

# ELDER CHAIRMAN Handbook



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## Table of Contents

THE ELDER BOARD CHAIRMAN	2
Executive Summary	2
INTRODUCTION	2
Sharpening the Role	3
APPOINTED BY THE ELDERSHIP	3
COORDINATES ELDER GOVERNANCE	4
THROUGH LEADING ELDERS MEETINGS	5
Before the Meetings	5
During the Meetings	6
After the Meetings	6
Summary of EBC Responsibilities for Elder Meetings	7
FACILITATING ACCOUNTABILITY AND EMPOWERMENT FOR THE LEAD PASTOR	8
Common Mistakes Made By EBCs	9
CONCLUSION	10

# THE ELDER BOARD CHAIRMAN

## Executive Summary

The role of the Elder Board Chairman (EBC) is essential to effective governance and leadership progress. This role can be defined as follows:

- Appointed by an eldership, the EBC
- Coordinates elder governance through leading Elders Meetings, and
- Facilitates the necessary accountability and maximum empowerment for the Lead Pastor.

This paper expounds this definition, integrating interviews and quotes from experienced board chairs inside and outside of GCC, and supplying the reader with action steps for EBC's.

## INTRODUCTION

Imagine two different elderships leading two similar churches. Each sits around a table for an Elders Meeting. Each group is scheduled to meet for three hours. Both want to make it count.

Stepping into one room, you observe a tumultuous assembly of misunderstanding, interruption, and confusion. No one arrived early. You suspect everyone will leave late.

You sit down to closely study the turmoil.

The agenda is sweeping in scope. But you observe that's not really a problem—because no one is guided by it. The leaders seem reactive, easily polarized, and conversation betrays undercurrents of agendas and competition. Two elders dominate the discussion, while some remain silent throughout the evening. The Lead Pastor seesaws between dominance and disinterest. The meeting feels high in drama and low in decisions. As the evening runs long, it concludes abruptly with most of the agenda punted to the next session. After a quick prayer, the group evaporates—the room sits empty.

Entering the other room, you find an eldership of equal size having a very different meeting. Most everyone arrives promptly, and the meeting starts at the appointed time. The agenda is neither a surprise nor a starting point for contentious negotiation. It was sent out early and now provides the pathway for profitable conversations. Perspectives are diverse, but the group is united on the conviction that the church comes first. With each new item, the context is summarized, the issue presented, and the decision-point defined clearly. Discussion commences. Dialogue progresses towards clarity and, eventually, a decision. Redundant opinions are minimized as each elder

listens carefully to the others. More reserved members are drawn out by wise questions. The Lead Pastor observes and feels free to participate, but often waits until they ask his opinion. The meeting progresses steadily, despite being punctuated by sincere prayer at appropriate times.

There's one thing that can make the difference between these two pictures: An Elder Board Chairman who understands his role and possesses the courage to execute it effectively.

## Sharpening the Role

As church roles go, the Elder Board Chairman (EBC) is neither paid nor prominent. Yet its relative anonymity does not render it inconsequential. In fact, this role is a hinge upon which eldership unity and progress turns. Are elders discussing the right things in Elders Meetings? Does their decision-making display the values of the kingdom? Of their local church? Does the Lead Pastor feel empowered and supported, or muzzled and immobilized? All critical questions, and the eldership with an uncluttered and united vision of the EBC role advances quickly towards the right answers.

What exactly is an uncluttered and united vision for this role?

Appointed by an eldership, the EBC:

- Coordinates elder governance through leading elders meetings, and,
- Facilitates the necessary accountability and maximum empowerment for the Lead Pastor.

## APPOINTED BY THE ELDERSHIP

The Elder Board Chairman is appointed by the other elders. Since the authority for leading the church comes from God and inheres in the elders, they must work with the Lead Pastor to authorize one elder to lead the meetings and organize the elders' governance efforts.<sup>1</sup> This does not mean the congregation should have no voice in the process. It simply means the elders bear the responsibility to ensure the EBC is appointed.

It's customary for the EBC role to have a term limit. Since this role is authorized by the elders, it falls to them to define the period of service which best serves the church and elders. The EBC role can be renewed, but best practices typically keep the same person in the role for no more than two

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<sup>1</sup> The role and job description for the EBC does not change for churches that believe governing authority (or the "keys," in Matt. 16: 17-19) are held by the congregation.

terms.<sup>2</sup> This limits burnout and allows the EBC to be refreshed and renewed by a season away from the burdens of the role. It also provides a caring and honorable way to acknowledge that numerical and financial growth increases organizational complexity and broadens eldership needs. An EBC who is effective for one stage of growth may not be suitable for all stages of growth. Term limits help ensure that the church's care and development remains the priority in every season.

## COORDINATES ELDER GOVERNANCE

The Chairman is himself an elder. That means he shares the responsibility to *govern* and *minister* in the local church (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2). As an important aside, an elder's responsibility to *minister* means the elder is a shepherd. He tends souls, cares for the suffering, and applies the word of God to people for their immediate and eternal benefit. Ministry includes everything an elder does as part of his shepherding and leadership role outside of the Elders Meetings. An EBC does not sacrifice his responsibility for ministry, nor does he trade it away simply because he is assuming the EBC role. When it comes to ministry, the EBC should expect to follow the Savior and lead by example (John 13:14-15).

Governing, however, is the work of the elders composite: it is “the proper application of power and policies for the mission of that local church.”<sup>3</sup> Unlike most nonprofit organizations, the church is not governed exclusively through by-laws, where roles are defined by an organizational constitution and a governing board with clear divisions between governance and management. Churches have a higher authority: Scripture, which must be consulted and followed.

In the body of Christ, eldership is defined first by Scripture which does not recognize the customary non-profit division of governance and management responsibilities. In the New Testament, elders exercised governance while also remaining embedded in most features of ministry.<sup>4</sup> The blending of these two functions into one elder calls for discernment about which hat to wear at different times.

The context for governance is the Elders Meetings. In fact, governance can *only* happen when elders meet. How does governance flow from these meetings? The two levers of Elder governance—the means by which governance takes place—are: (1) the decisions made, and (2) the policies enacted. This leads us to the next feature of our EBC definition: the *Elders Meetings*.

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<sup>2</sup> It's common for an EBC term to last either two or three years.

<sup>3</sup> Dave Harvey, *Elder Roles: A Model for Authority, Clarity, and Decision Making*, Great Commission Collective.

<sup>4</sup> Here “ministry” is used in the broadest sense to include all shepherding, management, and functions of the church.

# THROUGH LEADING ELDERS MEETINGS

For churches to truly flourish, elders must meet. In fact, the Elders Meeting is the exclusive locus for elder governance. Understanding governance this way has four vital benefits:

- It ties the exercise of authority to plurality (shared leadership), not to casual or individual acts by an elder outside of the meeting.
- It brings clarity to where and how governance operates.
- It more clearly distinguishes governance from ministry work.
- It yokes the exercise of authority to an accountable structure and protects the church from “domineering” exercises of individual authority. (1 Peter 5:2-3)

Yet for meetings to be profitable, they must be led well. “The role of the facilitator,” says Alexander Strauch, “is crucial to productive meetings.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the work done to prepare for these meetings is crucial to their effectiveness.

## Before the Meetings

The EBC will be a liaison between the Board and the Lead Pastor (LP). He will need to collaborate with the Lead Pastor in developing the agenda. He should seek input from the LP before the meeting and get feedback afterward.

Once the agenda is completed, he should send it to the elders for consideration. The EBC must vigilantly restrict the agenda to critical issues and monitor it for the creep of trivial items. As often as possible, agenda items should be framed towards making decisions and not merely having discussions. Governance happens, not by mere debate, but by decisions.

Each year the EBC should assume responsibility to coordinate the approval of the budget. The EBC should also track the policies necessary for wise church governance, consult the Lead Pastor on their relevance and priority, and then guide the elders in developing and approving policy.

As trust grows among elders, agendas sharpen and elders escape the tyranny of the urgent. They think together about the future more. But the wise EBC approaches each month remembering: *The Elders Meeting is the primary context for church governance; the agenda is the lever pulled by elders to guide that governance.* Where meetings happen weekly, a fixed agenda may be more useful where elders can submit additional items to the EBC.

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<sup>5</sup> Alexander Strauch, *Meetings That Work: A Guide to Effective Elders' Meetings*. Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 2001, 57.

## During the Meetings

During the Elders Meetings, the EBC's responsibility is to help the meetings serve their purpose. Preparing and communicating the agenda ahead of time will grease the wheels of the meeting. "Meetings go well," said one tenured organizational consultant, "when the EBC is genuinely seeking active participation from each leader present, championing healthy dissent and minority opinions, and promoting unity."<sup>6</sup> Another Elder Board Chairman suggests that each meeting should leave room for the Holy Spirit's unrevealed agenda. "The ideal EBC manages the meeting time by staying on schedule," he said, "but also remains sensitive to the Spirit's leading for those rare times when the schedule should be abandoned."<sup>7</sup> This, of course, includes spending time in prayer for wisdom from God and for the people of God.

The EBC facilitates the meetings, clarifying and summarizing where necessary, and inviting conversation, all while moving things forward from discussion to decision. He will guide the elders in developing policies related to church membership, budget, building, job descriptions, and more. Sometimes he'll gently redirect extraneous conversations or ask for a summary from someone dominating the meeting. He may occasionally need to speak offline with elders who display a pattern of dominance to ensure space is created for all elders to participate.

Towards those more reluctant to participate, he may draw out opinions. If their reluctance becomes a pattern, he may follow up privately to discuss their responsibility as an elder. After all, elders convene in an Elders Meeting to lead through their biblical convictions and tested wisdom. An elder unwilling to share his opinion may just need to overcome the fear of man and embrace his responsibility. Or he may need to consider whether he is better suited as a deacon. A good EBC will help him discern whether his reluctance is rooted in his soul or his call.

Good meetings are marked by active discussions that lead to wise decisions. The discerning EBC will not default to *immediately* soliciting feedback from the Lead Pastor. His goal, as one Executive Pastor summarized it, is "to lead and guide conversations to a healthy resolution."<sup>8</sup> He makes sure that information, thoughts, conclusions, and action items are all recorded and followed up on (whether he does this himself, or delegates it to another).

## After the Meetings

Depending on the situation, the EBC may be asked to communicate governance decisions to the rest of the congregation. Collaborating with the Lead Pastor here is key to knowing who should be

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<sup>6</sup> Tim Beltz, Board and XP Consultant.

<sup>7</sup> Larry Woods, Elder Board Chairman at Radiant in Avon, Indiana.

<sup>8</sup> Grady Adkins, Elder and Executive Pastor at Coram Deo in Davenport, Iowa

the voice, and when. But always remember: the Elder Board Chairman has no authority outside of the Elders Meetings except the authority to conduct business with the senior leader in keeping with the responsibilities outlined above. If the EBC *does* communicate outside the meetings, he does not act as a rogue agent, but as a representative of the entire eldership. This is essential for the unity of the Board, and for the unity of the church.

## Summary of EBC Responsibilities for Elder Meetings

When	EBC Responsibilities
<i>Before the Meeting</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop agenda in collaboration with the LP</li> <li>• Frame agenda items towards decisions</li> <li>• Notify the elders on items for pre-meeting prayer and reflection.</li> <li>• Include forward-looking items</li> <li>• Send agenda to Board</li> <li>• Adjust to feedback as necessary</li> <li>• Budget discussion should begin in Q3</li> <li>• Consider any policies needed</li> </ul>
<i>During the Meeting</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ratify minutes from the last meeting</li> <li>• Present items for discussion</li> <li>• Facilitate discussion with open-ended and guiding questions</li> <li>• Summarize perspectives for clarity and/or for time's sake</li> <li>• Lead towards decisions</li> <li>• Make room for the Holy Spirit's agenda</li> <li>• Ensure proper notes are taken (this can be delegated)</li> <li>• Read the room and ensure all elders are engaged and participating appropriately relative to the issue.</li> </ul>
<i>After the Meeting</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure notes are sent to the Board, including action items and their assignments</li> <li>• Ensure governance decisions are communicated to the congregation</li> <li>• Circle back to LP to debrief on the meeting and look ahead to the next meeting</li> <li>• Follow-up with any elders who experienced tension, frustration, or appeared unexpectedly disengaged.</li> </ul>



# FACILITATING ACCOUNTABILITY AND EMPOWERMENT FOR THE LEAD PASTOR

In the *Plurality Principle*, we propose five different hats a Lead Pastor must wear to be effective in his role<sup>9</sup>:

- **Custodian of the Plurality:** He is responsible to see that the associate pastors and elders are cared for.
- **Catalyst of Progress:** He is responsible for the elders' development.
- **Curator of Culture:** He protects the church's unique vision and mission.
- **Captain of Communication:** He is the leadership's voice to the church and community.
- **Connector for Partnerships:** He represents the church to its network, denomination and/or partners.

The entire eldership has a unique responsibility toward the Lead Pastor. They must understand why these different hats are vital to church health and help church members understand their importance as well. Elders must also grasp the maturity and humility necessary from all parties, including the Lead Pastor, to achieve a culture where hats can be exchanged multiple times each day; perhaps even multiple times in one meeting. Here the EBC plays a critical role by helping foster and support a culture that *facilitates necessary accountability* and *maximizes empowerment as the Lead Pastor manages his diverse responsibilities*. For the EBC, this means he needs to:

- Define “necessary accountability” together with the lead pastor and elders. The most effective accountability springs from clarity and alignment in three areas:
  - **The Rules:** What are the specific boundaries the elders believe the lead pastor needs to observe?
  - **The Score:** What specific standards do the elders use to track and measure progress from the Lead Pastor?
  - **The Win:** What does it look like for the lead pastor to have success in his role?
- Press for clarity on what it means to “maximize empowerment” for the Lead Pastor.
  - The Lead Pastor has been authorized by the elders to provide leadership to the church, which also includes supplying vision to the elders for discussion, adjustment, and agreement. The disposition of the Elder Board should be “go until we say stop” and not “stop until we say go.” This does not assume the pastor's leadership is flawless, nor even his primary gift. But the wise eldership recognizes the role as vested with the burden of leadership and works with the lead pastor to complement and supplement where needed.

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<sup>9</sup> See, Dave Harvey, *The Plurality Principle: How to Build and Maintain a Thriving Church Leadership Team* (Crossway 2021), 32-38. The word “Liaison” under the last responsibility has been swapped out for “Connector.”

- Organize essential care and compensation.
- Encourage the Lead Pastor in his responsibility to lead in the 5 areas outlined.

There is a built-in tension between the Board and the Lead Pastor: the LP is the “first among equals” who will lead in developing and communicating the vision and mission of the church. Yet the Board holds him accountable, evaluates his job performance, and establishes his responsibilities, parameters, and job description. Unity between the two parties is the reward of enduring humility, unrelenting communication, a mutual commitment to the gospel mission, timely expressions of care and diligent effort.

The EBC wants to be on the same page with the LP before the start of every meeting, so he diligently takes initiative. Communication is the key. Grady Adkins recommends the EBC and LP have regular one-on-one meetings: “This will help them build a quicker and deeper relationship, understand each other better, know how to best support each other, and provide a more intimate level of accountability.”

The EBC doesn’t relate to the LP in a silo, though: he works with the whole Board to support and evaluate the Lead Pastor. A healthy culture displays a baseline of necessary accountability and maximum empowerment towards the Lead Pastor. He ensures the LP is paid appropriately, and that he and his family are well cared for spiritually and relationally. But proactive relationships are essential. “It starts with a really robust relationship,” observed Nate Johnson, “and humility in that relationship, followed by the diligent pursuit from the Elder Chair to the Lead Pastor. It’s not just for business, but for relationships, family, and friendship.”<sup>10</sup>

## Common Mistakes Made By EBCs

*Exercising his chairman authority outside of the Elders Meeting without being authorized by the eldership.*

Remember: the EBC’s primary role is to lead the Elders Meetings.

*Flipping the adjectives referenced earlier on the elder disposition towards the Lead Pastor FROM “necessary accountability” and “maximum empowerment” TO “necessary empowerment” and “maximum accountability.”*

Remember: The Lead Pastor has already been authorized by the elders to lead. Whether the elders realize it or not, leading is fundamental to the role. Where he is titled “Lead Pastor”,

<sup>10</sup> Nate Johnson was the Elder Board Chairman at Summit Church in Fort Myers, Florida.

“leading” is embedded in his title. The disposition of the Elder Board should be “go until we say stop” and not “stop until we say go”.

*Creating an elder culture that mirrors Congress where two branches exist as a system of checks and balances towards each other. One common form of this is where the elders believe they must protect the church from the Lead Pastor’s weaknesses or innovations. The elders are the check and balance system to restrain the Lead Pastor’s role.*

Remember: Necessary accountability and maximum empowerment are the guiding principles.

*Assuming others are caring for the Lead Pastor and his wife, or the encouragement they receive from others makes it unnecessary to hear affirmation from you.*

Remember: We are all called to encourage each other (Heb. 3: 13). But there are unique burdens and attacks aimed at any Christian called to preach and lead. Subvert these assaults through consistent encouragement.

*Remaining passive in Elders Meetings instead of actively guiding the conversations.*

Remember: The EBC includes both facilitation and leadership. Most elders will appreciate the complexity of moving the meeting moving forward and understand your attempts to move discussion towards decision.

*Overlooking the importance of discussing how your eldership can become a more effective plurality.*

Remember: The call to eldership includes watching ourselves, our doctrine, our leadership and the integrity of our plurality. Make sure all of them are being graciously evaluated.

## CONCLUSION

At the end of his reign, King David recorded the Lord’s perspective on godly leadership:

“When one rules justly over men,  
ruling in the fear of God,  
he dawns on them like the morning light,  
like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning,  
like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth.” (2 Sam 23:3-4)

This is the goal of every elder, and every Board: that they would rule well (1 Tim 5:17) for the sake of the flock that is among them (1 Pet 5:2), serving and shepherding and leading in the fear of God. They shepherd to shower blessings on the church, to give their people a little warmth of God's love, and a larger glimpse of his glory. In doing so, the Elder Board Chairman adds a little dew to this shower:

“Behold, how good and pleasant it is  
when brothers dwell in unity!  
It is like the precious oil on the head,  
running down on the beard,  
on the beard of Aaron,  
running down on the collar of his robes!  
It is like the dew of Hermon,  
which falls on the mountains of Zion!  
For there the Lord has commanded the blessing,  
life forevermore.” (Psalm 133:1-3)

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