

SPOTS – The roles and responsibilities of ‘elders’ at Sheffield Vineyard



What many churches today refer to as ‘Elders’, we call the SPOTs (Strategic Pastoral Oversight Team).

Within the Vineyard, there is no requirement for an individual or team of leaders to accompany the Senior Pastor(s); however, there is biblical precedent and SV regards it as a positive attribute. In Acts 20:28, Phil. 1:1, 1 Tim. 3:2 and Titus 1:7, we see that church leadership is a plurality (a team); individual senior leaders emerged during the second century.

There are three key words in the NT that refer to the same *position* – Overseer, Elder and Shepherd (Acts 20:17-35, 1 Peter 5:1-6 and Titus 1:5-10). To gain a complete understanding of the *position*, all three terms should be considered.

Overseer (sometimes also referred to as a Bishop)

An overseer is one who watches over, inspects, cares for, and has responsibility over. We are to be overseers as God oversees the church (1 Peter 2:25). Everyone in the church has a role to care for others, however, SPOTs are particularly to be responsible in this regard.

Elder

The term *Elder* means ‘a bearded one’ and refers to a person of maturity (and older age). Elders are found in tribal communities long before the birth of the church. One example is when God chose elders in the time of the Exodus (special witnesses of his covenant – Exodus 24:1). They were representatives of the people they led. The Sanhedrin, or assembly of elders, consisted of prominent elders, and scribal and priestly leaders. They played a prominent part in the synagogue and their roles were simply continued within the church.

Shepherd

Jesus is referred to as the ‘good shepherd’ and the imagery of ‘leadership through care’ is clear. Jesus died for his sheep (Matt. 26:31) because his sense of care was so strong. The apostles followed this model in their perspective of church leadership (1 Cor. 9:7). Jesus spoke of the role of the shepherd to Peter (the first leader of the church) (John 21:16).

When we see the terms overseer, elder and shepherd in the NT, they are associated with notions of:

- Strategic
 - Exercise strategic consideration (vision, goal setting, planning decisions, etc.)
 - Ensure that the legal and financial governance of the church is administered by appropriate people (Trustees).

- Pastoral
 - Exercise care and protection of our church.
 - Exercise compassion for the marginalised and the lost.
- Oversight (leadership)
 - Consider/present biblical truth through preaching and teaching.
 - Exercise gracious discipline.
 - Represent our church, and seek to connect with the wider church.
- Team
 - Exercise a desire for collective and collaborative work.

The above is what a leader should do; regarding who they should be - they should be of wholesome character (see below).

There are five key passages that discuss the above position.

John 21:15-17

This passage highlights the connection between Peter's love for Jesus, and Jesus' love for his sheep. Three times Jesus says if you love me then you will show this by tending to my sheep.

If anyone desires to be a leader, they should be motivated firstly by a love for the church family.

Acts 20:17-35

This passage talks about the character of a leader, and the ability to protect the church (or people therein) from error. Paul was humble, compassionate, of proven track record and focused – he pushed aside personal goals to reach the goal God had set before him.

The life of a leader is one of service.

1 Peter 5:1-6

This passage looks forwards to a future time of the return of Jesus, when followers will appear before God without fault because of the cross. 5:2 shows that a leader of one church is not a leader of another church. There is a personal and humble devotion to a particular group.

The theme of service continues.

1 Tim. 3:1-6 and Titus 1:5-9

Here we see a list of qualifications:

- Spiritual qualities – a mature Christian.
- Personal qualities – temperate, a pursuer of good, self-controlled, disciplined, in control of themselves, not one to pursue personal gain.
- Social qualities – respectable within the church, respectable outside the church.

- Parental qualities – faithful to spouse if married, behaves in such a way as to deserve respect from any children.
- Relational qualities – hospitable, calm, not quarrelsome, not given to unrighteous anger.
- Doctrinal qualities – able to teach biblical truth and live a life of integrity (practice what they preach).

There is not an expectation that a leader is perfect, but they should be given to frequent or obvious lapses of wholesome character. The leader may not necessarily be an outstanding teacher/preacher, but they should know the fundamentals of biblical truth and be able to communicate and practice that truth in a public and/or personal setting.

1 Timothy 5:17-19

This passage deals with seniority, financial support and discipline.

Seniority – those who are able to preach and teach well are noted. The larger the church, the greater the need for hierarchy in leadership for the effective running of the church. At SV, our hierarchy of leadership is (1) Senior Pastor(s), (2) SPOTs (3) Ministry team leaders (4) leaders of smaller groups.

Financial support – typically, those in more senior positions of leadership can expect greater financial remuneration, although it will no doubt be the case that some leaders are fully paid, others partially paid, and others again not paid at all.

Discipline – If an allegation is made against a leader, there should be a proper process undertaken to enquire about the validity of the allegation. Proper verified testimony is required. An allegation should be upheld if it cannot be substantiated, or where an opinion of an individual meets widespread disagreement. Where an allegation is upheld, the level of public exposure should be commensurate with the public level of ministry. A Lifegroup leader would be addressed at a Lifegroup level, while a SPOT would be addressed at a church level.

The response of the church family

The Bible says that the response of the people should be as follows:

Support them

“The elders who are good leaders are to be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says: Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain, and the worker is worthy of his wage” (1 Tim. 5:17-18).

The church should provide reasonable financial support for its leaders.

Love them

“Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to give recognition to those who labour among you and lead you in the Lord and admonish you, and to regard them very highly in love because of their work” (1 Thess. 5:12-13).

The church should respect and honour its leaders.

Pray for them

“Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, through our Lord Jesus Christ and through the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in fervent prayers to God on my behalf” (Rom. 15:30).

Church leaders need specific prayer that goes beyond the generic “bless our pastor.” Here are ten very specific and biblical ways the church can pray for its leaders:

- Pray that their first love will be Jesus (John 21:15-17).
- Pray they will keep their marriage and family a priority; they are their first ministry (Eph. 5:25; 1 Tim. 3:4).
- Pray they will have the mindset that true success in ministry is measured by faithfulness to God. (1 Cor. 4:2).
- Pray for their purity so that they will not fall into temptation (Ps. 24:3-4).
- Pray they will continually seek God’s direction for the church (Ex. 33:13-15; Ps. 32:8; James 1:5).
- Pray they will have boldness to speak the truth and grace to speak it with humility (Acts 20:18-21; Eph. 6:19).
- Pray that they will teach sound doctrine (2 Tim. 2:15; Titus 1:9; 2:1).
- Pray they will discern what is most important and be guarded against the tyranny of the urgent (Acts 6:1-4).
- Pray God will protect them from negative criticism, false expectations, and gossip, and that they will have a soft heart in the face of abusive and mean-spirited people (Prov. 26:4).
- Pray they will receive the rest that they need (Luke 5:15-16).

Follow them

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, since they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account, so that they can do this with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you” (Heb. 13:17).

The church should submit to the authority of its leaders within the bounds of a healthy and biblical relationship.

The above responses tend to be more easily rendered when they are led well! In other words, the extent to which an individual follows a leader is proportional to the wholesomeness of the leader’s character and the depth of their relationship.

Appointment and dis-appointment

The Senior Pastors can appoint and dis-appoint a leadership team to work alongside them at any time.

There are biblical accounts of appointments being recognised (commissioned) in a public setting and involving prayer and the laying on of hands. Act 6:1-6 tells of when a group was chosen among an increasing number of followers of Jesus to undertake a form ministry, and how the followers “prayed and laid their hands on them”. A similar commission event involving prayer and the laying on of hands can be found in Acts 13:3, this time it was instructed by the Spirit directly.

In these instances, there is a laying on of hands by senior leaders in a public setting. There are prayers of commissioning (to a particular role of leadership) and commending (to the people they seek to serve). On these occasions, the church family is afforded the opportunity to consider their biblical call to practically support, respect and honour, and follow their leaders as they also pray.

“And in it all, the giver and blessing is God. He extends and expands the ministry of the leaders. He calls, sustains, and makes fruitful the ministry of the candidate. And he enriches, matures, and catalyses the congregation to love and good works, to minister to each other, and beyond, served by the teaching, wisdom, and faithful leadership of the newly appointed elder, deacon, or missionary.”

David Mathis - <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-laying-on-of-hands>

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