

The Role and Responsibilities of Elders

The Role of the Elder

Elders are leaders of the church, both men and women, whose primary task is to discern the mind of Christ for a particular Christian community. The pattern of elders leading local churches emerged in the early church (Acts 6:1–7), and several New Testament letters explain what this important role entails (1 Timothy 3:1–7; 1 Peter 5:1–4; Titus 1:6–9). One way to summarize the role of the elder as presented in the New Testament is to use the acronym G-O-E-S*. First, elders are *guardians* who uphold the truth, goodness, and beauty of the Gospel and protect the church from theological error, moral failure, and spiritual danger. Second, elders are *overseers* who lead the church through wise planning and decision-making. Third, elders are called to be *examples* of Christ through their way of life. And fourth, elders are *shepherds* who care for members of the community and reach out to those who are disconnected.

Leadership Structure

The group of active elders at Warehouse 242 is called the Session, which consists of both Ruling Elders and Teaching Elders. *Ruling Elders* are Participating Members elected by our community to serve actively on the Session for a renewable three-year term. Once they have completed their term(s), Ruling Elders roll off the Session into inactive status, but still maintain their leadership role as shepherds within our community. Elders can be re-elected to serve actively on the Session at a later date or recalled by the Session for special purposes. *Teaching Elders* are ordained ministers who are trained as pastors and recognized as such by our denomination, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Teaching Elders serve on staff in the local church as Senior/Lead Pastors and Associate Pastors. Our denomination is a national network of churches bound together by common beliefs, governing structure, and a commitment to mutual accountability and support. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church is divided into several regional networks called Presbyteries, and elders from each church gather together for a Presbytery meeting three times a year to discuss theological, missional, pastoral, and administrative issues. Overall, this Presbyterian system of church government creates a beautiful structure for support, decision-making, accountability, and effectiveness in mission.

While elders are responsible for the overall direction and health of the church, they work in partnership with the rest of the staff, who implement the mission and vision of Warehouse on a daily basis and deal with organizational details. Together, the elders and staff comprise the core leadership team of Warehouse 242, where prayer, trust, service, creativity, vulnerability, and integrity form key ingredients of the leadership culture. In addition, the elders and staff oversee and partner with scores of volunteers who serve according to their gifts and passions.

Elder Qualifications

In the Bible, several passages address the necessary qualifications for being an elder:

Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife**, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap. **(1 Timothy 3:1–7)**

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. **(1 Peter 5:1–4)**

*This acronym is borrowed from *The Practices of a Healthy Church* by Donald MacNair and Esther Meek.

**In the first century, it was most typical for married men to hold this leadership position, but this was a cultural dynamic that should not prevent single men or women from serving as elders in our twenty-first-century context.

An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless-not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it. (**Titus 1:6–9**)

Building on these biblical passages, based on the standards of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, and informed by practical demands, elder candidates must meet the following minimum criteria:

- * They must be mature, emotionally healthy, and trustworthy followers of Jesus
- * They must actively listen for God's direction for their life through prayer and study
- * They must believe God has gifted and called them for the role of elder
- * They must have a mature and growing faith in Jesus Christ that is apparent to others
- * They must believe that the Bible is the supreme and final authority for faith and life
- * They should strongly exhibit the spiritual gift of leadership
- * They should be able to explain the Gospel and defend their beliefs
- * They should exhibit consistent judgment in decision-making
- * They must agree with and demonstrate personal commitment to Participating Membership and the mission, vision, and core commitments of Warehouse 242
- * They must be active participants in the life of the church
- * They must be committed to the Essentials of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church without exception
- * They must generally align with Reformed theology as presented in the Westminster Confession of Faith
- * They must agree and align with the qualities of life and character described in the biblical passages above and the section from the Book of Government, included as an addendum.

Elder Characteristics

All elders are selected according to biblical requirements and should possess the personal qualities listed below, as well as demonstrated leadership gifts and skills.

- * Integrity, or the ability to know and do what is right
- * Enthusiasm about the Church and conviction about its mission
- * Authentic interest in people, with a desire to show hospitality
- * If married, exhibits healthy relationships with spouse and children
- * If single, exhibits healthy and godly friendships
- * Eagerness to serve others
- * Willingness to commit time, energy, and resources to the work of the church
- * Has the confidence of the Participating Membership in their leadership and spiritual oversight
- * Interest in looking ahead and planning for the future
- * Ability to interpret the needs and views of Participating Members in the Session
- * Ability to assess information and make critical decisions
- * Personally accessible and a protector of confidential information
- * Courage to express convictions
- * Ability to confront and manage conflict well for the purpose of restoration
- * Willingness to accept and support decisions made by the Session

Responsibilities

Individual elders should always represent the mind of Christ as demonstrated by commitment to the study of Scripture and to prayer. The following are other typical commitments and responsibilities:

- * Pray with those in need
- * Attend all Session meetings, elder interviews, training, and information sessions
- * Make decisions based on careful inquiry, consideration of the facts, and relational sensitivity
- * Monitor the results of ministry plans and goals
- * Administer baptism and Communion as requested
- * Adopt and monitor the Church budget and financial development strategy
- * Attend Presbytery and General Assembly meetings, as needed
- * Support the mission and vision of Warehouse 242 and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church
- * Participate fully and openly in decision-making dialogue
- * Proactively explore what's going on in the church
- * Track with staff members and provide counsel and encouragement
- * Participate in approved accountability structures
- * Defend the Lead Pastor from excessive demands or unproductive criticism
- * Give fully and enthusiastically of time, finances, and expertise
- * Recruit other volunteers for ministry needs
- * Create goodwill for the church to the community at large
- * Be familiar with The Book of Order and the Westminster Confession of Faith
- * Establish connection with and care for several Participating Members and their families

Addendum: Requirements of Ruling Elders from *The Book of Government*

The *Book of Government* is a document created by the Evangelical Presbyterian Church to establish leadership structure and protocol for individual churches and the denomination as a whole. The following are selections related to ruling elders:

"In the Old Testament, the office of Elder was established for the oversight of God's people. In the New Testament, this office is continued. Those who fill this office today for governing the Church are called Ruling Elders. Chosen by the people of a local church, these Ruling Elders are to watch over the spiritual welfare of that congregation. When appointed to participate in Presbytery or General Assembly, they shall watch over the spiritual welfare and participate diligently in the workings of that portion of the Church to which they are commissioned, recognizing that the Evangelical Presbyterian Church is a connectional church. The Ruling Elder shares authority with the Teaching Elder in all of the courts of the Church, in both rights and duties. It is the first duty of the Ruling Elder to represent the mind of Christ." (*Book of Government*, §9-8)

"According to Scripture, those who bear the office of Ruling Elder should be mature believers, led by the Holy Spirit, who exhibit a manner of life that conforms to the biblical description of an officer in Christ's Church (Numbers 11:16-17; Exodus 18:21; Romans 8:1-17; Romans 12; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9)." (*Book of Government*, §9-9)

"Ruling Elders should study and learn the Word. They should become equipped to teach the Word, lead worship, and prayer. They may be invited or commissioned to supply the ministry of the Word where none is available (1 Timothy 3:2). Ruling Elders, as Under-shepherds (Acts 20:26-28), should visit the sick, the bereaved, the lonely, the aged, the shut-in, and all those who have a pastoral need. In cases where there is a special need, the Ruling Elder shall be careful to inform the Pastor. Ruling Elders have a special responsibility to see to the development of the children of the congregation, to inquire after the inactive members, to encourage new members in spiritual development, and to otherwise show care for those whom they serve. Ruling Elders should be attentive to themselves and church members, guarding against dangers to the faith and to dangers to the moral life of believers. They are also responsible for warning, admonishing, and reclaiming those who stray. Where it is deemed

necessary, such situations should be brought to the attention of the Session for appropriate action in accordance with the *Book of Discipline*.” (*Book of Government*, §9-10)