

Discussing the Eldership Guidelines Document

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[0 : 00] Oh Hello, everybody.

Welcome to the Providence Podcast. My name is Chris Oswald. I'm the senior pastor at Providence Community Church. Thank you for joining us again. Some of you have been asking, what's up with the recent podcast output?

There's a significant increase in the number that are being produced. And there are a number of reasons for this. One of them is that I have, as many of you know, had trouble finding an office at Providence.

We are just outgrowing a number of those spaces traditionally set for office space. And that's a good thing. It really doesn't bother me at all.

I'm currently kind of hidey-hold in the room with the refrigerator and the internet modem and the paper supplies and the communion supplies.

[1 : 48] And, you know, that suits just fine for a couple days a week. It's an easy place to kind of hole up in and do some work. But I really don't find that space to be ideal for recording podcasts.

There's a lot of ambient noise and it's just kind of not the ideal environment. And so one of the reasons that I've been able to do more of these is because, as many of you know, my parents live with me.

And for a season, we had our son and our daughter-in-law living with us as well. And they moved out. And so we were able to move my parents down into their space in the basement.

And we remodeled that space and put a little kitchenette down there for them. So they're downstairs now. And that leaves one of our bedrooms open upstairs here at the house.

And I'm working on turning that space into an office. Actually, guys, I would really love if we could have maybe a workday to help me get this all knocked out.

[2 : 49] I have kind of an ambitious plan for this space, including a space that would look good on video so that we can start recording some teaching via video from what will become a little office slash studio here in my house.

So one day, I hope that we can all work together and knock that out, hopefully just on a Saturday or so. So that's another reason that it's just, you know, I'm able to sit in one space and have all my equipment set up and so forth in a relatively quiet room.

So that's one reason why there have been more podcasts. The other one, and I think this is just an interesting life lesson for some of you, is I'm just pretty self-critical with the content that I produce.

But the truth is, is that really for most of my adult life, I've woke up, woken up, you know, pretty early in the morning and will sit down and read the word and then kind of catch up on some other reading.

And then I write, I write almost every morning about 2000 words. And I've been doing this for years and years and years, but almost all of it feels to me to be unhelpful or not polished enough or so on and so forth.

[4 : 08] And so I've been working on just my mindset with that and trying to, you know, loosen the self-criticism a little bit, loosen those reins and just be more consistent in sharing the things that I'm working on.

So that's kind of why things are, you know, increasing in terms of podcast production. Now, today I want to introduce a document to you that we have been working on as a leadership team that essentially just offers guidelines for our vision for the eldership team.

And so today, you know, I will be reading a little bit more than normal. I don't know how that's going to be, you know, come off, you know, in terms of the listening experience. But I'm actually reading from a document that we've been working on as a team for, you know, a number of months.

And I want to just expose this to you. I will post this as well on Basecamp. But I want you to see, I want you to be able to hear this. And maybe I'll drop in and offer explanations as they, you know, dawn on me.

This document is definitely a working document. This is just a kind of 1.0. There was a lot of work done to just even get it to this point. But we imagine that there will be lots of other wordsmithing that needs to be done.

[5 : 29] Phrases that weren't as carefully constructed as they could have been and so on and so forth. We did our best to get a good minimum viable product, as they talk about in the tech world, a good 1.0 product.

But we know that there's probably going to be, you know, questions that arise and clarifications that need to be made and so forth. So what I'm going to read to you now is the 1.0 version of this.

And then we will keep this updated in a document folder on Basecamp so that people will know.

And if anything, you know, significant arises, a significant change arises to this document, we'll be sure to let you know.

Okay, so here's how the document starts. This is the eldership guidelines for Providence Community Church. God is glorious. The gospel is precious. Jesus Christ bought the church with his blood.

In light of these truths, the leadership team at Providence dearly wishes to glorify God, advance the gospel, and steward Christ's church with the utmost care and faithfulness. We long for our church to continue to grow in fruitfulness for the glory of God as we live out truth and beauty in community.

[6 : 39] To do this, we need to expand and maintain a leadership team that will be able to meet the needs of our flock as a biblical, timely, and effective manner as possible.

Therefore, we are laying the following guidance, following the following guidance for how eldership at Providence is defined and maintained. Eldership Principles The Importance of Plurality Elders are to serve as a plurality and not alone.

The New Testament teaches this by precedent, seen by the fact that all mentions of elder are plural. Acts 14.23 15.2 16.4 Philippians 1.1 1 Timothy 4.14 Plurality is a means of acknowledging that God gives a diversity of gifts to his people.

1 Corinthians 12.7-11 No man has all the gifts necessary to lead a local church. For example, while all elders must be able to teach, 1 Timothy 3.2 Some will be gifted, some will be more gifted than others.

Plurality will often mean that different elders have different responsibilities, reflecting their diverse gifting as much as is feasible. Furthermore, when decisions are made in leading a church, one man may possess more wisdom in a given area, in which case it is prudent for mutual deference to be exercised among the other elders.

[8 : 07] So here's an example of that. This is not in the document. If we are talking about rental lease agreements, real estate deals, and so forth, well, those are things that I've done in the past before even moving to Kansas City.

And so I might have insight there and therefore might have more authority there. If we're talking about security issues, well, that wouldn't be my realm.

That'd be John's realm and so on and so forth. So there's a recognition within a plurality that God's assembled us as a team with a diverse set of giftings.

And that in any given moment, one man is the authority on a particular topic. The document goes on, a church plant may have a season in which there is only one elder.

You know, that's pretty common, not only with church plants, but just also churches that are recovering from, you know, season of ill health or whatever. However, while the New Testament has a category for an authentic church without a plurality of elders, this should be understood as a temporary necessity to be remedied as quickly as appropriately possible.

[9 : 21] While the precedent of plurality in the New Testament is important, it cannot be an excuse to overlook requirements of the man who is to be an elder. A church will more likely suffer from unqualified elders than it is from, than it will from having too few elders in office.

That's a very, very important principle. We don't want to be hasty in arriving at this mandate we find in the scriptures because that mandate, the mandate being a plurality, because that mandate also includes an extreme level, an emphasis on qualifications.

All right, so the next section of this document goes into the concept of teaching elders and ruling elders. 1 Timothy 5.17 says, Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

This verse suggests that not all men who served as elders were especially or explicitly devoted to preaching and teaching. While 1 Timothy 3 requires all elders to be able to teach, 1 Timothy 5.17 leads us to understand that some elders are uniquely devoted to teaching while others rule in a more general way.

And here we differ from our denomination in the sense that officially the denomination views all elders in a more uniform way and thus would require what we would call ruling elders to be as theologically proficient as those devoted to teaching.

[10:52] So they require more theological training from ruling elders than we think is wise, as we think that that standard keeps local churches from fully benefiting from the various blessings associated with bivocational elders.

A church is full of men who possess godly character but lack sufficient theological education to pass our denomination's ordination requirements. We do agree with our denomination that those elders who are devoted to teaching ought to be rigorously evaluated to ensure that they are not just sound in doctrine but theologically proficient.

So what we're saying there is that our denomination views all elders as the same. They don't make a distinction between teaching elders and ruling elders.

And therefore, they hold one standard for all elders. And that standard is relatively high on the side of the theological proficiency.

It is, of course, true that all elders ought to be qualified according to the standards set forth in passages like 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 and 1 Peter 5.

[12:03] But we would say that there's an additional bar for those who are going to dedicate themselves to teaching and preaching that the other elders do not need to meet.

And that higher bar being theological proficiency. And so this is where we are differing from our denomination in this respect in recognizing the existence of both teaching elders who must meet the ordination standards of our denomination while viewing another set of elders who must meet only, I say only, it's not a low bar, the qualifications set forth explicitly in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

So that's an explanation of our schema for teaching elders and ruling elders and how we differ. We don't find that difference to be substantial enough to break fellowship with our denomination.

We don't think that this is going to be an issue in that sense. But it's important for you to understand that, for instance, the ruling elders that we'll be installing, they don't count as elders in the eyes of our denomination because they are not qualified in the, according to the denominational standards, which includes this really high bar of ordination and examination.

Just a quick word on that.

[13:57] Various theological topics. And there are papers to be written and ordination exams to be taken. And so we recognize that that's really good for people who are going to be primarily doing the work of teaching and preaching.

And if a man has, you know, an especially unique interest or commitment to more formal theology, you know, he's going to find that ordination process a little bit more doable than one who is just more generally committed to serving the church in practical ways and in general kind of leadership. So because we've created these two categories, we need to then talk about the differentiation between qualification and calling.

If we were only going to the standard set by the denomination, it would be a relatively simple issue. You have to do all this work and then you have to be examined by what is in our case the region, the Midwest Northwest region of Sovereign Grace churches.

And it would be a very, very religious.

[15:41] Potentially a church where many are qualified, but few are called. That's a category that we need to have at Providence in particular because our focus is on raising up as many men as possible who meet the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3.

We believe that is a really good benchmark for masculinity, for masculinity, for masculinity. And so we use that set of qualifications as sort of a guideline for how we disciple all the men in our church. And, you know, hopefully if we're successful, and I think that we are being successful thanks to the Lord, we're going to have a lot of guys who match the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3, but not all of

those guys or not even many of those guys will be called.

The document says it this way. Since our wider culture is dealing with a dearth of capable men, the notion of leaving some guys on the bench might seem counterintuitive.

But as God blesses a local church, it will find itself having a surplus of men who in scarcer contexts would be called to serve. It's important to stipulate that a healthy church will always have a number of men who, while being qualified to serve as elders, will not be called to serve in that role.

[16:57] Here are some shorthand ways we just provide a little bullet list of shorthand phrases that kind of communicate this idea. The first one being many qualified, few called.

Secondly, qualification does not equal calling. Third, calling is contextual. Calling is, I could say it this way, calling is subjective.

Qualifications are objective, but calling is subjective. And finally, the need is a big part of the call.

Here's some examples, just some, you know, theoretical examples.

Jim is a godly man with a solid track record of service to the saints. He is both qualified to serve as an elder and has a desire to do so, yet the existing elders do not believe the church needs additional elders at this time.

Like Jim, another guy named Brad is both qualified and desirous to serve as an elder, yet the elders determine that another man who is also qualified would, based on his giftings or whatever, be a better fit for the plurality at this time.

[18:06] Both Jim and Brad have a couple of options. They can continue to serve at Providence in various ways, various informal ways, and trust that the Lord may make him an elder, make them an elder, elders at some point.

They can ask the elders to help them find another church that has a more urgent need for an elder.

This is something that a category we don't typically entertain.

But this is a reasonable category, and it's actually part of our grand scheme, you know, as viewing this production of leaders as an effort to not only strengthen our church, but to strengthen the kingdom at large.

So one possibility you might find is with a guy like Jim or Brad is that they are qualified. And in other contexts, they might be called. And so what that could involve potentially is that a decision is made to go look for another church that has a need for an elder.

And this would obviously require leaving Providence and potentially moving to another part of the country. And it should also be expected that there would be a transition period. You know, it's unlikely for a guy to leave this church and go to another church and just become an elder, you know, on day one.

[19:25] There's going to have to be a feeling out period and a transition period, even in that new church. So both of these options are perfectly acceptable and depend in large part on the intensity of the desire that the individual has to serve as an elder.

So how does this all work? How do men become elders at Providence? Well, which kind of elder are we talking about? If we're talking about teaching elders, those formally ordained by Sovereign Grace, that process is all completely set up.

And it is pretty objective. We would simply follow the guidelines provided by Sovereign Grace churches and their ordination processes included in the document that I'm reading from.

And it is really pretty simple in terms of it's all laid out for you. This is what you have to do. Well, what if a man wants to become a ruling elder? That's what John and Noah and Noah are becoming. Well, there are a variety of ways that that could happen. And we can't actually, you know, just like give you as clear a path because that calling is just much more subjective and has a lot to do with the needs of the church in the moment.

[20:39] But we see it as essentially coming about in a kind of confluence of three factors. Number one, biblical qualification, right?

It's got to meet those qualifications. Number two, a need in the church for him. And number three, a history of growing and healthy church service within Providence.

That's the three ways that we, if the confluence of those three factors would sort of help us to identify and appoint additional ruling elders. For any elder within Providence teaching or ruling, they must meet the qualifications as defined in 1 Timothy 3, 1 through 7.

We believe that an elder candidate should be displaying these characteristics fully, consistently, and over a significant period of time. Therefore, it is essential that an elder candidate be living

within community at Providence for some time.

While there is not a prescribed time for a candidate to become known and observed, it could take as many as three to five years for someone to display these qualities in a consistent manner.

[21 : 53] To help us assess a person's qualifications, we use a tool developed by Sovereign Grace that we think fits just fine for both ruling and teaching elders.

And that is known as the eldership qualification matrix. That matrix looks at an individual's desire, personal character, marriage, parenting, ministry strength, ability to shepherd, and some attention is paid to his biblical and theological acumen.

For a candidate's consideration regarding being able to teach, we would assess a ruling elder's ability to teach in a variety of settings, whether that be one-on-one counseling or small group settings.

And we would especially keep an eye on their ability to correct opponents, which is seen in Titus 1 as a qualification. Finally, while not determinative, congregational affirmation and observation will be taken into account.

It is important, I think, the shorthand way of saying this is that when a man becomes an elder at Providence, we don't want anyone to be surprised. We want people to think, well, you know, that makes sense.

[23 : 09] He's got the character, we've seen it, he's been serving, and so on and so forth. Second, to become ordained as a ruling elder, a position on the eldership team must be determined as needed by the current eldership team.

This will be very much determined by the season and ministry requirements that Providence is going through or projected to go through over the next two to three years. Therefore, as stated in the reflections earlier in this document, Providence may have men in the congregation who are biblically qualified to lead, however, based on their individual set of specific talents, ministry experiences, or interests, they may or may not be installed as a ruling elder.

Third, any ruling elder candidate will have demonstrated, you know, a pretty long history of growing and healthy church service and responsibility. What this could look like will be detailed further in this document, but what is primary is that a ruling elder candidate must have shown proven character, gifting, and relational strength in their ministry history at Providence.

How they have accomplished their ministry goals will be just as important as apparent success of their ministry. We're looking not only to, like, are they doing good stuff, but are they doing that stuff in a good way?

Have they been humble, kind, encouraging, faithful, and zealous in their efforts? Have they built strong relationships through their ministry history, seen as a leader whose life and example will be a blessing to the congregation?

[24 : 42] Ultimately, are they living for the glory of God, the advance of the gospel, and the health of the church? Or are they living to accomplish their own ends? All of this matters when considering a ruling candidate.

Now, next in the document, we talk about examples of potential pathways to becoming a ruling elder. The ascent into eldership will most likely, I don't like that word ascent, that's something I would change.

It's not, I don't like that. Anyway, we'll fix it. The ascent into eldership will most likely not be as clean as a single path. A candidate may be involved in more than one category of service.

The emphasis, however, is on a growing level of service and oversight within the church in, you know, specific areas or in variety of areas in the church. In addition, growth into eldership is not guaranteed by following through any of the potential paths that we'll talk about in a moment.

These are just potential paths. We're going to show you these potential paths in two ways. We're going to first give you a couple guys' testimonies. And then secondly, we're going to just talk about a potential sequence of ministry roles that could potentially lead into eldership.

[25 : 59] But none of this is, you know, should be taken as like, this is the way. It's far more subjective than that. Okay, so how do regular members become elders?

Don't love that either. All right, let's first take two guys that are on the team and listen to how they describe their journey.

This is Dove Cohen's story. My journey to eldership was truly a story of God's grace and continual upbuilding. Back in New Jersey, I attended Sovereign Grace Marlton for about 20 years, growing up

in the Christian life with a richly biblical gospel-centered community, serving as a community group assistant leader and then leader for a number of years.

I had the wonderful opportunity to observe and learn from a church that had progressed through a variety of seasons of flourishing and growth. In coming to Providence in 2020, Christine and I were focused intently on being here to serve and did not expect any form of official leadership.

Within time, though, God opened the door for us to assist and then lead a community group. In addition, we had the privilege of initiating a number of events from the Easter egg hunt to the Passover Seder. Finally, and most pivotal, I had the opportunity to take part in Providence's theological leadership program, which set me on a path for engaging with the Sovereign Grace ordination process through a variety of reading and writing assignments.

[27 : 22] Prior to official ordination within Providence, I served as unofficial support to Chris, helping him process various questions and challenges facing the church. Now, as an elder, I still lead a community group, oversee our parent youth ministry, and serve as counsel to our JCC outreach team, as well as teach on Sunday mornings every six to eight weeks.

So that's Dove's story. Here's John Hegarty's story. My journey to eldership at Providence Community Church highlights the gratitude I have for what Christ accomplished on the cross. I grew up in a solid Christian home and faithfully attended a Christ-centered church with my family, participating in a wide variety of service opportunities.

When my wife Lauren and I married in 2011, we moved to Overland Park and immediately plugged into Providence, finding it through the beneficial online resource, Church Finder, at Nine Marks.

During our past 14 years at Providence, we have committed ourselves to the service of the church and body, passionately believing in Christ's love for His bride. Through our time as care group leaders, caring for the building, participation in countless events, and serving as a deacon, my joy has been loving the people of this church through times of peace and turmoil.

My four children have grown up in this church, and truly, this body of believers is our family. On top of serving, I've taken part in Providence's theological leadership program and have served as a deacon for the past six years.

[28 : 48] Additionally, I helped kickstart Providence's first family Sunday school, which has been going strong for over a year. It profoundly has been a blessing to serve this body of believers.

So there's two stories taken from our own team that show kind of different ways of becoming elders. And then we have just a couple of example pathways for how this might play out.

A person could move from being a member to leading a huddle, a discipleship huddle, or becoming a community group assistant, and then become a community group leader, and then potentially a deacon.

And then they would become, at some point in the future after that, an elder. You could also see a situation where a member becomes a manager of a particular team, a ministry team, and they lead that team and become a deacon and then become an elder.

There's another way where they could just become, you know, they're in a ministry, they eventually wind up leading that ministry, and, you know, so on and so forth. So those are just some examples of how people might move through the process to become a ruling elder.

[30 : 07] From here, we want to talk about kind of the off-ramp. We've talked about the on-ramp, and now we want to talk about the off-ramp.

How does a man not, how does a man stop being an elder? Well, some people put term limits on their elders, but we've chosen not to do that.

The document says, There are three passages that we use.

I've already mentioned them. 1 Timothy 3, 1-7, Titus 1, 5-9, and 1 Peter 5, 1-5. These are the three passages we'll use to consistently evaluate our qualification and fitment for the plurality.

Broadly speaking, when you look at those texts, you see three conditions that all matter for assessing whether an elder is an ongoing, you know, is qualified and viable as an officer of the church.

[31 : 36] The first one is willingness. You know, the first qualification mentioned in 1 Timothy 3, 1 is a desire to serve in that role. This concept is also highlighted in 1 Peter 5, 2, where it says that shepherds must shepherd the flock without compulsion, not under compulsion, but willingly.

They need to serve because they're willing to serve. So that's kind of the first point of assessment that the plurality will use on itself. That is, are we all still willing to do this?

Is anyone here feeling called to serve not willingly but under compulsion? You know, that's, that's the first one. The second one is character. In addition to regularly assessing a willingness to serve, we will keep a close eye on one another's life and doctrine to ensure that we continue to demonstrate the various character attributes highlighted in the passages I just listed.

And the third one is family health. The Bible is clear that a godly man should always prioritize the health and well-being of his own family. For a variety of reasons, an elder might find himself in a season where the tensions between caring for the church and caring for his family are not easily resolved.

In such circumstances, the elder team will help one another navigate these tensions in various ways, one of which might include stepping down from his office.

[33 : 03] That's not something that a person can decide on them on their own. You know, I would say that none of these are things that the person can decide on. He needs to interact with the morality to help get a sense for whether this, for instance, willingness.

Like, we all go through seasons where we'd rather be doing something else. And, you know, you need to have some help assessing, is this a season or is this sticking around for a long time?

That's a very common conversation that happens amongst pluralities all across the world. A man will be weary and he's wondering, he uses his brothers on the team to help assess, like, is this a weariness that can be addressed while remaining?

Or is this a weariness that has to be addressed by departing? Character, same way. You know, we hopefully are keeping a close eye on our own life and doctrine. But, you know, you really need the mirror of other brothers to see yourself clearly.

The same is true with family health. You know, there are a couple of ways this could take place. A man could, an elder could come to the team and say, yes, you know, we're just not handling these tensions between home life and church life very well right now.

[34 : 27] There could be a situation where, heaven forbid, a family member is struck with a very serious and long-term illness that's going to just take up all of the man's time.

It could just be, you know, various reasons why family health kind of comes to the foreground as a concern. And, of course, we see that, you know, that's very important to the qualifications.

We see that in 1 Timothy 3. So in that situation, again, the man's not going to just show up and say, I have to quit because my family is tired or weary or so forth.

You'd rely on the team to help sort out, is this a temporary thing? Is this not? Is resigning from office going to fix this? Lots of questions would emerge there.

So generally speaking, now the document turns to a word to the congregation. Generally speaking, churches should make it hard for a man to become an elder and easy for him to step away.

[35 : 33] That's the basic idea. There should be a high bar for entry and a relatively easy way of stepping away. We want that because that is actually God's plan for ensuring that its church's leaders are consistently serving in joy and faith and integrity and sincerity.

To this end, we need the congregation to remain calm and unflustered when or if an elder feels like he is no longer able to serve with joy, not under compulsion.

We don't want to create a culture within the congregation that subtly communicates to its leaders that stepping away is going to create a massive controversy, gossip, panic, and so forth.

The principle here is that the congregation should be grateful to have elders, but not graspy. That is to say they ought to be careful to remember that their faith is fundamentally tied to the great shepherd and he has promised to build his church and that the men who serve under him are most definitely not indispensable.

So how would an elder leave office? Well, there's basically two ways. One would be voluntary resignation.

[36 : 45] Voluntary resignation from office. Circumstances may arise such that an elder chooses to resign from office willingly, whether confessing to sin, which calls into question moral qualification, deviation from the sovereign grace statement of faith, pastoral mishandling or misconduct, or just for personal reasons.

That would be a voluntary resignation. And then there would be an involuntary resignation. The plurality will, in these instances where there appears to be a problem that could result in involuntary removal, the church will, the eldership team and the church at large will use 1 Timothy 5, 19 through 21 as our guideline.

That says, Not all charges will be admitted.

Personal charges will be handled through the process noted in Matthew 18, 15 through 20. And a charge will be admitted when it relates to the functioning of the elder's office and is weighty enough to do so.

And that is determined by the plurality itself. So that's the document. That's sort of where we're taking this creation of broadly a leadership team that is comprised of both teaching elders and ruling elders.

[38 : 37] Yeah. So that's, that's, that's, that's the document as it stands today with a little bit of commentary from yours truly. Well, I hope that was helpful to you.

You know, sometimes being a church member is fun. Sometimes it's, you know, it's like reading, you know, it's like reading a policy document. I mean, that's part of what it means to be a church member.

It's not, it's not all fun. It's not all easy. Sometimes you have to like read policy documents. And so, and sometimes you have to write them, which is what we've done. All right.

Well, please let me know if you have any questions or comments about this. You'll be able to read this shortly. And, you know, as I said, this is a working document.

I'm sure there are lots of things that we could bring into sharper clarity or say better, but that's the general gist of where we're headed. So thank you for listening. God bless. God bless.

[40 : 05] God bless.

Thank you.