.03
11-15 years	18.49
16-20 years	4.79
Longer than 20 years	11.64

Survey item 4 asked for the respondent's highest level of education. Nearly 41 percent of respondents shared that they had attained a Master's degree, while almost 9 percent had no education beyond a High School diploma (see table 3).

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<sup>12</sup> Survey item 1 was the Agreement to Participate which may be viewed in appendix 2. Survey item 2, "What is your current role with your church: Pastor, Senior Pastor, Lead Pastor, Other."

<sup>13</sup> Survey item 3, "How long have you been in your current position: Less than Five Years, 5-10 Years, 11-15 Years, 16-20 Years, Longer than 20 Years."

Table 3. Level of education<sup>14</sup>

Level of Education	Respondent Level of Education %
High School Diploma	8.97
Associate degree	6.21
Bachelor's Degree	22.07
Master's Degree	40.69
Doctoral Degree	22.07

Survey item 5 asked the respondents to indicate their level of formal ministry training. Over half of the respondents (58.9%) shared that they had ministry training at the Seminary level, while almost 22 percent had no formal ministry training (see table 4).

Table 4. Formal ministry training<sup>15</sup>

Level of Ministry Training	Respondent's Ministry Training %
No formal ministry training	21.92
Bible college	20.55
Seminary certificate	4.79
Seminary degree	58.90
Other	13.70

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<sup>14</sup> Survey item 4, “What is the highest level of education that you have attained: High School diploma, Bachelor’s Degree, Master’s Degree, Doctoral Degree.”

<sup>15</sup> Survey item 5, “What formal ministry training have you had? Check all that apply: No formal ministry training, Bible College, Seminary certificate, Seminary degree, other.”

Table 5. Average worship attendance<sup>16</sup>

Attendance	Respondents' Average Worship Attendance %
50 or Less	16.44
51-100	23.29
101-200	21.92
201-300	13.70
301-400	6.85
401-500	5.48
501 +	12.33

Survey item 6 asked respondents to state their average worship attendance. The majority of churches (61.65%) that responded to the survey answered that they had averaged fewer than 200 people for worship (see table 5).

Survey item 7 asked respondents to identify their church's context. 43.45 percent of churches reported that their context was suburban, while only 22.07 percent of churches said that their context was urban (see table 6). Almost 35 percent of the respondents said that their church context was rural.

Survey item 8 asked for the respondent whether their position was paid or unpaid. Over three-quarters of the respondents identified their role as paid (76.03%), while almost 24 percent of respondents were unpaid (see table 7).

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<sup>16</sup> Survey item 6, "What is your church's average worship attendance: 50 or less, 51-100, 101-200, 201-300, 301-400, 401-500, 501+."

Table 6. Church context<sup>18</sup>

	Respondents' Ministry Context %
Rural	34.48
Suburban	43.45
Urban	22.07

Table 7. Paid or unpaid<sup>19</sup>

	Respondent's Paid or Unpaid %
Paid	76.03
Unpaid	23.97

**Elder roles.** Survey items 13 through 22 focused on the roles that unpaid elders play in the respondent's churches (see table 8). Respondents were only able to answer these survey items if they answered "Yes" to survey item 10.<sup>20</sup> Respondents were asked to respond with the number of hours per week that the unpaid elders in their church spent on a particular task or role.<sup>21</sup> The highest percentages were recorded in the 0-5

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<sup>18</sup> Survey item 7, "Your church context is best described as: rural, suburban, urban."

<sup>19</sup> Survey item 8, "Is your position paid or unpaid?"

<sup>20</sup> Survey item 10, "Does your church use unpaid or lay elders?"

<sup>21</sup> The question that preceded survey items 13-28, "We understand that each individual is uniquely gifted and has a unique set of training and experiences. Therefore, not all unpaid elders will perform all the duties we are asking about. In the blanks below, please enter the approximate number of hours an unpaid elder in your church spends in an average week performing the duty listed."

hours per week category for each function or task. The highest percentage of respondents were on “elder meetings,” “members meetings,” “counseling congregants,” and “managing church property.” Ninety-eight percent of respondents stated that their elders spent 0-5 hours per week on “elders meetings,” while 96.77 percent of respondents said that their unpaid elders spend 0-5 hours per week on “members meetings.” Ninety-three percent of respondents stated that their unpaid elders spend 0-5 hours per week “counseling congregants.”

The highest percentages in the 6-10 hour per week category were “praying for congregants,” “oversight of ministry areas,” “preaching/preparation to preach,” “teaching individuals,” and “teaching groups.” A little more than 35 percent of respondents indicated that their unpaid elders spend 6-10 hours per week teaching groups. The next highest was the “teaching/preparing to individuals,” as 16.26 percent of respondents answered that their unpaid elders spend 6-10 hours per week on this task. Fifteen percent of respondents indicated that their unpaid elders spend 6-10 hours per week on “oversight of ministry areas.” In comparison, 15.32 percent of respondents’ unpaid elders spend 6-10 hours per week “preaching or preparing to preach.”

Table 8. Hours per week unpaid elders

Role/Task	0-5 Hours Per Week	6-10 Hours Per Week	11-15 Hours Per Week	More than 15 Hours Per Week
Praying for Congregants	82.11	15.45	2.44	0.00
Counseling Congregants	93.50	5.69	0.81	0.00
Visiting	89.52	8.06	0.81	1.61



Role/Task	0-5 Hours Per Week	6-10 Hours Per Week	11-15 Hours Per Week	More than 15 Hours Per Week
Oversight of Ministry Areas	73.39	15.32	6.45	4.84
Evangelism	87.90	9.68	0.81	1.61
Benevolence	87.90	9.68	1.61	0.81
Oversight of Finance	89.52	8.87	1.61	0.00
Preaching	75.00	15.32	7.26	2.42
Teaching Individuals	78.86	16.26	3.25	1.63
Teaching Groups	61.29	32.26	4.03	2.42
Elder Meetings	98.39	1.61	0.00	0.00
Members Meetings	96.77	3.23	0.00	0.00
Managing Church Property	91.94	5.65	1.61	0.81

Note: All numbers presented as a percentage.

The highest percentages of respondents in the 11-15 hour per week category were found in the “preaching,” “oversight of ministry area,” and “teaching groups.” Seven percent of respondents said that their unpaid elders spend 11-15 hours per week on preaching or preparing to preach, and 6.45 percent of respondents said that their unpaid elders spend 11-15 hours per week on ministry oversight. Four percent of respondents said that their unpaid elders spend 11-15 hours per week teaching/preparing to teach groups. The highest percentages of responses in the “more than 15 hours per week” were

in the “oversight of ministry area,” “preaching/preparing to preach,” and “teaching/preparing to teach groups.”

Survey item 26 was an open-ended item that asked the respondents to list any tasks that were not previously addressed (see table 9). Various themes emerged from the respondents. The three most frequent responses were: oversight/administration (16.36 percent), pastoral care (14.55 percent), and strategy/vision (12.73 percent). The majority of the themes that emerged from the open-ended question dealt with ministry roles of the unpaid elder (worship, missions, pastoral care), while a few seem to address the administrative function of the unpaid elders (oversight, staff accountability, and facilities maintenance).

Table 9. Tasks not previously addressed in the survey<sup>22</sup>

Theme	Response Frequency %
Oversight/administration	16.36
Pastoral Care	14.55
Strategy/Vision	12.73
Staff Accountability/Support	10.91
Production	9.09
Facilities Maintenance	7.27
Missions and outreach	7.27
Music/Worship	5.45
Guest Services	5.45
New Member Training	3.64

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<sup>22</sup> Survey item 26, “Please list any tasks the unpaid elders in your church perform that have not already been addressed by this survey (even if you do not perform them).”

Survey item 27 asked if there were particular Scripture passages that informed how the church decided upon roles for their unpaid elders (see table 10).

Table 10. Scripture for assigning roles<sup>23</sup>

Passage (Book and Chapter)	Frequency of Occurrence %
1 Tim 3	20.08
Titus 1	17.57
1 Peter 5	12.13
Acts 20	8.37
Heb 13:17	4.18
1 Tim 5	3.77
Ephesians 4	3.77
James 5	2.93
Acts 6	2.93
Acts 14	2.51
All Others (12 passages with less than 2%)	12

The respondents were asked to list any Scripture references used in assigning roles to unpaid elders. The three passages with the highest percentage of frequency were 1 Tim 3 (20.08 percent), Titus 1 (17.57 percent), and 1 Peter 5 (12.13 percent).

**Elder competencies and skills.** Survey items 28-32 asked the respondents to indicate their level of agreement that their unpaid elder must possess a particular

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<sup>23</sup> Survey item 27, “Did your church use Scripture when assigning roles to your elder body? If so, which passages?”

competence or skill (see table 11). All respondents indicated a high level of agreement that their unpaid elders should have specific competency or skill. Almost 62 percent strongly agreed that their unpaid elders must possess biblical and theological knowledge, while 36.59 percent agreed (97.38 percent total respondents either strongly agree or agree). The second competency or skill churches desired their unpaid elders to possess was “strong leadership skills” (95.16 percent strongly agree or agree). The third highest competency or skill was “teaching skills,” as 88.62 percent strongly agreed or agreed that their unpaid else should possess this skill. “Financial management” had the highest percentage of disagree or strongly disagree. Over a quarter of respondents (26.62 percent) either disagreed or strongly disagreed they their unpaid elders have financial acumen.

Table 11. Elder competencies and skills

Competence/Skill	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total SA and A
Financial Mgt. Skills	0.81	25.81	58.87	14.52	73.39
Biblical/Theological Knowledge	0.00	1.63	36.59	61.79	97.38
Skilled in Evangelism	0.81	11.38	65.85	21.95	87.80
Strong Leadership Skills	0.0	4.84	63.71	31.45	95.16
Teaching Skills	0.00	11.38	59.35	29.27	88.62

Survey items 33-37 asked respondents to rate the importance of individual competencies on a scale of 1 to 10 (see table 12).<sup>24</sup> The skill that received the highest

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<sup>24</sup> Survey items 33-37, “Indicate how important each competency is for lay or unpaid elders in

rating was “theological acumen,” which had an average rating of 8 on the scale. The second highest skill for unpaid elders was “teaching skill,” which had an average of 7.2. The lowest rated skill was “business management acumen,” which affirms the data derived from the survey items 28-32 in which financial management skills had the highest level of “disagree” or “strongly disagree.”

Table 12. Importance of each skill

Competency/Skill	Average Rating
Theological Acumen	8.0
Teaching Skill	7.2
Governance Skill	6.6
Evangelistic Skill	6.3
Business Management Acumen	5.4

**Elder decision making.** Survey items 38-45 asked respondents to share information about the decision-making abilities of unpaid elders within the elder body. Survey items 38-40 asked the respondents to indicate their level of agreement with whether or not their unpaid elders have the same, less, or more decision-making ability within the elder body.

Over three-quarters of respondents (80.18 percent) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that their paid elders and unpaid elders have an equal say in

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your church by sliding the dot to the appropriate number. (1 represents minimally important and 10 represents highly important.)”

elder decisions (see table 13). Almost 20 percent agreed or strongly agreed that their elders have an equal say in elder decisions.

Table 13. All elders have equal say in elder decisions<sup>25</sup>

Level of Agreement	Respondent Level of Agreement %
Strongly Agree	4.50
Agree	15.32
Total A/SA	19.82
Disagree	50.45
Strongly Disagree	29.73
Total D/SD	80.18

Nearly 80 percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that their paid elders have a more significant say in elder decisions, while only 21 percent agreed or strongly agreed (see table 14).

Table 14. Paid elders have greater say in decisions<sup>26</sup>

Level of Agreement	Respondent Level of Agreement %
Strongly Agree	5.21
Agree	15.63
Total A/SA	20.84

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<sup>25</sup> Survey item 38, “The paid elders and unpaid elders in our church have equal say in elder decisions.”

<sup>26</sup> Survey item 39, “The paid elders in our church have greater say in elder decisions.”

Level of Agreement	Respondent Level of Agreement %
Disagree	48.96
Strongly Disagree	30.21
Total D/SD	79.17

Greater than 84 percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that their unpaid elders have more significant say in decisions, while nearly 16 percent agreed or strongly agreed (see table 15).

Table 15. Unpaid elders have greater say in elder decisions<sup>27</sup>

Level of Agreement	Respondent Level of Agreement %
Strongly Agree	3.54
Agree	12.39
Total A/SA	15.39
Disagree	51.33
Strongly Disagree	32.74
Total D/SD	84.07

Survey item 41 asked respondents if the church had formal policies regarding the decision-making process for their elders. Almost three-quarters of respondents (74.14 percent) answered that their church had such policies, while 25 percent shared that their church did not have such policies (see table 16).

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<sup>27</sup> Survey item 40, “The unpaid elders in our church have greater say in elder decisions.”

Table 16. Church has policies that govern the decision-making<sup>28</sup>

Level of Agreement	Respondent Level of Agreement %
Yes	74.14
No	25.00
Don't Know	0.86

Survey item 42 asked if the churches had articles in their church constitution regulating elder decision making (see table 17). Over half of the churches (54.39 percent) responded that their constitution or bylaws contained restrictions on decision making for paid elders, and 42.98 percent said that their constitution or bylaws did not have regulations.

Table 17. Constitution has restrictions on elder decision making<sup>29</sup>

Level of Agreement	Respondent Level of Agreement %
Yes	54.39
No	42.98
Don't Know	2.63

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<sup>28</sup> Survey item 41, “Our church has policies that govern the decision-making process of our church elders.”

<sup>29</sup> Survey item 42, “Our church constitution or by-laws contain restrictions on decision making for paid elders.”



Survey item 43 asked respondents to list any formal boundaries to their decision-making process for their church elders (see table 18).<sup>30</sup>

Table 18. Policies on elder decision making

Theme	Frequency of Occurrences %
Unanimous Vote Required	23.53
Majority Unpaid Elders	23.53
Division of Responsibility	17.65
Unpaid serve as Checks and Balances	11.76
Chairman Responsibility	5.88
Unpaid Discuss Staff Payment	5.88
Paid Elder breaks ties	5.88
Total Responses	17

The most common policies were a requirement of a unanimous vote among the church elders as well as a requirement of a majority of unpaid elders within the elder body. Both of these responses were given by 23.53 percent of the respondents.

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<sup>30</sup> Survey item 43 was an open-ended item that did not require a response. Survey item 43, “If your church has written policies regarding the decision-making abilities of unpaid and paid elders, please briefly describe them below.”

Table 19. Decisions that require a church vote<sup>31</sup>

Theme	Frequency of Occurrence %
Budget	19.05
Staffing	19.05
Finances	10.32
Elders	9.92
Membership matters	9.13
Property	8.73
Changes to constitution	4.37
Officers	3.97
Deacons	3.57
Debt	2.78
Elder Discretion	1.98
Major Changes	1.59
Dissolve church	1.19
Responses with less than 1%	8
Total Responses	252

Survey item 44 asked the respondents to identify the decisions that required a vote by the congregation (see table 19). The answers that appeared the most frequently were budget and staffing decisions. Budget and staffing both received 19.05 percent of responses. Almost 10 percent of churches required a church vote when affirming new church elders.

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<sup>31</sup> Survey items 44 and 45 were open-ended items that did not require a response. Survey item 44, “Please list the decisions the church votes on.”

Survey item 45 asked the respondents to list the decisions delegated to the elder body. Twelve percent answered that all decisions not covered in item 44 were left to the elders. A little over 10 percent answered that administrative decisions were left to the elders.

Table 20. Decisions delegated to the elder body<sup>32</sup>

Theme	Frequency of Occurrence %
Everything else (not covered in question 44)	12.00
Administrative	10.22
Financial (usually with limits)	9.78
Vision	8.44
Overall Leadership	8.00
Personnel	8.00
Preaching/Teaching	5.78
Pastoral care/member care	5.33
Selection/Removal of elders	4.00
Day to day decisions	4.00
Church discipline	4.00
Ministry	3.56
Programming/Schedule	3.56
Doctrine/theology	3.56
Spiritual decisions	3.11
All others (7 items with less than 2%)	7

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<sup>32</sup> Survey item 45, "Please list the decisions delegated to the elder body."

Theme	Frequency of Occurrence %
Total Answers	225

## Phase 2

Five paid elders and 4 unpaid elders participated in the Phase 2 interviews. The participants were encouraged to be candid, and the participants were assured that neither they nor their churches would be identified with their responses. The interviews were designed to seek further explanation and clarification of the information gathered in the Phase 1 survey.

**Demographics.** The average time in ministry among the interviewees was 12.89 years, and their average length of tenure in their current position was 9.67 years. The interviewees ranged in age from 33 to 67 years old (see table 21).

Table 21. Phase 2 elder age and experience<sup>33</sup>

	Minimum	Maximum	Range	Mean	Median
Ministry Experience	33	36	34	12.89	10
Tenure in Position	2	28	26	9.67	6
Age	33	67	34	48.78	44

Note: All numbers are in years.

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<sup>33</sup> Demographic interview Item 2, “How many years have you been in ministry as a paid/unpaid elder?” Demographic interview Item 3, “How many years have you served in your current role?” Demographic interview Item 5, “What is your current age?”

Over half of the interviewees held graduate degrees (see table 22). Two of the participants were pursuing doctoral degrees. One elder was pursuing a Doctor of Ministry while another elder was pursuing a PhD.

Table 22. Phase 2 elder level of education<sup>34</sup>

Education Level	Count	Percentage %
Bachelors	4	44
Masters	3	33
Doctoral	2	22

The churches selected for Phase 2 represented diverse sizes and regions of the United States (see table 23). However, due to challenges in securing interview participants, the ministry contexts were not as diverse as desired.

Table 23. Phase 2 church participation profile.<sup>35</sup>

ID	State	Region	Attendance Survey	Attendance/Interview	Context
1	TX	West South Central	501 +	2,000	Urban
2	LA	West South Central	51-100	85-105	Urban
3	ME	New England	50 or Less	30-50	Urban
4	NY	Middle Atlantic	101-200	130-230	Rural
5	WI	East North Central	101-200	130	Rural

<sup>34</sup> Demographic interview Item 4, “Describe your training and educational background.”

<sup>35</sup> Demographic interview Item 1, “Describe your ministry context (type of community).”  
Demographic interview Item 6, “Describe your church (size, demographics, etc.).”

The only two contexts from the Phase 1 survey represented in Phase 2 are “rural” and “urban,” as no churches classified as “suburban” are in the Phase 2 interviews.<sup>36</sup> The churches in Phase 2 represent four regions in the United States, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau.<sup>37</sup> The US Census Bureau regions represented are New England, West South Central, Middle Atlantic, and East North Central.

It is also important to note the size and makeup of the elder teams at each church. Church one had 4 paid elders and 6 unpaid elders. Church two had 1 paid elder and three unpaid elders. Church three had 1 paid elder and 3 unpaid elders. Church four had 1 paid elder and 4 unpaid elders. Church five had 1 paid elder and 3 unpaid elders.

Table 24. Elder team make-up

Church	Paid Elders	Unpaid Elders
1	4	6
2	1	3
3	1	3
4	1	4
5	1	3

The elder portion of the interviews revealed several themes related to the role of the unpaid elder. The questions were designed to specifically inform themes related to

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<sup>36</sup> Invitations to interview were sent to churches in each ministry context from the Phase 1 survey. However, no churches classified as suburban agreed to participate. These classifications were also self-reported, and no guidelines were given in the survey items as to what constitutes rural, urban, or suburban. Invitations were also sent to churches in each of the US Census regions. However, churches in the regions not represented in the sample either decline to participate or did not respond to the invitation.

<sup>37</sup> “2010 U.S. Census Regions and Divisions of the United States,” United States Census Bureau, last modified August 20, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/geographies/reference-maps/2010/geo/2010-census-regions-and-divisions-of-the-united-states.html>.

shepherding, teaching, assessment, and selection. Coding the data generated the themes for analysis.<sup>38</sup> Coding was based on the frequency of responses in the data. Major themes were then developed from the analysis. The following discussion will explore the findings for each theme.<sup>39</sup>

**Shepherding.** The elders were asked to share their understanding of how an unpaid elder is to shepherd in the church.<sup>40</sup> All nine elders shared that they saw no difference in how an unpaid elder is to shepherd when compared to a paid elder. Paid elder 4 stated that “their [unpaid elders] job is my job. I get paid to do it, but their job is exactly the same.”<sup>41</sup> The unpaid elders had the same perspective. Unpaid elder 2 said, “I think as far as generally shepherding there’s not a difference...there’s not a fundamental difference in the way that an unpaid elder versus a paid elder shepherds.”<sup>42</sup> However, all nine elders interviewed also acknowledged that one thing that distinguishes shepherding between paid and unpaid elders is the time available to shepherd. All 9 revealed that there is a greater expectation on the paid elder to do more shepherding because it is the paid elder’s full-time job. Paid elder 1 also shared that there is a perception among their church that “the pastor or the paid people when it gets really bad, those are the ones that are going to show up when it is really serious.”<sup>43</sup> Unpaid elder 4 also stated that the

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<sup>38</sup> John W. Creswell and Vicki L. Plano Clark, *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2018), 212–13.

<sup>39</sup> All Phase 2 interview questions will be only be annotated by using the ID and tag “unpaid elder” or “paid elder” randomly assigned in table 22.

<sup>40</sup> Elder interview item 7, “Describe your understanding of how an unpaid elder is to shepherd. Is this any different from a paid elder in your church? In what ways are you/your unpaid elders engaged in shepherding in your church?”

<sup>41</sup> Paid elder 4, interview by author, Zoom video conference, August 24, 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Unpaid elder 2, interview by author, Zoom video conference, August 24, 2020. Both the paid elder 2 and unpaid elder 2 also referred to all elders in their church as “pastor.” While they did not say this was their practice, throughout their interviews they referred to both paid and unpaid elders as pastors. They currently only have one paid elder at their church.

<sup>43</sup> Paid elder 1, interview with the author, Zoom video conference, August 17, 2020.

church often looks to their paid elder for shepherding as that is “what he [paid elder] went to seminary for.”<sup>44</sup>

The elders were also asked to share the specific ways that the unpaid elders were shepherding in their church. Teaching was the most common answer as to how elders were shepherding. The ways unpaid elders were teaching will be further explored in the next section. Another theme that arose in unpaid elder shepherding was the preaching ministry of the church. Almost 78 percent (7 of 9) of the elders answered that their unpaid elders preach regularly in their church, while just over 22 percent of the elders shared their elders did not preach regularly. However, unpaid elder 1 shared that the elder body at church 1 was beginning to reconsider the idea based on a book study they had recently completed in which the author stated that elders needed to have the ability to preach.<sup>45</sup>

Table 25. Ways unpaid elder are shepherding

Shepherding Engagement	Frequency of Response
Teaching	9
Preaching	7
Oversight	7
Member Care	6
Church Discipline	3

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<sup>44</sup> Unpaid elder 4, interview with the author, Zoom video conference, August 26, 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Unpaid elder 1, interview with the author, Zoom video conference, August 26, 2020. The book that elder was referring to was *Church Elders* by Jeramie Rinne.



Most of the elders (5 of 9) did not have a particular amount of time or instances in which an unpaid elder preached. The elders stated that their unpaid elders stepped in to provide pulpit supply when the paid elder was away. Paid elder 2 and unpaid elder 2 were the only elders that codified the expectation of their unpaid elders preaching. They stated that the paid elder at church 2 was expected to preach “65 percent of the time” while the unpaid elders would preach the other 35 percent of the time.<sup>46</sup> Unpaid elder 2 stated that their elder body believed it was important for unpaid elders to preach so that the congregation was able to view the unpaid elders as “pastors” and “shepherds.”<sup>47</sup> An interesting finding was that the unpaid elders at church 2 were also providing pulpit supply to other Southern Baptist churches in their area.<sup>48</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic also forced their worship services to be moved to the afternoon, which allowed elders to preach at another church in the morning and then attend their regular worship service at church 2 in the afternoon.<sup>49</sup>

The theme of church oversight was mentioned by 7 of the 9 elders interviewed. Unpaid elder 5 stated that the unpaid elders were responsible for making sure that sound doctrine was being preached from the pulpit and taught in discipleship ministries.<sup>50</sup> Paid elder 2 also noted that the congregation entrusts the elder body with the ability to make decisions about the church's ministry and that they have the responsibility to steward ministry resources.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Paid elder 2, interview with the author, Zoom video conference, August 18, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Unpaid elder 2, interview.

<sup>48</sup> Paid elder 2, interview. Southern Baptist churches participate

<sup>49</sup> Paid elder 2, interview.

<sup>50</sup> Unpaid elder 5, interview with the author, Zoom video conference, August 24, 2020.

<sup>51</sup> Paid elder 2, interview.

Member care was another theme that arose during the elder interviews. Five of the 9 elders suggested that member care was a large part of how unpaid elders shepherd. Both elders at church 1 noted that the unpaid elders often visit homebound church members and that each Sunday, they are available for anointing for healing during their worship services.<sup>52</sup> Paid elder 1 noted that a large part of their elders' meetings was discussion of congregational needs and the unpaid elders act as a conduit of information about those needs to the rest of the elder body.<sup>53</sup> Paid elder 2 also acknowledged the impossibility of knowing every need in the congregation, so he relied on unpaid elders to inform him of needs and also help him in addressing the needs of the congregation.<sup>54</sup> One of the interesting discussions in this data was how member care had changed during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>55</sup> Six of the 9 elders interviewed stated that the elder body had become more intentional in communication and shepherding due to the church's inability to gather during the pandemic. Each elder described a process by which the leadership divided the membership of their church into different groups and assigned a church leader to follow-up with the group weekly. Unpaid elder 4 found this to very helpful for him as a shepherd since it allowed him to have extended shepherding and encouraging conversations with church members that he had not known well previously.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Paid elder 1, interview. Unpaid elder 2, interview. These are the only elders that mentioned anointing with oil and prayer for healing.

<sup>53</sup> Paid elder 1, interview.

<sup>54</sup> Paid elder 2, interview.

<sup>55</sup> During March of 2020, a global pandemic was declared due to sickness called COVID-19 that was caused by the novel corona virus. Churches, schools, and business were shutdown to prevent the spread of the virus. By August of 2020, some of these entities were beginning to reopen, while others remained closed per state and local regulations.

<sup>56</sup> Unpaid elder 4, interview. The elder stated that "A number times where I'd be on the phone for an hour just talking to somebody. Sometimes it was just life, you know they were just talking about something. It was funny, thing is there were people who I can't wait till we get back to being around each other 'cause there's people who I've never really actually connected with on a Sunday morning other than a "hi how you doing" who I'm talking to for quite a while and found out we've got a lot more in common. So that, it was challenging you know because we do want that care but that was one of the things that I felt made a big difference."

The interviewees were also asked about the time the unpaid elders spent on shepherding tasks based on their responses to the Phase 1 survey items 13-22.<sup>57</sup> The quantitative survey found that the unpaid elders in most churches spent 0-5 hours per week on elder tasks. During the interviews, 8 of the 9 elders stated that there were no time expectations placed explicitly on the unpaid elders for shepherding or doing elder work. Paid elder 1 noted that the question would have been answered differently two years before the interview as the church was then going through difficult situations, but then he felt that the Lord had them in a time of “peace” currently.<sup>58</sup> Unpaid elder 2 echoed that sentiment by acknowledging that they measure time spent during seasons of the church life.<sup>59</sup> Paid elder 3 shared that he felt that the Lord was gracious in balancing the challenges that cropped up week-to-week.<sup>60</sup> Paid elder 3 simply stated the call of an elder was to “feed the sheep,” and so the necessary time needed to be spent, whatever that amount of time may be.<sup>61</sup> The only elder to state an expectation was paid elder 4, who said that he expected the unpaid elders to put in the amount of time collectively into shepherding as he puts in individually.<sup>62</sup>

**Teaching.** Each elder was asked to describe his understanding of how an unpaid elder is to teach.<sup>63</sup> All 9 elders agreed that unpaid elders should and must teach

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<sup>57</sup> Elder interview item 9, “You indicated in the survey items 13-22 that the unpaid elders in your church spend more/less time (preaching/teaching/visiting/ministry oversight). Is this the expectation of your unpaid elders? Why do you think they spend more/less time in these roles than others?” Elder interview item 10, “Your survey answers in items 13-22 you indicated that there are various tasks your unpaid elders perform. Is there a time expectation placed on unpaid elders for the tasks of teaching and shepherding?” See the findings of Survey items 13-22 recorded in table 8 above.

<sup>58</sup> Paid elder 1, interview.

<sup>59</sup> Unpaid elder 2, interview.

<sup>60</sup> Paid elder 3, interview with the author, August 19, 2020.

<sup>61</sup> Paid elder 3, interview.

<sup>62</sup> Paid elder 4, interview.

<sup>63</sup> Elder interview item 8, “Describe your understanding of how an unpaid elder is to teach. In what ways are you/your unpaid elders engaged in teaching in your church?”

since it is listed as a qualification for elders in Scripture, but there were many ways an elder can teach. Unpaid elder 2 noted that Scripture is not explicit in how elders should teach.<sup>64</sup> Paid elder 3 noted that elders should teach according to their gifting, doing so with love toward their congregation.<sup>65</sup> He acknowledged that the teaching of an unpaid elder could carry more weight with the congregation. He said,

I really push on them [unpaid elders] to help teach day-to-day application because I say you 'carry a teaching stick that I don't.' And the fact that you are both in the pew, you are in the workforce, and they lose their ability to give you excuses that faith is harder because you gotta do it too, just like them. So, if you teach application your application will go farther. When I teach application, they hear it, but they may not apply it because some of that is, 'it's just my job for the pastor to tell me that.' But when you teach it, they lose that ability to say, "it's not your job you do it just like I did "that's right. I said that, I sit in the pew just like you do so obey.<sup>66</sup>

Several themes arose when discussing the ways that unpaid elders were currently teaching. A significant way that elders teach was through preaching.<sup>67</sup> Six out of the 9 elders stated their unpaid elders teach small groups, which in some instances was a different group than Sunday school, but in other cases served as a replacement for traditional Sunday school. Small groups were groups that meet for Bible study during the week. Another theme that the majority of elders noted (6 of 9) was that the unpaid elders are involved in one-on-one discipleship relationships with other men in the church. Four of the 9 elders acknowledged that their elders taught in their student ministry. Paid elder 2 noted that this was the way that his church identified one of their unpaid elders.<sup>68</sup> The

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<sup>64</sup> Unpaid elder 2, interview.

<sup>65</sup> Paid elder 3, interview.

<sup>66</sup> Paid elder 3, interview.

<sup>67</sup> See table 24.

<sup>68</sup> Paid elder 2, interview.

potential elder was already involved in teaching in youth ministry, so the current elders gave him responsibility over the youth ministry in their church.<sup>69</sup>

Table 26. Unpaid elder teaching roles

Teaching Role	Frequency of Response
Preaching	7
Small groups	6
One-on-one discipleship	6
Sunday school	4
Youth	4
Formal leadership training	2

**Unpaid elder preparation.** Each elder was asked to describe the process for how elders were prepared to serve in his church.<sup>70</sup> Several different themes were identified in analyzing how they prepared men to serve as unpaid elders. However, it was evident that very few of the churches have a formalized process for preparing their elders to operate within their churches.<sup>71</sup> Paid elder 5 stated that the preparation process was “evolving” as he has only brought on a new elder in a “normal way.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Paid elder 2, interview.

<sup>70</sup> Elder interview item 12, “How do you assess and prepare a potential elder for shepherding and teaching?”

<sup>71</sup> During these discussions several elders began to describe steps in the preparation process that I would consider “selection items.” For example, both of the elders at church 1 noted a doctrine questionnaire that the candidate completes. While this affirms a candidate’s doctrinal stances, it is not a teaching tool that is preparing a person to serve as an elder.

<sup>72</sup> Paid elder 5, interview with the author, Zoom video conference, August 25, 2020. He shared that soon into his tenure as pastor they had to discipline an elder and had to bring on a new elder very

Several themes stood out that involved the potential elder doing the things that he would do as an elder. Four of the 9 elders noted that they have the potential elder teach with a time of feedback and encouragement.<sup>73</sup> Three of the 9 elders shared that they have their potential elders preach in a similar fashion, with intentional feedback given to the candidate. Two of the 9 elders revealed that their potential elders begin an “on the job training” where the potential elder attends meetings and observes the current elders as they perform their role. While they are not given the ability to vote, and certain information is withheld, they are for all intents and purposes “co-elders” for a season.<sup>74</sup>

Two of the 9 elders shared that a book study was undertaken in preparation for service. Paid elder 4 said that he went through two books with his elder candidates: *Bible Doctrine* by Wayne Grudem and *The Deliberate Church* by Mark Dever.<sup>75</sup> Two of the 9 elders described a formal leadership track program that existed for the purpose of raising men to lead within the church. The program included reading, teaching, and practice of the skills necessary for serving as an elder in the church.

Table 27. Unpaid elder preparation themes.

Theme	Frequency of Occurrence
Teach with feedback	4
Preach with feedback	3
Book study	2
Co-elders	2

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quickly which was difficult.

<sup>73</sup> See table 25.

<sup>74</sup> Unpaid elder 5, interview.

<sup>75</sup> Paid elder 4, interview.

Theme	Frequency of Occurrence
Season of testing	1

**Unpaid elder selection.** Each elder was asked to describe how the unpaid elders are selected to serve.<sup>76</sup> All of the elders stated that they look to the men who are already doing the job of elder without the title as they begin to select elders for their church. Paid elder 1 said

the first thing we begin to do is we look around and say, ‘you don’t operate as an elder when you get the title.’ You operate as an elder before that, and you are raised up into that position. I don’t think anybody; we don’t believe that anybody that just gets the big ‘E’ stamped on their forehead “I’m now an elder” now they begin to do all these different things. We look for men who are leading in these ways and see their gifting and talents, the gifting that God has placed into them. And the talent that God has placed into them.<sup>77</sup>

Other elders followed similar patterns as they look to men who are already serving as deacons or are teaching in some way when selecting elders.

Another theme that 100 percent followed was the requirement of the congregation to vote and affirm the new elder. Paid elder 5 shared that this process included a time where the elder stood before the congregation to answer questions on doctrine and how he would handle potential scenarios.<sup>78</sup> All elders stated that the names of elder candidates were made public several weeks before the vote so that members of the congregation could be given time to express concern or affirm the candidate’s fitness for the office.

Nine of the 9 elders shared that potential elders were put through an interview process with the current elders. The purposes of these interviews were to affirm the

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<sup>76</sup> Elder interview item 13, “How are potential elders identified in your church? What is the process for men to become elders?”

<sup>77</sup> Paid elder 1, interview.

<sup>78</sup> Paid elder 5, interview.

candidate’s qualifications as well as his doctrinal belief. Paid elder 2 stated that the elder candidates provided written answers to 66 questions and are then interviewed by the current elders for clarification of answers.<sup>79</sup> Paid elder 4 shared that his unpaid elders go through an ordination council and are ordained in the same fashion as paid elders.<sup>80</sup>

Table 28. Unpaid elder selection themes

Theme	Frequency of Response
Already doing the work	9
Congregational vote/affirmation	9
Elder interview/conversations	9
Evidence of ability	5
Congregational nomination	2

### Summary of Research Findings

The objective of the explanatory, mixed-method study was to identify and better understand the role of unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches. In the first phase, a quantitative survey was distributed to gather data on unpaid elders from Southern Baptist churches and to seek churches for a purposive sample for qualitative Phase 2. One hundred forty-six usable surveys were completed by both paid and unpaid elders at Southern Baptist churches resulting in a confidence interval of 8.11. From the 146 respondents, 9 were purposefully selected to participate in in-depth related to the role of the unpaid elders. Five of the participants were paid elders, and 4 participants were unpaid elders. Each of these interviews was conducted by video conferencing.

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<sup>79</sup> Paid elder 2, interview.

<sup>80</sup> Paid elder 4, interview.



Participants were asked questions related to how unpaid elders shepherd, teach, are prepared, and selected. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded for analysis.

Phase 2 provided an explanation of how unpaid elders function in Southern Baptist churches. The interviews revealed that 5 of the 5 churches understand that their unpaid elders are to shepherd the same as their paid elders. Unpaid elders were involved in shepherding in much the same ways that their paid counterparts were, but the paid elders were able to give more time to shepherding than unpaid elders. Unpaid elders were expected to teach, and there are many ways in which they are teaching. The majority of the churches in Phase 2 were not able to describe a formal process for training or preparing elders but do have a very structured process for selecting or affirming unpaid elders.

### **Research Questions**

Specific research questions guided the research design. A brief answer to each question is given next.

#### **Research Question 1**

“What are the distinct roles assumed by paid and unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches?”

The quantitative Phase 1 survey revealed that unpaid elders spend most of the time preaching, teaching, conducting ministry oversight, and pastoral care. These are roles that are assumed by both the paid and unpaid elders, but some administrative or day-to-day decision making is left to unpaid elders.

#### **Research Question 2**

“What competencies do churches expect unpaid elders to have?”

Almost 98 percent (97.38) of respondents wanted their unpaid elders to have biblical and theological knowledge. They also desire their unpaid elders to have strong

leadership and teaching skills, especially teaching, as it is listed in Scripture as a qualification for eldership. The least desired competency for unpaid elders from the list of competencies provided was financial management skills or business acumen.

### **Research Question 3**

“What are the formal and informal boundaries to decision making for elder teams?”

The Phase 1 survey revealed that almost 80 percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the paid and unpaid elders have an equal say in elder decision making. Nearly 21 percent of respondents believed that paid elders have more decision-making power, while almost 16 percent of respondents believed that unpaid elders have more decision-making power. Almost three-quarters of respondents stated that policies existed regulating the decision-making process for elders, while just over 54 percent had these policies in their church constitution. The two most frequent formal policies were a requirement for a unanimous vote among the elders (23.53 percent) and a requirement that the elder body is made up of a majority of unpaid elders (23.53 percent). Survey respondents also showed that there were specific decisions upon which the congregation must vote and specific decisions the congregation entrusted to the elder body. Budget and staffing were the most frequent decisions that the congregation final authority as 19.05 percent of respondents answered. Twelve percent of the respondents shared that they entrust the elders with every other decision not specifically voted on by the congregation. Just over 10 percent said that they allow the elders to make administrative decisions and 9.78 said they allow the elders to make financial decisions.

### **Research Question 4**

“What does the church do to prepare unpaid elders to serve?”

After analyzing the qualitative interviews, the following themes emerged to inform research question 4:

1. Teaching for feedback
2. Preaching for feedback
3. Book study
4. Leadership training
5. Co-elder
6. Season of testing

### **Research Question 5**

“How does the church select unpaid elders?”

After analysis of the qualitative interviews, the following things emerged to inform research question 5:

1. Already doing the work
2. Congregational vote/affirmation
3. Interviews/conversations with current elders
4. Evidence of ability
5. Affirmation of belief
6. Congregational nomination

### **Research Question 6**

“How are unpaid elders engaged in teaching and shepherding the congregation?”

Analysis of the qualitative interviews revealed the following themes to inform research question 6:

#### **Teaching.**

1. Preaching
2. Small Groups
3. One-on-one discipleship

4. Sunday school
5. Formal leadership training

### **Shepherding.**

1. Preaching
2. Teaching
3. Oversight
4. Member care
5. Church discipline

### **Evaluation of Research Design**

This study was an explanatory, sequential mixed-method study that was conducted in two phases. It was designed to learn more about the role of the unpaid elder in Southern Baptist churches. The literature contains much about what unpaid elders should be doing in Southern Baptist churches, but there is very little about how unpaid elders are currently serving in their churches. A mixed-method study was appropriate for this study as it allowed initial information to be gathered in Phase 1 and provided a sample of churches to seek further explanation of the Phase 1 results in Phase 2. Southern Baptist churches were a substantial population to study because their united document, the Baptist Faith and Message, defines them as both evangelical and congregationally ruled. A random sample of Southern Baptist churches was chosen to solicit participation through quantitative surveys in Phase 1. A purposeful sample was drawn from the churches that participated in Phase 1 to participate in qualitative interviews in Phase 2. However, the sample was drawn from the Southern Baptist Convention's website, which may or may not have been updated with a current database of churches within the Southern Baptist Convention. An evaluation of the challenges and the strengths of this research design will be given in this section.

## **Strengths**

The biggest strength of this study is the empirical data that was acquired on unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches. The quantitative survey in Phase 1 helped begin to identify Southern Baptist churches that are using unpaid elders in their church leadership. The Phase 2 participants were purposely selected from diverse locations, backgrounds, contexts, and educational levels to broaden the potential applications of this study. The semi-structured nature of the Phase 2 interviews as well as the anonymity of the participants allowed the data gathered through interviews to be comprehensive in its scope.

Another strength of this research design was the team approach. Two researchers collaborated in gathering data, research concepts, and develop instrumentation to learn more about the role of the unpaid elder in Southern Baptist churches. The members of the research team also used their skills to seek, find, and contact research participants.

## **Challenges**

A significant challenge in this research design was gathering the data for both phases of the research. The initial plan of obtaining Annual Church Profile data was not viable, so the research team had to get a sample of SBC churches by a different method. Developing the database of current SBC churches was long and tedious. The research team sent 2,881 surveys to SBC churches. Three-hundred thirty-two surveys were completed, while only 146 of those completed surveys were completed by churches who have unpaid elders. Despite attempts by the research team to encourage responses to the Phase 1 instrument, a sufficient number of churches did not respond to the survey to reach the desired confidence interval of 5.

Another significant challenge as obtaining participants for phase 2. Six of the invitations were unanswered or declined so that the number of interviews was 9 when 12 was desired. Phase 2 also finished with 5 interviews with paid elders and 4 interviews

with unpaid elders while the desire was to finish with 5 unpaid elders. The initial desire was also to have 6 churches represented, and the result was only 5 churches.

Finding the research population was also a challenge. Currently, there are no central records of Southern Baptist churches that use unpaid elders. It was challenging to find ways to effectively sample and collect data on Southern Baptist churches that are currently using unpaid elders.

The most significant challenge was conducting research during the COVID-19 pandemic. A lack of participation may be due in some part to a lack of time on the parts of pastors as the demands on their time have increased due to the new ministry challenges. Much of the demographic data may also be skewed as numbers in attendance may be different based on regulations in different regions of the United States.<sup>81</sup>

### **Conclusion**

This study collected quantitative data from 146 paid and unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches about how their churches are using unpaid elders. In Phase 2 of the study, 9 church elders were interviewed from 5 churches to see unpaid elders were shepherding and teaching in their churches. The Phase 2 interviews also provided explanation for how their unpaid elders were prepared to serve and selected from among the congregation.

These findings represent one of the first empirical studies on unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches. Applications of this study will help churches as they evaluate the role of their unpaid elders.

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<sup>81</sup> Each elder interviewed in phase 2 gave a caveat prior to answering the demographic interview questions. Most couched his answers with “pre-COVID” and “now.” Church number 4 actually reported a growth in attendance as they are one of the only evangelical churches in their community that has the space to have worship service outdoors.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS

The overall purpose of the larger sequential, explanatory mixed-methods study was to understand the role of the unpaid elder in Southern Baptist churches. The focus of this portion was on how unpaid elders shepherd, teach, how they are prepared, and how they are selected. The research team sent out 2,881 surveys to Southern Baptist churches seeking input from churches with unpaid elders. The research team acquired 146 surveys from elders serving in Southern Baptist churches in Phase 1. I interviewed 9 elders in Phase 2 to find themes related to how unpaid elders were shepherding and teaching in their churches, as well as the church's process for raising unpaid elders. The elders in the Phase 2 interview were divided between 5 paid elders and 4 unpaid elders, with diverse churches represented. This chapter will connect the research findings with the existing literature to help churches who use or are considering using unpaid elders. Research implications are provided for unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches. Research applications will be given for how unpaid elders are shepherding and are prepared to shepherd. Finally, suggestions for further research will be provided.

#### **Research Implications**

The precedent literature review in chapter 2 of this study revealed that there was a gap in the literature base that explained how unpaid elders were serving in Southern Baptist churches. The literature base was shown to be mostly prescriptive as it pertains to unpaid elders. There was little empirical data on what unpaid elders were doing in Southern Baptist churches and little understanding of whether they were acting in step with the prescriptive literature. The quantitative phase collected data from 146

elders at churches with unpaid elders and confirms that their unpaid elders are serving in a manner consistent with the prescriptive literature.

Peter calls Christ the Chief Shepherd in 1 Peter, as Christ himself commanded Peter in John 21 to feed Christ's sheep. Timothy Laniak asserts that the most suitable metaphor for the job of a church leader described in Scripture is a shepherd.<sup>1</sup> Laniak explains the aptness of the analogy by stating that "both occupations have a comparable variety of diverse tasks that are constantly negotiated."<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Merkle describes the roles of an elder as a shepherd, teacher, and equipper.<sup>3</sup> According to Merkle, the elder, whether paid or unpaid, urges the members of the flock toward sound living while seeking to heal or rebuke as needed.<sup>4</sup> In the modern context, feeding the sheep takes place through teaching and preaching. All the while, the elder is preparing the members of the flock for the work of ministry.<sup>5</sup> Michael Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones also show the primary job of the shepherd is to feed the sheep, as the primary example of such a shepherd is Christ.<sup>6</sup>

The quantitative phase of this study expanded the knowledge and understanding of what unpaid elders are doing in Southern Baptist churches. Research question 1 sought to find the distinct roles that unpaid elders were playing in

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds after My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 20 (Leicester, England: Apollos, 2006), 40.

<sup>2</sup> Laniak, *Shepherds after My Own Heart*, 40.

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2008), 89–94.

<sup>4</sup> Merkle, *40 Questions*, 91–92.

<sup>5</sup> Merkle, *40 Questions*, 93–94.

<sup>6</sup> Michael S. Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones, *The God Who Goes before You: Pastoral Leadership as Christ-Centered Followership* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2018). Wilder and Jones point out that the church leader cannot effectively lead if the leader is not following Christ. Wilder and Jones push against the traditional view of the *Munus Triplex* of church leadership (prophet, priest, king) and state that the *Munus Triplex* sees fulfillment in Christ as he is the only leader who fulfills all three offices. Therefore, leaders look to Christ and lead as he did, being a shepherd who lays down his life for his flock.



congregationally ruled churches.<sup>7</sup> While it was consistent with Laniak’s assertion of a variety of tasks to be negotiated, there were a few roles that the survey respondents noted that they played more than others. The survey respondents showed that their unpaid elders spent most of their time devoted to elder work in either preaching or teaching. Almost 94 percent of respondents said that their unpaid elders spend 10 hours or less a week teaching while 90.32 percent said their unpaid elders spend 10 hours or less a week preaching or preparing to preach. The respondents said that the unpaid elders in their churches spent at least some time during their week in prayer for the congregation, engaged in member care, and engaged in the general oversight of the church. While their primary responsibility was in the work of preaching and teaching, the survey showed that elders were also engaged in member care. Respondents also answered that theological knowledge, leadership, and teaching skills were their most sought-after competencies when looking for potential elders. Over 97 percent of the respondents agreed that their unpaid elders must have theological knowledge, and 95.16 percent said they their unpaid elders needed strong leadership skills. Nearly 89 percent desired for their unpaid elders to have strong teaching skills. The respondents also indicated that their unpaid elders were involved in member care, oversight of paid elder or staff, and various other tasks.<sup>8</sup>

Alexander Strauch writes that elders must have leadership skills as elders govern and manage in addition to “feeding the flock.”<sup>9</sup> The health of the congregation is dependent upon how the elders plan and steward resources.<sup>10</sup> The job and authority of an

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<sup>7</sup> Respondents were asked to rate the number of hours per week their unpaid elders spent on specific tasks or roles. They were also asked to list any tasks or roles their unpaid elders filled on an open-ended question. See tables 8 and 9 in chapter 4.

<sup>8</sup> See tables 8 and 9 for a full list of the roles or tasks done by unpaid elders in the respondents’ churches.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, rev. and exp ed. (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), 24–26.

<sup>10</sup> Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 26.

elder require the elder to make “business decisions.” Calling a decision a business decision does not mean that these decisions do not have spiritual implications, but they involve how the church spends money or distributes resources. The responsibility of administration and oversight gives the elder a significant level of authority, but it is an authority that is to be exercised through stewardship. John S. Hammett explains that the role of the elder in Titus 1 is a steward who stewards on behalf of God, the Master.<sup>11</sup> In polities such as the Presbyterian model, the elder may make these decisions without the requirement of a congregational approval.<sup>12</sup> In a congregational context, the elder must be careful not to practice his stewardship in a way that is too authoritative yet must use authority judiciously. Jonathan Leeman describes congregational polity as a “mixed” form of governing as both the congregation and the elders have distinct roles.<sup>13</sup> Leeman writes that the congregation has decision-making authority on all matters except for those specifically delegated to the elders.<sup>14</sup> In practice, this means that major decisions that affect the mission or significant direction of the church may require a congregational vote. In contrast, other day-to-day choices may be left to the discretion of the elders.

Research question 3 asked, “What are the formal and informal boundaries to decision making for elder teams?” When asked to consider the decision-making dynamics within the elder body, almost 80 percent disagreed that the decisions making power were equal between the paid and unpaid elders. Nearly 80 percent disagreed that paid elders had more say. Nearly 84 percent of respondents disagreed when asked if

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<sup>11</sup> John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2005), 192.

<sup>12</sup> For further explanation of elder rule versus congregational rule, see the “Presbyterian” section in chap 2.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *Understanding the Congregation’s Authority* (Nashville: B & H Books, 2016), 46.

<sup>14</sup> Leeman, *Understanding the Congregation's Authority*, 39–45.

unpaid elders had more decision making power.<sup>15</sup> Merkle states that all elders, whether paid or unpaid, have equal authority.<sup>16</sup> The quantitative survey was unable to verify whether or not this is the case it pertains to decision-making ability within the elder team. It is possible that neither the paid or unpaid elders wanted to appear as though that have more influence. The respondents may have been reluctant to answer in such a way as to make it look contrary to shared leadership. A better question may have been “are there decisions in which paid/unpaid elders are given deference?” However, many respondents shared that their constitution or bylaws had regulations regarding decisions making ability of paid or unpaid elders. The policies most noted were the requirement of a unanimous voted among the elder team (23.53 percent) and the requirement that the elder team has more unpaid elders than paid elders (23.53 percent).

The second insight revealed about elder decision making in Southern Baptist churches related to the authority of the elders and the power of the congregation. The respondents shared several decisions that required a congregational vote. Leeman states that there is not a biblical standard for the decisions that need a voice from the congregation.<sup>17</sup> Leeman’s counsel is that churches should vote on elders and deacons, receiving, disciplining, or dismissing members, and any decision that “significantly impacts the integrity and viability of the church as a gospel ministry.”<sup>18</sup> The highest response of congregational decision making was budget decisions, which certainly has a massive impact on how a church conducts ministry (19.05 percent). The same percentage

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<sup>15</sup> See tables 13, 14, and 15 in chapter 4.

<sup>16</sup> Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, 173–74.

<sup>17</sup> Leeman, *Understanding the Congregation’s Authority*, 40.

<sup>18</sup> Leeman, *Understanding the Congregation’s Authority*, 43. Leeman does state that church context will dictate the when the congregation votes. He notes that the size of the church and its resources may well be the guiding principle. Leeman says, “A fifty-member church with a \$100,000 budget may recognize that purchasing a \$20,000 van will impact its ability to pay the pastor and therefore the durability of their gospel ministry. A church with a \$4 million budget will not feel this pressure. One church might want to vote on the van, while the other would leave it to the leaders.”

(19.05) stated that the congregation voted on staffing with the affirmation of elders (9.92) and membership matters (9.13) at a lower portion. The highest percentage of those decisions delegated to the elders was administrative decisions, which is consistent with the literature on the division of responsibility. The elders are tasked with keeping the administrative side running, so every decision does not have to be brought before the congregation. The divisions of responsibility between the elders and the congregation allow for a more efficient way of doing ministry, so ministry does not have to stop to make decisions.

In summary, the quantitative data reveals three things about the role of unpaid elders in relation to the literature. First, unpaid elders are assuming different roles in their churches, but most are doing so by preaching and teaching. Second, decision-making among the elder teams is still a bit of a mystery. Finally, the respondents revealed that the congregation and elder teams are working in concert with their authority. The congregation has its specific role, and the elders are entrusted by the congregation to ensure that the work of ministry will continue.

### **Research Application**

Phase 2 of this study specifically looked at churches whose unpaid elders are active in teaching and shepherding. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 9 elders from 5 churches from diverse sizes and locations (see appendix 2 for the survey items). The following section will examine three specific themes that emerged from the qualitative interviews.

#### **Potential Elders will be Revealed in their Work**

Research questions 4 and 5 asked, “What does the church do to prepare unpaid elders to serve” and “How does the church select unpaid elders?” All 9 of the interview participants shared that his church identified potential elders from men who were already

doing the work of the elder. The role of the elder has specific qualifications that are defined in 1 Timothy 3:2-7 and in Titus 1:6-9.<sup>19</sup> The qualifications in these passages are visible and observable by those that know the potential elder. Hammett notes that these qualifications are “ordinary” and should be true of all Christians.<sup>20</sup> Churches or elders should not view these qualifications as a higher standard than what is expected of all followers of Christ.<sup>21</sup>

Thabiti Anyabwile gives several characteristics that congregations should watch for when considering who to affirm as elders for their church. The first visible sign to watch for is the attendance of the man at worship services and members’ meetings.<sup>22</sup> Anyabwile argues that regular attendance reveals a man’s desire to be a part of the church and shows that the desire does not need stirring up by an outside influence.<sup>23</sup> Second, he counsels churches to look for men who are already shepherding (visiting the sick, teaching, etc.) are happily doing it “without recognition,” as this reveals that the man is not merely after a title or power.<sup>24</sup> Finally, Anyabwile recommends that churches seek the men that support the current leadership and to watch these men over time to confirm a desire to serve as an elder.<sup>25</sup> Strauch adds that it is also vital to prepare men to serve as

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<sup>19</sup> The qualifications for an elder recorded in 1 Tim 3:2-7 are above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, able to teach, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, gentle, uncontentious, free from the love of money, manages his household well, not a new convert, and a good reputations outside of the church. The qualifications for an elder recorded in Titus 1:6-9 are above reproach, the husband of one wife, have children who believe, not self-willed, not quick tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, hospitable, lover of what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, and holds fast to the Word to exhort and refute.

<sup>20</sup> Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 194.

<sup>21</sup> Hammett, 194.

<sup>22</sup> Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*, IX Marks Series (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 53.

<sup>23</sup> Anyabwile, *Find Faithful Elders*, 53.

<sup>24</sup> Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders*, 53.

<sup>25</sup> Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders*, 54.

elders.<sup>26</sup> He writes that some men may possess the qualifications of elder and desire to serve, but if these men become elders without proper training, then the church will suffer.

Paid elder 1 followed the process described by Anyabwile by looking for men “who are already shepherding” when looking for new potential elders.<sup>27</sup> Paid elder 2 noted that he is always watching for the man who “who shows up before anyone else shows up who leaves after everybody has left who is very just content and loves to serve Christ’s body.”<sup>28</sup> Paid elder 4 noted that after observing a potential elder in a leadership position led the elder team to determine that the person was not a candidate at that time and they decided to have that person serve the church in a way that better fit his gifting.<sup>29</sup> Paid elder 3 also spoke to the importance of letting a man know that he was being considered for the office of elder because of the spiritual warfare that the potential elder will face.<sup>30</sup> He said that,

once we determine that the Lord might want him as an elder, we immediately, go and talk to that guy because I realize that once we’ve had the conversation as existing leaders, verbally, we’re opening up warfare against that dude. The enemy is going to disqualify that dude. So we’ve talked about it now verbally, I gotta run over his house and let him know, “look we have, we are considering you as a candidate for elder, and we need to know that you need to know warfare that’s gonna come for you, you need to realize that you’re gonna be attacked in ways you didn’t even know. You’re gonna want to sin things you haven’t wanted to do since you were 18. Like everything is going to come at you and all kinds of weird ways. Stay the course. Stay faithful. You’re not alone, and let’s see you get through this.”<sup>31</sup>

Prior service, leadership, and shepherding is a proving ground for the ability of a person to serve as elder, and observation over time gives evidence of a man’s qualifications for the office.

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<sup>26</sup> Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 68.

<sup>27</sup> Paid elder 1, interview with the author, Zoom video conference, August 17, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Paid elder 2, interview with the author, Zoom video conference, August 18, 2020. He also noted that this person may also serve as a deacon and may not always be a potential elder.

<sup>29</sup> Paid elder 4, interview with the author, Zoom video conference, August 24, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Paid elder 3, interview with the author, Zoom video conference, August 19, 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Paid elder 3, interview.

Elder preparation looked different in the churches in Phase 2. Paid elder 3 pointed out that there a difference in “having a skill and being good at it.”<sup>32</sup> Only two churches had a formal training curriculum that the potential elders engaged in while one church had an “on the job training” in which the elder was a part of elder work for some time. Church 2’s formal training involved a training track that took place over several semesters with bookwork and observation of the individuals in different settings.<sup>33</sup> Church 4’s preparation included a book study.<sup>34</sup> Church 5 had the potential elders take part in meetings and in shepherding conversations with church members.<sup>35</sup> Preparation for serving as an elder is essential both for helping a candidate see what the work is like and affirming a desire to serve. However, if men who are already doing the work of the elder (shepherding, leading, teaching, etc.), then a church may not need a formal preparation program. If he is already doing the work of an elder, then prior service may be enough preparation. All that may be necessary in that instance is training in theology and minutiae of the elder body.

### **Unpaid Elders Shepherd through Teaching**

Teaching was the most common answer given when Phase 2 participants were asked how unpaid elders were shepherding in their church (9 of 9).<sup>36</sup> Leeman argues that the authority of the elder is exercised through teaching, claiming that the type of authority

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<sup>32</sup> Paid elder 3, interview.

<sup>33</sup> Paid elder 2, interview. Unpaid elder 2, interview with the author, Zoom video conference, August 24, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Paid elder 4, interview. Unpaid elder 4, interview with the author, Zoom video conference, August 26, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Paid elder 5, interview with the author, Zoom video conference, August 25, 2020. Unpaid elder 5, interview with the author, Zoom video conference, August 24, 2020

<sup>36</sup> See table 25 in chapter 4 for the specific ways the unpaid elders were shepherding.

that an elder possesses is “authority of counsel.”<sup>37</sup> Authority of counsel is one of the distinguishing factors between the authority of the congregation and the authority of the elders. The requirement of elders to be able to teach enables the elders to use their authority correctly as it gives them the responsibility to “instruct, warn, and rebuke.”<sup>38</sup> The elder’s job is to train the congregation to correctly do its job, which is to exercise the “authority of command.”<sup>39</sup> Strauch argues that to perpetuate the cycle of qualified elders, elders must be masterful teachers of the Bible.<sup>40</sup> Elders that have been a part of a church where the Bible is correctly taught will be prepared to one day teach, fulfilled the Paul’s instructions to Timothy in 1 Timothy 2:2.<sup>41</sup>

Anyabwile states that the pulpit ministry is not the only place where the elder may teach.<sup>42</sup> Elders may be more gifted in teaching in one-on-one discipleship relationships, which is still an important exercise of the gift of teaching. Anyabwile also describes the shepherding aspect of teaching as needing to be “pastoral” as the elder must “feed the sheep, not beat the sheep.”<sup>43</sup> Merkle also believes that the pastoral side of teaching includes the ability and the willingness to refute false teaching.<sup>44</sup>

The elders in the Phase 2 interviews shared that their elders are involved in teaching in different ways, but they all expected their unpaid elders to teach in some fashion. All of the elders noted the ability to teach is a qualification of an elder, so it was

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<sup>37</sup> Leeman, *Understanding the Congregation’s Authority*, 45–46.

<sup>38</sup> Leeman, *Understanding the Congregation’s Authority*, 45.

<sup>39</sup> Leeman, *Understanding the Congregation’s Authority*, 49. According to Leeman, authority of command is the ability to make final decisions such as admitting individuals to membership, etc.

<sup>40</sup> Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 81.

<sup>41</sup> Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 82.

<sup>42</sup> Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*, 78.

<sup>43</sup> Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*, 80.

<sup>44</sup> Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, 92–93.



expected they had an active role in the discipleship ministry of the church. The most common answer given for how elders teach was preaching (8 of 9). Seven of those elders shared that the unpaid elders filled the pulpit only when the paid elder was away, while one church shared that the unpaid elders intentionally preached 35 percent of the year. Unpaid elders were also teaching in small group settings and in one-on-one discipleship. Scripture does not prescribe or dictate a way for all elders to teach, and there must be some leeway given to how an elder is gifted. There is no requirement for unpaid elders to preach, but it is undoubtedly allowed if that elder is equipped and desires to preach. Other unpaid elders may flourish more in discipleship relationships. Elders may exercise their gifts of teaching in many different ways, all of which urge and rebuke as needed.

### **Shared Leadership in Shepherding**

Research question 6 asks, “How are unpaid elders engaged in teaching and shepherding the congregation?” This study found that unpaid elders are shepherding their churches in much the same way as the paid elders. When asked how the unpaid elders were shepherding in their churches, the most common answers were through teaching, preaching, and oversight. All 9 elders interviewed viewed the unpaid elders as fellow pastors, or “co-shepherds.”<sup>45</sup>

Joseph Hellerman argues that elders should serve within a “community of leadership” that is defined by a group of elders that first see each other as brothers in Christ.<sup>46</sup> Hellerman believes that community in the elder body is developed through prayer between the elders and facing the challenges of church leadership as a team, as

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<sup>45</sup> Unpaid elder 5. Paid elder 4, interview with the author, Zoom video conference, August 24, 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Joseph H. Hellerman, *Embracing Shared Ministry: Power and Status in the Early Church and Why It Matters Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2013), 265.

these things lead to greater consensus among the individual elders.<sup>47</sup> Strauch notes that Scripture calls for elders to operate using shared leadership as he is convinced that this is the model for church leadership prescribed in the New Testament.<sup>48</sup> Strauch states that the elders of a church are a “council of equals,” which allows elders to work according to their gifting and will enable the workload of elders to be shared.<sup>49</sup> Within the shared leadership framework, Strauch writes that Scripture describes a “first among equals” dynamic in which those elders who are more gifted in certain areas may take a more substantial leadership role within the elder team.<sup>50</sup>

None of the elders, when interviewed, used the phrase “first among equals.” None of the 9 elders asserted that any of the elders in their church had more authority or influence than the other elders. However, it was clear in most interviews that the paid elders set agendas for meetings and had more responsibility for directing the overall vision of the church. However, the concept of shared leadership was described in each interview, although none of the interviewees used that term. Each elder shared that the job of an unpaid elder is no different than a paid elder in terms of how the elder is to shepherd, but each elder shared that the unpaid elders shepherded according to their gifting. Paid elder 2 shared that one of his church’s elders was gifted a family ministry and therefore did much of the counseling to families with kids or students.<sup>51</sup> He also stated that an elder was not forced to preach if he was uncomfortable doing so as they

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<sup>47</sup> Hellerman, *Embracing Shared Ministry*, 266.

<sup>48</sup> Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 36–37.

<sup>49</sup> Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 39–42.

<sup>50</sup> Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 45–47. Strauch disagrees with the labels of a *unpaid* or *lay* elder. In his explanation of the first among equals dynamic, Strauch states that calling “one elder ‘pastor’ and the rest ‘elders’ or one elder the ‘clergyman’ and the rest ‘lay elders’ is without biblical precedence. It will not result create a biblical eldership.” Strauch affirmed his belief in an email to the author dated February 5, 2020 in which he said, “I personally don’t like the term ‘lay elders.’ If they are lay elders, what are the other elders called? Isn’t this an unbiblical distinction, although it is commonly used by churches?” Instead, Strauch calls those elders not employed by the church “tentmaking elders (48).”

<sup>51</sup> Paid elder 2, interview.

were confident that he would be an effective teacher in other areas of the church.<sup>52</sup> Paid elder 4 shared that one of the unpaid elders handles the church finances as he was more gifted than the paid elder in managing financial affairs.<sup>53</sup> Elders may be equal in authority, but each unpaid elder will exercise his authority differently according to how they are gifted. It must be noted that 4 of the 5 churches that participated in the qualitative interviews had only one paid elder, with the rest of the elder body made up of unpaid elders.<sup>54</sup> These churches each shared that they would not be as effective at keeping watch over their congregation if they had to rely solely on their paid elders. Paid elder 2 shared that without the unpaid elders in his church, he would not be as in tune with his congregation as he feels he is.<sup>55</sup> This fact affirms Dave Harvey's assertion that smaller churches who cannot pay large staffs benefit from the strong leadership that unpaid elders may provide.<sup>56</sup>

Each elder was asked to give his general impression of the role of the unpaid elders in his church. All of the elders expressed deep affection and appreciation for the unpaid elders with whom they serve. The paid elders spoke of the pressure that is relieved by the unpaid elders and the unique ministry that the unpaid elders have within their congregations. All of the elders also shared that they felt using unpaid elders helped them fulfill the biblical model of church leadership. The implications and applications in this section are not exhaustive, and suggestions for further research are given in the next section.

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<sup>52</sup> Paid elder 2, interview.

<sup>53</sup> Paid elder 4, interview.

<sup>54</sup> See table 24 in chapter 4 for a complete breakdown of the elder team in each church.

<sup>55</sup> Paid elder 2, interview.

<sup>56</sup> Dave Harvey, "Lay Elders Are Not the Shepherding JV Team," *The Gospel Coalition* (blog), accessed January 25, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/lay-elders-are-not-shepherding-jv-team/>.

## **Further Research**

This study focused specifically on unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches. The population for the study was Southern Baptist churches that use unpaid elders. Several possibilities for further research arose during the study.

### **Unpaid Elders in other Denominational Contexts**

Southern Baptist churches fit the parameters of evangelical congregational churches for this study and yielded much data for analysis. However, the generalization of the data and the study is limited only to Southern Baptist churches. Conducting follow-up studies with congregationally ruled churches of other denominations would aid in the transferability of the study results. Follow-up studies in non-congregational church populations would help understand how unpaid elders function in elder-ruled contexts.<sup>57</sup> How do ruling-elders (unpaid) fulfill their roles as compared to teaching elders (paid)? How do other confessional contexts use unpaid elders in the ministry of their churches?

### **Unpaid Elders in More Diverse Church Context**

The church sizes in the Phase 2 study ranged from 30-2,000 (average attendance).<sup>58</sup> The data range is deceiving as four of the five churches ranged from 35-230. The church sizes represented in the Phase 2 interviews were on opposite extremes. Follow-up studies could be conducted on churches that are in between the extreme sizes of the church in this study's Phase 2. Are unpaid elders more "hands on" in smaller contexts? Is there more deference to paid elders in larger church contexts?

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<sup>57</sup> See Robert L. Reymond, "Presbytery Led Church: Presbyterian Church Government," in *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, ed. Chad Brand, and R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2004), 121. Reymond explains that in the Presbyterian form of government there are teaching elders who are gifted to teach/preach (paid elders) and ruling elders (unpaid elders). This form of polity gives authority to church elders, who are elected by the congregation and make decisions on behalf of the congregation.

<sup>58</sup> See table 23 in chapter 4.

The churches in Phase 2 are also consistent in location. All the churches were either rural or urban, with no churches from a suburban area. What are the challenges unpaid elders help within these other contexts?

### **View of Unpaid Elders Based on Age of Paid Elders**

The paid elders in Phase 2 ranged in age from 35 (paid elder 2) to 66 (paid elder 1). The next oldest elder was paid elder 4, who was 44. A follow-up question or study could look at how the age of the paid elder affects how they allow unpaid elders to function, or even if they would be willing to serve in a church with unpaid elders. The growth in unpaid elders has been recent, so does the time frame in seminary affect one's view of unpaid elders? Does lack of experience shape how one views unpaid elders?

### **Conclusion**

The use of unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches is growing. However, this study demonstrated that there is a lack of data regarding how churches are using unpaid elders. Much of the literature remains prescriptive, and this study represents one of the first empirical studies of how unpaid elders are functioning.

This study asked both quantitative and qualitative questions about unpaid elders to determine principles that could be transferable to churches. Analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data led to many themes and principles regarding unpaid elders. These principles have been presented. Unpaid elders are serving churches in many ways and are a support to their congregations as well as paid elders. I am encouraged by the desire of churches to have biblical leadership within their churches, and I take hope in the fact that God will not abandon his church. As the church continues to face challenges in a fallen world, I trust that God will raise qualified shepherds to lead churches in the accomplishment of the Great Commission.

## APPENDIX 1

### INVITATION FOR PHASE 1 SURVEY

Dear Church Leader,

Our names are Adam Mehaffey and Scott Rhodes and we are a research team of doctoral students from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, under the supervision of SBTS faculty member Dr. Danny Bowen. The purpose for our letter to you today is to thank you for the leadership of your church. Church leadership has many different dynamics and we are seeking to grow in our understanding of some of the changing dynamics in our denomination. If you are not a pastor on staff at your church, we ask that you please send this information to one of the pastors on your staff.

There is much anecdotal evidence regarding the growth of unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches. We are working to find churches that use elders in their church structure and seek to learn how unpaid elders are leading in Southern Baptist churches. As such, we want to learn from you.

We are asking if you would take a few moments to complete the survey located at the link below within the next seven days.

Our research seeks to identify principles that may be transferable to other churches. We pray that God allows us to see His hand at work in your church and to tell part of His story in your church. We need to hear from many churches, including those that do not utilize unpaid elders.

As pastors, we know the daily pressures of the ministry. There is far more to do than there seems to be time to accomplish it. This is why we are humbly asking you to give us some of your most precious commodity: time. We anticipate that it will require approximately 15 minutes to complete this survey.

A select group of churches will be identified from the results of this survey and approached to commit to a more in-depth interview with one of our research team. If you agree to be available for a follow up interview, we will include you in a drawing for one of three \$50.00 Amazon gift cards.

Would you please take a moment, even now, to help all of our SBC churches learn from you? Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. Participation in this

study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. On behalf of our team, thank you for your leadership and for your prayerful consideration of this request.

For the sake of His Name,

Adam Mehaffey

Scott Rhodes

## APPENDIX 2

### PHASE 1 CHURCH SURVEY

A paid elder is a pastor or elder that receives compensation and wages for the work performed as a pastor-elder.

An unpaid or lay elder is a pastor-elder that serves the church but does not receive monetary compensation for his service.

Congregationalist polity is the system in which the church congregation has the power to make final decisions on church matters. Congregationalist polity or rule does not mean that every decision is left to the entire congregation as some decisions are delegated to church leaders.

#### Demographic Information

1. Question one was an agreement to participate in Phase 1.

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify principles and practices that affect the role of unpaid church elders. This research is being conducted by Adam Mehaffey and Scott Rhodes, under the supervision of Dr. Danny Bowen, of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for purposes of understanding the role of the unpaid elder in congregationalist churches. In this research, you will be asked to respond to several questions pertaining to your experience with unpaid elders. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. By your completion of this survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

- A. Yes
- B. No

2. What is your current role in your church?

- A. Senior Pastor
- B. Lead Pastor
- C. Pastor



3. How long have you been in your current position?
- A. Less Than Five Years
  - B. 5-10 years
  - C. 11-15 years
  - D. 16-20 years
  - E. Longer than 20 years
4. What is the highest level of education you have attained?
- A. High School Diploma
  - B. Associate's Degree
  - C. Bachelor's Degree
  - D. Master's Degree
  - E. Doctoral Degree
5. What formal ministry training have you had? Check all that apply.
- A. No formal ministry training
  - B. Bible college
  - C. Seminary certificate
  - D. Seminary degree
  - E. Other
6. What is your church's average worship attendance?
- A. <50
  - B. 51-100
  - C. 101-200
  - D. 201-300
  - E. 301-400
  - F. 401-500
  - G. 500<
7. Your church context is best described as:
- A. Rural
  - B. Suburban
  - C. Urban
8. Is your position paid or unpaid?
- A. Paid
  - B. Unpaid
9. Does your church have a plurality of elders or pastors?
- A. Yes
  - B. No
10. Does your church utilize unpaid elders? [If "No," then the survey ends. If "Yes, then the survey will continue to Q.11.]

- A. Yes
- B. No

11. Are you willing to participate in a follow-up interview regarding the role of unpaid elders in your church?

- A. Yes
- B. No

### **Interview Participation Contact Information**

12. Contact information: [Appears only if the answer to Q. 11 is “Yes”]

- A. Name:
- B. Church Name:
- A. Church address:
- B. Address:
- C. Street # and street
- D. City
- E. State
- F. Zip/Postal code
- G. Church website
- H. Email address
- I. Phone number

### **Elder Roles**

We understand that each individual is uniquely gifted and has a unique set of training and experiences. Therefore, not all elders will perform all the duties we are asking about. In the table below, please enter the approximate number of hours you spend in an average week performing the duty listed.

13. Praying for Congregants

- A. 0-5 Hours Per Week
- B. 6-10 Hours Per Week
- C. 11-15 Hours Per Week
- D. More than 15 Hours a Week Hours Per Week

14. Counseling Congregants

- A. 0-5 Hours Per Week
- B. 6-10 Hours Per Week

- C. 11-15 Hours Per Week
- D. More than 15 Hours a Week Hours Per Week

15. Visiting Congregants (Home, hospital, etc.)

- A. 0-5 Hours Per Week
- B. 6-10 Hours Per Week
- C. 11-15 Hours Per Week
- D. More than 15 Hours a Week Hours Per Week

16. Oversight of Ministry Area

- A. 0-5 Hours Per Week
- B. 6-10 Hours Per Week
- C. 11-15 Hours Per Week
- D. More than 15 Hours a Week Hours Per Week

17. Evangelism

- A. 0-5 Hours Per Week
- B. 6-10 Hours Per Week
- C. 11-15 Hours Per Week
- D. More than 15 Hours a Week Hours Per Week

18. Community Benevolence

- A. 0-5 Hours Per Week
- B. 6-10 Hours Per Week
- C. 11-15 Hours Per Week
- D. More than 15 Hours a Week Hours Per Week

19. Oversight of Church Finance

- A. 0-5 Hours Per Week
- B. 6-10 Hours Per Week
- C. 11-15 Hours Per Week
- D. More than 15 Hours a Week Hours Per Week

20. Preaching/Preparation for Preaching

- A. 0-5 Hours Per Week
- B. 6-10 Hours Per Week
- C. 11-15 Hours Per Week
- D. More than 15 Hours a Week Hours Per Week

21. Teaching/Preparing to Teach Individuals

- A. 0-5 Hours Per Week
- B. 6-10 Hours Per Week
- C. 11-15 Hours Per Week
- D. More than 15 Hours a Week Hours Per Week

22. Teaching/Preparing to Teach Groups

- A. 0-5 Hours Per Week
- B. 6-10 Hours Per Week
- C. 11-15 Hours Per Week
- D. More than 15 Hours a Week Hours Per Week

23. Elder Meetings

- A. 0-5 Hours Per Week
- B. 6-10 Hours Per Week
- C. 11-15 Hours Per Week
- D. More than 15 Hours a Week Hours Per Week

24. Church Business/Member Meetings

- A. 0-5 Hours Per Week
- B. 6-10 Hours Per Week
- C. 11-15 Hours Per Week
- D. More than 15 Hours a Week Hours Per Week

25. Managing Church Property

- A. 0-5 Hours Per Week
- B. 6-10 Hours Per Week
- C. 11-15 Hours Per Week
- D. More than 15 Hours a Week Hours Per Week

26. Please list any tasks the unpaid elders in your church perform that have not already been addressed by this survey (even if you do not perform them).

27. Did your church use Scripture when assigning roles to your elder body? If so, which passages?

**Elder Competencies and Skills**

28. Our lay or unpaid elders must possess strong financial management skills.

\_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

\_\_\_\_\_ Agree

\_\_\_\_\_ Disagree

\_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree

29. Our lay or unpaid elders must possess strong biblical and theological knowledge.

\_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

\_\_\_\_\_ Agree

\_\_\_\_\_ Disagree

\_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree

30. Our lay or unpaid elders must be skilled in evangelism.

\_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

\_\_\_\_\_ Agree

\_\_\_\_\_ Disagree

\_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree

31. Our lay or unpaid elders must possess strong leadership skills.

\_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

\_\_\_\_\_ Agree

\_\_\_\_\_ Disagree

\_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree

32. Our lay or unpaid elders must be skilled teachers.

\_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Agree

\_\_\_\_\_ Agree

\_\_\_\_\_ Disagree

\_\_\_\_\_ Strongly Disagree

Indicate how important each competency is for lay or unpaid elders in your church by circling the appropriate number. (1 represents minimally important and 10 represents highly important.)

33. Theological Acumen

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

34. Business Management Acumen

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

35. Governance Skill

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

36. Evangelistic Skill

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

37. Teaching Skills

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

**Decision Making**

38. The paid elders and unpaid elders in our church have equal say in elder decisions.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

39. The paid elders in our church have greater say in elder decisions.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

40. The unpaid elders in our church have greater say in elder decisions.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

41. Our church has policies that govern the decision-making process of our church elders.

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

42. Our church constitution or by-laws contain restrictions on decision making for paid elders.

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know

43. If your church has written policies regarding the decision-making abilities of unpaid and paid elders, please briefly describe them below:

44. Please list the decisions the church votes on.

45. Please list the decisions delegated the elder body.

APPENDIX 3  
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Agreement to Participate**

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to identify principles and practices that influenced the use of unpaid elders. This research is being conducted by Adam Mehaffey, under the supervision of Dr. Danny Bowen, of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for purposes of the role of the unpaid elder in congregationalist churches. In this research, you will be asked to respond to several questions pertaining to your experience with unpaid elders. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name identified with your responses. Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. By your completion of this interview, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

I agree to participate

I do not agree to participate

Thank you for your help.



APPENDIX 4  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PHASE 2

**Demographic Information**

1. Describe your ministry context (type of community)
2. How many years have you been in ministry as a paid/unpaid elder?
3. How many years have you served in your current role?
4. Describe your training and educational background.
5. What is your current age?
6. Describe your church (size, demographics, etc.)

**Elder Questions**

Before we begin with the elder questions, let me give you some baseline definitions that will help you with the questions. For this research, the following definitions are used:

**A paid elder is an elder that receives compensation and wages for the work performed as a pastor-elder.**

**An unpaid elder is a pastor-elder that serves the church but does not receive monetary compensation for his service.**

**Congregationalist polity is the system in which the church congregation has the power to make final decisions on church matters. Congregationalist polity or rule does not mean that every decision is left to the entire congregation as some decisions are delegated to church leaders.**

Teaching is the giving of sound doctrine and “encouragement through biblical teaching” as well as rebuking those who “oppose the truth of the gospel.”

Shepherding is the job of the elder in leading, protecting, and caring for the congregation or flock.

7. Describe your understanding of how an unpaid elder is to shepherd. Is this any different from a paid elder in your church? In what ways are you/your unpaid elders engaged in shepherding in your church?

8. Describe your understanding of how an unpaid elder is to teach. In what ways are you/your unpaid elders engaged in teaching in your church?

9. You indicated in the survey items 13-22 that the unpaid elders in your church spend more/less time (preaching/teaching/visiting/oversight). Is this the expectation of your unpaid elders? Why do you think they spend more/less time in these roles than others?

10. Your survey answers in items 13-22 you indicated that there are various tasks your unpaid elders perform. Is there a time expectation placed on unpaid elders for the tasks of teaching and shepherding?

11. In survey items 25-32 you indicated that the unpaid elders in your church must have skills in (finance/leadership/teaching/evangelism). How do these skills help elders shepherd in your church?

12. How do you assess and prepare a potential elder for shepherding and teaching?

13. How are potential elders identified in your church? What is the process for men to become elders?

14. What are your general impressions of the role of unpaid elders in your church?

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## ABSTRACT

### THE ROLE OF THE UNPAID ELDER IN SOUTHERN BAPTIST CHURCHES: A MIXED METHODS STUDY

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Chair: Dr. Danny R. Bowen

Scripture teaches that leadership was created by God, a concept illustrated by the creation mandate to man to subdue the earth (Gen 1:28-29). As Michael Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones point out, leadership was not something that God put into place after the Fall, but it was God's plan from the beginning for man to exercise the dominion of the rest of creation. However, as a result of the fall, man needs leadership and guidance in order to fulfill the purposes that God has set forth. Institutions need leadership, and the Church is no exception.

Benjamin Merkle asserts that while church polity is not the weightiest decision that a church will make, adopting a biblical form is essential for the health of the church as it determines who leads and teaches the church. In recent years there has been a growth of the use of elder leadership in congregationalist churches and the increase in elder leadership has included the use of unpaid elders. While there is much prescriptive literature for the role of unpaid elders in Southern Baptist churches, there is little empirical research that describes the roles that unpaid elders are assuming in their congregations.

The purpose of this explanatory sequential, mixed-method study was to understand the role of the unpaid elder in Southern Baptist churches. In the quantitative



phase 146 churches with unpaid elders completed a survey related to their experience with unpaid elders in their church. The focus of this thesis was on the ways that unpaid elders are shepherding and teaching. Churches that fit the selection criteria were invited to participate in the qualitative phase.

Nine interviews were conducted with 5 paid elders and 4 unpaid elders from 5 churches in the qualitative phase. The interviews were composed of open-ended questions that asked the elders share how their unpaid elders were involved in shepherding and teaching in their churches. The top three ways unpaid elders were shepherding were through teaching, preaching, and providing church oversight. The top three ways unpaid elders were teaching were through preaching, small groups, and one-on-one discipleship.

Keywords: Southern Baptist, church elders, church elder selection, church elder role church polity, shepherding, teaching, unpaid church elders

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