

Identifying and Building a Church-Planting Team¹

The success of a church plant depends to a large degree on the quality of the church-planting team. It is crucial that the team include a group of lay leaders who can provide leadership support for the church-planting pastor, thus providing plurality of leadership until the church can support one or more assistant pastors.

I. THE PRINCIPLE OF PLURALITY AMONG ELDERS

“The apostolic churches seem, in general, to have had a plurality of elders as well as deacons.”²

A. A shared endeavor

1. Local-church leadership in the New Testament was a shared endeavor.
2. “Jesus Christ gave the church a plurality of leadership.”³

“The plurality of team leadership...surface[s] very early in the New Testament text.”⁴

B. What exactly is plurality?

1. The term *plurality* simply reflects the scriptural evidence that New Testament churches were led by more than one leader.⁵

¹ This outline by Dave Harvey was originally presented at the Pastors College of Sovereign Grace Ministries. © 2006 Sovereign Grace Ministries. Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² J.L. Reynolds, “Church Polity: or The Kingdom of Christ in its Internal and External Development,” *Polity: A Collection of Historic Baptist Documents*, ed. Mark E. Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2001) p 349

³ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, rev. and exp. ed. (Littleton: Lewis & Roth, 1995) p 36

⁴ Kenneth O. Gangel, *Team Leadership in Christian Ministry: Using Multiple Gifts to Build a Unified Vision*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1997) p 55

⁵ “On the local church level, the New Testament plainly witnesses to a consistent pattern of shared pastoral leadership. Therefore, leadership by a plurality of elders is a sound biblical practice.” Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, p 37

2. Within Sovereign Grace Ministries, we call this principle of plurality “team ministry.”
3. It is the strength and unity of team ministry that provides the foundation from which elders serve the church and stand accountable for their lives and doctrine.

C. Why is plurality a central feature for local-church government within Sovereign Grace Ministries?

1. Because it is strongly supported in Scripture.
2. Because it embodies the New Testament principle of the interdependence and diversity of gifts among members of Christ’s body (Ro 12:4–6; 1Co 12).
3. Because it disseminates the authority and responsibility for the church to more than one person, thereby protecting both the church and the elder.

“In this system, each local church elects elders to a session. The pastor of the church will be one of the elders in the session, *equal in authority to the other elders. This session has governing authority over the local church.*”⁶ (emphasis added)

“Reformed churches differ, on the one hand, from all those churches in which the government is in the hands of a single prelate or presiding elder, and on the other hand, from those in which it rests with the people in general. They do not believe in any one man rule, be he an elder, a pastor, or a bishop; neither do they believe in popular government. They choose ruling elders as their representatives, and these, together with the minister(s), form a council or consistory for the government of the local church.”⁷

4. Because no one elder possesses the full complement of gifts that God uses to bless and build the church.
5. Because it creates a structure where men must model the unity that should ultimately characterize the church (Jn 17:23; Ro 15:5; Eph 4:3, 13; Col 3:14).
6. Because it creates a “multitude of counselors” (Pr 15:22; 24:6) for leading and guiding the church.
7. Because it creates a defined venue of accountability for life and doctrine among the leaders (1Ti 4:16; Titus 1:6; Jas 5:16).

⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: InterVarsity; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, HarperCollins, 1994) pp 925–926

⁷ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th rev. ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941, 1986) p 589

“Regardless of what polity conclusions one draws, the leadership structure of the local church placed authority in the hands of a small group of men, not just one man.”⁸

D. Is a plurality possible for church planters?

1. We believe that church planters can uphold the spirit and principle of plurality by launching a new church with the explicit intention of identifying and positioning a second elder as quickly as possible.
2. One method of supplementing the church-planting elder in the absence of a plurality has been to establish a “leadership team.” This non-governmental group is composed of men with character and insight, drawn from the church-planting team. Their charter is to provide the single elder with an alternative voice of counsel, a context for relationship, and a forum for accountability.
3. Within Sovereign Grace Ministries, plurality in new or smaller churches is also served by more direct access to apostolic involvement.

E. Does a plurality necessitate that elders be paid staff?

1. While there is plenty of evidence that leaders are worthy of remuneration and that a compensated clergy was a New Testament reality (see Mt 10:10; Luke 10:7; 1Co 9:8–14; Gal 6:6; 1Ti 5:17–18; cf. 1Pe 5:2; Titus 1:7, 11), there is no biblical mandate requiring elders to fill salaried positions.
2. Indeed, there are some unique situations, such as church poverty or persecution, in which financial support of full-time elders may become impractical, even or impossible.
3. However, neither the deep respect we hold for these men, nor the polity flexibility that Scripture allows, should minimize the strategic benefits of a full-time eldership. Sovereign Grace Ministries adopted this practice near its inception, and the resultant fruit has only emboldened us to advocate this approach where possible. This fruit includes the following:
 - a. An efficient eldership: Strategic planning and decision-making are greatly enhanced by having men united in schedule and locale.

⁸ Bill Hull, *The Disciple-Making Pastor: The Key to Church Revitalization and Growth* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1988) p 78

- b. A connected eldership: Relationships and biblical fellowship are greatly facilitated through working together closely.
- c. An undistracted eldership: Men are not adding the burden of governing and pastoring the local church to the demands of their vocation.
- d. A compensated eldership: The church is afforded the opportunity to apply the many passages that command financial remuneration for those dedicating their lives to pastoral ministry.

II. THE PRINCIPLE OF THE PRESIDING PASTOR

The concept of plurality is not entirely sufficient to describe Sovereign Grace Ministries' approach to eldership rule. Indeed, our plurality is modified in a strategic way to reflect some vital themes in Scripture, enhance our order, and increase our efficiency as servants of Christ.

A. The foundation of plurality

The presiding pastor, senior pastor, is a role drawn generally from the broad pattern of order resonant in Scripture, and is specifically informed by the summons to humility displayed through Christ's example from the second chapter of Philippians. While neither the pattern nor the application carries in itself sufficient force to sustain an apologetic for senior pastors, they unite bring greater understanding of the role. Central to this understanding is the fact that the role of presiding pastor must always be based on the foundation of plurality.

"The permission for that person [the senior pastor] to lead comes from a plurality of leaders."⁹ Otherwise, the senior pastor may drift toward autocracy and the eldership can squander the opportunity to demonstrate the unity of biblical leadership.

B. First among equals

1. The Old Testament offers a gallery of names that remind us of God's practice of using *one* to influence *many*.
2. The New Testament also displays a pattern of shared leadership organized and facilitated by a central figure.

⁹ Bill Hull, *The Disciple-Making Pastor*, p 84

- a. In New Testament times, the Jewish synagogues were ruled by a council of elders, but each council had a chairman, or “ruler of the synagogue” (Lk 8:41; Acts 18:8, 17).
 - b. The early church enjoyed a plurality of elders, yet it appears that James’ role carried unique authority (Acts 15:13; 21:18; 1Co 15:7; Gal 1:19; 2:12). In like manner, Paul led a growing team of apostolic men.
 - c. In the Trinity there is a head (1Co 11:3), in the church there is a head (Eph 5:23), and in the home there is a “head” (Eph 5:23).¹⁰ For additional evidence and biblical study, see Addendum II, “Biblical Evidence for the Presupposition of ‘First among Equals,’” in *Polity: Serving and Leading the Local Church* (Number 2 in the Sovereign Grace Perspectives series), available from www.SovereignGraceMinistries.org.
3. Historically, this concept of a “leader leading leaders has been captured by the Latin phrase *primus inter pares*,¹¹ meaning “first among equals.”

“‘The want of united action among the different presbyters of the same church when they were all of equal authority,’ and the order of public deliberations requiring that there should be some one ‘invested at least with the authority of collecting the sentiments and executing the resolutions’ of the church, led to the appointment of one of their number as permanent president or moderator. The title bishop, which was applied to all the elders, came after a while to be applied exclusively to the president, —elder, as Justin in the middle of the second century still calls him, merely to distinguish him from his equal co-elders. He was not superior to them, but only ‘first among equals.’”¹²

4. The benefits of appointing a senior pastor:
 - a. A plurality with no senior pastor is structured better for protection than for expansion. This model often appealing to those seeking to prevent the repetition of past leadership mistakes, but the perceived safety often carries a trade-off: protection for productivity, and preservation for progress.
 - b. A plurality with no senior pastor often results in “churches within a church.” When no one voice unites the eldership and speaks

¹⁰ “According to Paul, the fundamental principles regarding the structures of the human family are to be applied to the church as God’s household (1 Timothy 3:15).” Vern Sheridan Poythress, “The Church as Family: Why Male Leadership in the Family Requires Male Leadership in the Church,” *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991) p 239

¹¹ “Primus inter pares—‘first among equals’—refers to a certain primacy, even among equals.” James T. Bretzke, *Consecrated Phrases: A Latin Theological Dictionary: Latin Expressions Commonly Found in Theological Writings* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998) p 96

¹² William Williams, “Apostolical Church Polity,” *Polity: A Collection of Historic Baptist Documents*, ed. Mark E. Dever, p 532

authoritatively on its behalf, church members can gravitate to particular elders, cultivating independent identities within the church. Congruent direction for the church is often absent when there is no “first shepherd” to gather and move the sheep.

- c. A plurality with no senior pastor dissipates responsibility and makes accountability difficult. In other words, *where everyone is responsible, no one is responsible*.¹³
 - d. A plurality with no senior pastor inevitably keys off of the most vocal or most gifted elder. This man becomes de-facto senior pastor, but without the nameplate and business card. He possesses the elders’ confidence but not the role. This gradual slide toward the most gifted elder compromises the integrity of the eldership in their attempts to model their unity through the purity of their plurality.¹⁴
 - e. A plurality with no senior pastor denies a legitimate avenue of service to elders with a distinct gift of leadership.
 - f. A plurality with no senior pastor creates a vacuum of care for the elders and their wives because it is inconsistent to entrust this charge to any one elder in a co-equal eldership.
5. Certainly, where the humility of a co-equal eldership is high, the difficulties of this form of plurality diminish, at least temporarily.

III. DEFINING THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH-PLANTING TEAM

The quality of the church-planting team itself is no less important than the maturity of its leaders. Based on Scripture and our experience in church planting, we offer the following observations on the role of that team and how to recruit and prepare them successfully.

A. Acts 13:1–3:

¹³ “Responsibility is a unique concept: it can only reside and inhere in a single individual. You may share it with others, but your portion is not diminished. You may delegate it, but it is still with you. Even if you do not recognize it or admit its presence, you cannot escape it. If responsibility is rightfully yours, no evasion, or ignorance or passing the blame can shift the burden to someone else. Unless you can point your finger at the man who is responsible when something goes wrong, then you have never had anyone really responsible.” Admiral Hyman G. Rickover quoted in John Ed Robertson’s review of Francis Duncan, *Rickover and the Nuclear Navy: The Discipline of Technology*. <http://www.christianmind.org/resources/reviews/Rickover.htm> <Accessed 2006 November 22>.

¹⁴ “Some churches claim to have a plurality of elders, with no single leader. But objective observation clearly demonstrates one person stands head and shoulders above the rest. While there may be accountability, debate, give and take on issues, the leader remains.” Bill Hull, *The Disciple-Making Pastor*, p 79

“Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.”

B. Surveying Antioch

1. Acts 13 provides a compelling portrait of team ministry. In this passage, men of strong gifting and diverse backgrounds are united *within* the local church.
 - a. The rare phenomenon of prophets and teachers *together* (Ac 13:1a).
 - b. God taps two-fifths of these leaders for the mission.
 - c. Model forged, model exported.
 - d. The message is typically carried in community:

“And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits.” (Mk 6: 7)

“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!” (Ecc 4:9–10)

2. The church-planting team becomes a column of pillars that lift and uphold the new work.

IV. THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH-PLANTING TEAM: SUPPORT!

“I am convinced that the degree to which you’ll experience success or failure in your church planting endeavors depends on whether your core people share the same values.”¹⁵

A. How is this support expressed? (The job description of the church-planting team)

¹⁵ Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches for the 21st Century: A Comprehensive Guide for New Churches and Those Desiring Renewal*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) p 254

1. To support the work in prayer

"And he said to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.'" (Lk 10:2)

- The ideas of “harvest” and “asking” are inseparably bound in Scripture.

“Actually, the first step is prayer. Before we attempt to plant a church anywhere, it’s imperative that we spend hours on our knees in prayer. In fact, it would be wise for church planters to recruit personal intercessors who will pray for them, their teams, and the entire planting endeavor on a constant basis. Church planters, however, should not regard intercessory prayer as the first step because that might influence people to emphasize it only at the beginning of the process. Instead, it must be encouraged *throughout* the process. We can’t place enough emphasis on prayer!”¹⁶

2. To support the work in service

- a. Matthew 20:28: One of the most essential roles is “to serve.”
- b. It is appropriate that a candidate for the church-planting team check his motives and evaluate what’s fueling his decision.
 - (1) Not primarily an opportunity to exercise gifts that were stifled in his home church
 - (2) Not primarily an opportunity to use his unrecognized leadership gift
 - (3) Not primarily an opportunity to build the relationship with his new pastor that was unrealized in his last church
- c. The challenges of church planting reveal heart motives in unique ways.
 - Candidates should not be part of team if they:
 - a) Don’t have confidence in God’s commitment to church planting.
 - b) Don’t have confidence in the leader’s ability to lead.
 - c) Don’t have an enthusiasm to serve the leader.

3. To support the work financially

¹⁶ Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches*, p 252

- a. We reveal our priorities by our giving.
- b. Church operation expenses and the pastor's salary will eventually be drawn from the church's giving.
- c. Ask for a two-year commitment.

“Once a core group is established, the people involved must understand that they have a responsibility to support the new ministry as much as possible. Consequently, while the core group will provide some income for the church-planting team initially, within one to three years, they as a church should be able to assume much of the responsibility for all the team, depending on their personal finances and the church's rate of growth. Therefore, it's important that core groups discuss and commit to this before they begin the actual process of starting the church.”¹⁷

- d. The leader should not invest his financial hope in the church-planting team.

“In fact, one of the laws of the harvest (to which the church's task is likened) says, ‘The resources are in the harvest.’ ‘In the harvest,’ where the church planter is sent to labor, the resources will be found for the new congregation's future.”¹⁸

4. To support the work through aggressive outreach
 - The church-planting team creates an “outreach core,” which is deployed in two different ways:
 - (1) Aggressively reaching out and showing hospitality to those who visit the new church.
 - (2) Aggressively participating in outreach initiatives that the leader devises.
5. To support the work by adjusting well to change
 - a. Church planting is about change. It requires flexible people who are not overly dependent on constancy.
 - b. The reality of your first Sunday meeting

¹⁷ Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches*, p 51

¹⁸ Charles L. Chaney, *Church Planting at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1991) p 38

V. LESSONS FOR WISE AND APPROPRIATE RECRUITING

“The secret of any organization’s success is choosing the right people to play key roles.... One of the most important aspects of successful leadership is putting together a group of people to carry out the mission.”¹⁹

A. Choosing a team begins in prayer.

“In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles.” (Lk 6:12–13)

B. Team effectiveness springs from team quality, not team quantity.

“In forming a church planting team you can be tempted to try and attract as many people as possible. We have found this to be a mistake that can result in difficulties later. The ‘more people the better’ is not the right approach to forming a church planting team. You cannot afford to have people with ungodly motives, unresolved conflicts, outstanding disagreements, personal ambition, weak marriages and families, or a deficient relationship with the Lord. You need people who are proven and going in direct response to a word from the Lord for their lives. The work involved in starting a church does not allow you to be dealing with ‘problem people’ on the church planting team. They eventually become a strain, distraction, and even a stumbling block to the new people you are reaching out to.”²⁰

C. Recruit the pastor *before* you recruit his people

1. The responsibility to recognize his role
2. The wisdom of soliciting his counsel
3. The honor of respecting his responsibility
4. The prudence of discovering his experience with the team member.

D. Evaluate the candidates against objective criteria.

1. Invite them to fill out a church-planting team questionnaire.

¹⁹ Fred Smith, *Learning to Lead: Bringing Out the Best in People*, The Leadership Library, vol. 5 (Carol Stream, IL: Word, 1986) p 93

²⁰ Brent Detwiler, *Qualifications for Participation on a Church Planting Team*, unpublished paper

2. Use a list of qualifications to evaluate each candidate.
3. Do they have an internal and external calling to this work?
 - a. Neither Saul nor Barnabas sent themselves. These were not two independent ministers circulating through local churches. In fact, it appears that God honored their submitted relationships and mutual accountability by addressing his direction to the other men present: “*Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work for the work to which I have called them*” (Ac 13:2b). Apparently, God wanted this team to “set apart” these men, rather than just having Saul and Barnabas “feel led” to split.
 - b. When it comes to who is set apart for church planting, an internal sense from God is a great start, but it’s only that...a start. We must trust God to add to our internal sense an external confirmation from those around and over us. *When it comes to the mission, a believer who says “God told me to go” has only half a calling.* Every believer in the field should have an “Antioch” endorsing and supporting them.

VI. PREPARING FOR THE LAUNCH

A. Gather regularly for prayer.

B. Plan social events to galvanize the church-planting team relationally.

C. Teach the team on the following themes:

1. The glory of God in missions
2. Why church planting?
3. The role and expectations of the church-planting team
4. What should we expect in our new church home
5. Biblical servanthood
6. Glorifying God through change
7. Faith

“Time is important in building a team. The team should spend about eight weeks together before the start of the congregation. This period should be followed by one week of rehearsal; then the actual launch of the new church should take place. It takes about six weeks for a team to start bonding. By the eighth week, the excitement should be peaking in most cases. The time to strike is when the iron is hot. Waiting may mean loss of momentum.”²¹

D. Invite the church-planting team’s apostolic leader(s) to address the team.

E. Begin to provide pastoral care for the team.

F. Evaluate specific giftings on the team and begin to assign tasks.

G. Encourage the team to maintain a high level of enthusiasm for their local (sending) church and pastor before their departure.

H. Ensure that team members are training replacements for their current ministry responsibilities.

I. Inform them that the designation of “Team” will be discontinued six to twelve months into the church plant.

VII. CONCLUSION

“My experience with ‘hot starts,’ along with that of other church planters, is that within a year or two the initial core group will often leave the church. This is because some don’t understand the sacrifice that it takes to plant a church. . . . Therefore, it’s most important that church planters take great pains to explain repeatedly to their initial core groups the church’s values, mission, vision, strategy and other vital concepts.”²²

²¹ Charles L. Chaney, *Church Planting*, pp 198–199

²² Aubrey Malphurs, *Planting Growing Churches*, p 303