# **Sovereign Grace**

# **Book of Church Order**

**PROPOSAL** 

SGM Polity Committee October 28, 2012

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Preface to the Book of Church Order: An Overview of SG Pol	lity
	A.	Introduction	1
	В.	Appeal for Ecclesiastical Union.	2
	C.	Executive Summary	7
	D.	SGM International Partners	10
		The SG Book of Church Order	
I.	Ge	eneral Principles	12
II.	Ex	xtra-local Polity	
	<b>A.</b>	Regional Assembly of Elders	17
	B.	Council of Elders	23
	C.	Nominating Committee	25
	D.	Governing Board	26
	E.	Leadership Team	28
	F.	Partnership Agreement	31
	G.	Process of Separation of a Local Church from SG	32
III.	Local Church Polity		
	<b>A.</b>	The Office of Elder	34
	B.	The Elder as Christian First	42
	C.	Elders and Plurality	43
	D.	Bi-Vocational Elders	43
	<b>E.</b>	The Senior Pastor	45
	F.	Repositioning of the Senior Pastor.	46
	G.	Accountability for Pastors	48
	Н.	The Ordination of Elders	49
	I.	The Office of Deacon	53
	J.	The Role of the Congregation	55
IV.	The Rules of Discipline		
	<b>A.</b>	Principles of Discipline	60
	B.	Discipline in the Local Church	61
	C.	Discipline of a Member	62
	D.	Discipline of an Elder	62
	E.	Regional Judicial Review Committee	74
	F	The SG Court of Appeal	77

# I. AN OVERVIEW OF SG POLITY

### A. Introduction

At its April 2012 meeting in Louisville, Kentucky, the Board of Directors of SGM appointed a committee of seven SG pastors for the sole purpose of formulating a polity structure for SGM and its affiliated churches. The Polity Committee would, after formulation of such a polity, submit its recommendation to the Board of Directors at its Fall 2012 retreat. It is the responsibility of the Board of Directors to take the Committee's work forward if it finds it acceptable. What follows is that Polity Committee's Recommendation.

The Committee has endeavored to be true to our mandate from the Board which included defining what SGM is, how it is to organize itself centrally, how it is to relate to its member churches and their officers, how SG member churches are to govern themselves locally, and how member churches and their officers should relate to one another. Added to that sizable task was the challenge of creating Rules of Discipline sufficient to answer every recommendation made in the Panel Reports and the AoR Report. Given the large body of polity on which there is common agreement within SG churches, we have been fairly minimalistic on a number of points related to local church government. Our emphasis has been on the existence and nature of extra-local leadership and how it interfaces with the local church.

The Polity Committee of SGM desires nothing more than to be faithful to the Word of God and to God Himself as we seek to recommend a polity that serves the well being of our churches and aids them in the fulfillment of their mission together. While many of the details of church polity are not spelled out explicitly in the NT, it is the belief of the Committee that within the pages of Holy Scripture God has given us sufficient information, both prescriptive and descriptive, to establish a polity for our family of churches. Where the Scriptures have been less clear we have proceeded with caution in the spirit of Christian brotherhood and Christian prudence. This Polity Recommendation is the Committee's attempt to articulate a set of principles and practices that will govern our family of churches. The Committee recognizes that only the Bible is infallible and without any need to be changed or improved, so we expect that what is written here will be appropriately criticized, adjusted, and amended for many years to come. It is our hope that this Recommendation, if approved, will be sufficient at least to bring us together to begin the process and to provide a foundation both for our relations together and our pursuit of God-given mission. It should also be noted that this Polity Recommendation is not a bare-bones document. Given that this is our first serious attempt toward developing a SG Book of Church Order, there is more explanation and defense of positions taken than one would normally find in a mature denominational Book of Church Order. As this book is amended, it would be the Committee's expectation that it could and should be reduced in size.

\_

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> In this document, "Sovereign Grace" (abbreviated as SG) refers only to the family of churches, and "Sovereign Grace Ministries" (SGM) refers to the organization, governed by a Board, that serves those churches.

The Committee recognizes that there are many different approaches to church polity within Christendom. And while we have attempted to base our recommendation on Scripture, we do not claim that our perspective is the only correct view. As we have studied and written over the last six months, we have only grown in appreciation for the different polity positions taken by our evangelical brothers. Each attempts to flesh out the different principles they find in Scripture in different ways. Not surprisingly we found that there are a number of divergent views among SG pastors and even among the Committee members themselves. In the end we did try to resist the temptation to build a monstrosity of polity that endeavored to please everyone. This Polity Recommendation is a good faith effort to lay down a workable polity that is based on Scripture, consistent with a few key principles, and that takes into account our history and our present circumstances.

Before setting forth our Polity Recommendation, it is important to speak first to the limits of polity. The best polity, in and of itself, is ill-equipped to create consensus, promote sound doctrine, or protect unity. God builds these foundations of healthy gospel partnership through the efficacy of His Word and the power of the Holy Spirit. When churches seek to express their spiritual unity in Christ through institutional connectivity, they must first establish a culture of common doctrine and biblical values. Polity can protect these things to a degree, but it is insufficient to build shared values, theological commitments, and experiential priorities. Polity is important and vital to the long-term effectiveness of the SG churches. Where doctrinal foundations are healthy, good polity has great potential to keep them on track. However, a robust view of sin militates against treating polity as a panacea for problems. No polity can protect a church or a family of churches from problems and difficulties or from sin and its effects. It is inherently dependent upon the fallen men implementing it. And so, while polity is important, it is not decisive. Polity delivers process and parameters, derived from the Bible, and fills these out with prudential wisdom and sanctified common sense. But ultimately it is only as useful as the doctrinal foundations it is built upon and the humility of the men who carry it out.

The following sections ("Appeal for Ecclesiastical Union" and "Executive Summary") describe and defend the polity of the Book of Church Order. However, they are not part of the Book of Church Order. Subscription to the Book of Church Order does not require agreement with the arguments or assertions of this prefatory material.

# B. Appeal for Ecclesiastical Union

As the Polity Committee approached the task given to it by the Board, a logical ordering of the relevant issues emerged. That is, the answers to certain key questions would logically determine the answers to the remaining questions. First and foremost was the question of whether or not SG churches were to be ultimately independent of one another or whether they together comprise one unified ecclesiastical body. If the churches are fundamentally independent then, by definition, there could be no unified polity for them. Each church would configure its own governmental structure independent of all others, and its elders would not be answerable in a significant way to

any church or group of churches, but only to themselves or, in the case of a congregational polity, to its members. Likewise, the central aspects of SGM (as we have known it) would have to be organized as an independent para-church ministry (with no vital connection to churches) to which the churches delegated aspects of their shared mission. SGM would then be governmentally autonomous and SGM officers would not be answerable in a significant way to any church or group of churches but only to their equally independent board of directors. There would be, therefore, no need at all to debate polity outside of the local church. And, indeed, that is the way most independent churches function in the United States today. They are autonomous with regard to governance, doctrine, and moral integrity, with no true accountability outside of themselves.

To answer the question concerning independency or interdependent union, the Committee turned to the Scriptures to see how the churches in the NT were organized and related. The Committee's research included its own detailed study, interactions with SGM pastors, formal presentations of papers by SGM pastors, and conversations with outside church leaders and theologians representing a range of polities. The Committee's opinion on this question is that the churches in the NT were not independent (and therefore unaccountable doctrinally, morally, etc.), but rather significantly interrelated and interdependent. Individual local churches seemed to have a fundamental integrity that was not dependent upon affiliation with other churches, and yet they seemed to be bound together not only in mission but also in doctrine and in some aspects of governance. We are therefore recommending a polity that embodies a form of **ecclesiastical unity**, based upon five considerations:

- 1. It is supported by the doctrine of the universality of the church
- 2. It is supported by the example of the churches in the NT
- 3. It is seen in the majority of church traditions throughout most of church history
- **4.** It facilitates and leverages our mission together, and
- **5.** It is part of our own shared history, which testifies to the abundant grace that has flowed from our ecclesiastical unity.

# First, ecclesiastical unity is supported by the doctrine of the universality of the church

The Scriptures teach us that all Christians are part of one body, and therefore one church. Ephesians 4:3-4 exhorts us to "maintain the unity of the Spirit" and that there is "one body and one Spirit." "Is Christ divided?" asks Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:13. While the answer to that question is quite obviously "no," we, as Christians of this age, have perhaps resisted the unifying ministry of the Holy Spirit and have grown too at ease with the independent spirit of our time. According to Scripture, a fundamental organic unity should characterize the church of Jesus Christ, and that unity ought to find expression in as many areas of church life as possible. It seems to be the Godgiven impulse of both individuals and churches. We see it in the life of new believers in Christ. Believers are water baptized into the one body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13), which gives the church universal a degree of social demarcation and public visibility. Just as every new believer in Christ has a basic God-given impulse to join with other believers in close fellowship, so also local

churches ought to have a desire to join together as much as possible. The Scriptures emphasize the importance of our unity in John 17 when Jesus says:

<sup>20</sup>I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, <sup>21</sup>that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:20-21)

The unity we are able to achieve is a powerful witness to the gospel. It seems to be the testimony of history that divisions within the body of Christ are a result of sin and weakness. Unity is not to be achieved at the expense of sound doctrine, which is what has characterized the majority of modern ecumenical movements. But SG churches are, for the most part, unified in doctrine, and our shared values give us a wonderful opportunity for an even greater expression of unity.

Scripture supports not only a "spiritual" unity but also a unity of governance and mission as is demonstrated by the gifts that Christ gives to the church. He gave gifted men and officers (including elders and apostles) to the church universal (Eph. 4:11; 1 Cor. 12:28), which suggests that the church universal has a visible social and organizational structure. The burden of proof for complete independency seems to lie with its advocates in light of the teaching and example of the Scriptures.

# Second, we see ecclesiastical unity supported by the example of the church in the NT.

There is a real unity expressed in the NT that is wonderful to behold. We see gifted men traveling to and from churches. We see that the churches in the NT did not regard themselves as independent or autonomous. In many cases they appear to have organized themselves as a regional church comprised of several local churches. For example, Luke refers to the primitive church in Jerusalem as one, single church (Acts 8:1, 3; 11:22; 15:4), although it numbered in the thousands (Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 21:20). This suggests that the one church met in many distinct house-churches, such as the NT describes elsewhere (Acts 2:46; 5:42; 8:3; cf. Rom. 16:3-5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philem. 2). The Antioch church provides a similar witness. A great many people (Acts 11:21, 24, 26) belonged to the one church at Antioch (Acts 11:26, 13:1). With no temple for the church to meet in, it seems plausible to think that the Antioch church consisted of many smaller house-churches. Without pressing the details too far, these almost incidental references point to the vital unity that existed among NT congregations.

The apparent governmental interdependence of NT churches gives further support to their ecclesiastical unity. First, regardless of how one applies all the details, the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 provides evidence for the governmental interdependency of local churches. A dispute regarding the orthodoxy of Paul and Barnabus arises in Antioch, but the case is referred to the elders and apostles in Jerusalem for adjudication. Several lines of evidence point to the extra-local governmental authority of the council. (a) The very fact that a local church (Antioch) would deem it appropriate to look outside of their own church to other men in other churches shows that the church did not regard itself as completely self-governing. (b) If it is the case that the elders of the Jerusalem council came from many different Jerusalem house-churches, then this also indicates

the governmental unity of the churches. (c) The council viewed itself as having authority in many local churches. The council communicated its decision not only to the church in Antioch, but to churches in all of Syria and Cilica as well (15:22ff.; 16:4). (d) The decree sent to the churches carried authority: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements..." (Acts 15:28). The decision came, not as a suggestion from a neighboring church, but as an authoritative decree (carrying the "burden" of "requirements") sent by ecclesiastical officers. It was given in that spirit (vv. 24-30), and it was received in that spirit (v. 31).

Additionally the extra-local unity, cooperation, and government of the NT churches is especially apparent in the ministry of the apostles. Although contemporary apostles play no role whatsoever in the proposed polity of SG, the ministry of NT apostles tells us something about the nature of the church. Apostles and their coworkers ordained elders (Acts 14:23; 1 Tim. 5:22; 2 Tim. 2:2; Titus 1:5), adjudicated charges against them, censured them if necessary (1 Tim. 5:19-21), and authoritatively regulated the moral and doctrinal purity of the churches (e.g., 1 Cor. 4:14-5:5; 1 Cor. 11:16; 2 Cor. 10:6, 13:1-4, 10; 2 Tim. 1:13-14). Through apostolic ministry, the churches of the NT were vitally connected in a common mission and had avenues for mutual financial support, mutual benevolence and care. Even in the absence of apostles, there is no textual warrant for jettisoning elements of extra-local unity (mission, care, and government) that characterized the NT churches (indeed, early church history after the NT era points to the assumption that these extra-local elements should continue). To set aside these texts as irrelevant to the contemporary church is to set aside the main textual basis for any polity whatsoever.

In sum, we are hard pressed to avoid an ecclesiastical unity if we would honor the principle of substantial connectivity of local churches so pervasive and compelling in the NT. So, in the Committee's recommended polity, the extra-local authority exercised by the NT apostles and the vital connectivity they fostered devolves upon regional assemblies of elders. This structure resembles Presbyterianism, though not exactly.

# Third, ecclesiastical unity is seen in the majority of church traditions throughout most of church history.

We will not belabor this point, but it is instructive and should chasten the impulse of complete autonomy for a local congregation. The ecclesiastical unity that characterized the NT church was assumed by the apostles' heirs and was given expression in the church following the NT era. Even amidst significant theological differences, the major church bodies that emerged from the Reformation retained a vital ecclesiastical unity among their respective congregations.

Although we recognize that no historical argument is determinative and the history of the church is variegated, the majority witness of church history points to an ecclesiastical unity among congregations which should not be lightly dismissed.

## Fourth, ecclesiastical unity facilitates and leverages our mission together.

A truly functional mutual accountability and a fruitful and effective shared mission necessitate ecclesiastical unity since they involves local elders exercising their authority in partnership.

No single local church is capable of carrying out all of the tasks necessary for the discipleship of the nations (Matt. 28:19-20). Local churches rely on cooperative efforts for such tasks as the theological training of ministers, the deployment of church planters, and other educational and publishing endeavors. If local churches are, by divine design and biblical precedent, joined into larger ecclesiastical bodies, then they naturally have God-given means to carry out such efforts in a theologically coherent manner. But if local churches are fundamentally independent, then such cooperative efforts are ad hoc pragmatic measures of merely human devising, which will ultimately lack both durability and accountability. The mission of the church should be carried out by the church in her visible, organized capacity; it should not be delegated to external agents or organizations. An ecclesiastical body can truly carry out cooperative missionary efforts as the church. For independent churches, however, cooperative organizations are not themselves ecclesiastical, but are rather para-church, since they fall outside the scope of the authority of any particular congregation or its officers.

Furthermore, churches historically have sought to make common confession of their shared understanding of the gospel in order to bear witness to their spiritual unity in Christ. Without a mechanism for enforcing fidelity to that confession, subscription soon becomes meaningless. In the case of independency, no one outside a particular local church has spiritual authority to enforce confessional fidelity within that local church. In the NT, however, the vital connections between churches allowed for such enforcement and thus preserved doctrinal unity (e.g. 2 Tim. 1:13-14; 1 Cor. 11:16; cf. Acts 15:27-29).

#### Fifth, ecclesiastical unity is part of our own shared history.

For over 30 years, SG churches have flourished as a result of their ecclesiastical unity. We moved in unity through the various winds and waves that were so prevalent in the 70s and 80s, particularly in charismatic churches. We have embraced as an ecclesiastical body the shared values that are, in part, what define us and give us doctrinal distinctives as SG churches. We are Reformed in our soteriology, gospel-centered in our preaching and teaching, continuationists in our pneumatology, complementarian in our view of leadership in the home and in the church, committed to church planting, and passionate in our corporate worship. SGM has been a great means of grace to our churches, and every SG elder has tasted the benefits of the ecclesiastical unity that SGM facilitated. We are loathe to abandon the rich legacy and fruitfulness of a true and thoroughgoing gospel partnership. We have lived in it for decades, and it is the hope of this Committee that our unity will continue, even as we seek to bring reform and refinement to our polity.

# C. Executive Summary

Polity, or church government, is intended to honor Jesus Christ through the ordering and protection of his church and the promotion of the gospel in accordance with his Word. The following polity proposal for SG upholds the primacy of local governance, the ecclesiastical unity of our churches, and extra-local leadership. The result is an ecclesiastical body with a polity that could be described as a modified form of Presbyterianism.

# 1. Extra-local Polity

Many of the biblical expressions of partnership among churches will be best accomplished through decentralization. This places interdependent ministry, care, and accountability into the hands of each region and its elders. Strong regions are vital to the future of SG. Therefore, regions will have their own *Regional Assembly of Elders* consisting of all ordained elders in the region. Each Regional Assembly of Elders will appoint various committees and a regional leader to serve their region with a delegated authority that is carefully prescribed. Numerous functions that have been more centralized in the past will now be handled largely on a regional level: approving the ordination of SG elders, adjudication by a regional *Judicial Review Committee*, the removal or censure of churches within the region, and planting new churches. In matters pertaining to ordination, doctrinal fidelity, and the moral integrity of elders, the elderships of a region have jurisdiction over the churches within their region.

The *Regional Leader* will coordinate care within the region and represent the Regional Assembly of Elders beyond the region. A Regional Leader is an elder in a local SG church with outstanding gifting, ability, and experience. We believe that the recognition and deployment of such a leader within the Region for the purposes of caring for our pastors and churches, for giving advice and counsel to local elderships, and to lead our Regional Assembly of Elders meetings is wise and necessary. If the mission of the church is to move forward under the leadership of gifted men, then some local elders must be released, to some extent, to serve beyond their local church. The NT is replete with such men, and the same has been true throughout church history. They are a gift of God to the church.

The *Council of Elders* is a representative body made up of one ordained elder from each church in SG. It will meet to approve changes to the Statement of Faith and the Book of Church Order, to confirm the removal of a church from SG, to confirm members of the Governing Board, and for various other reasons included in the Book of Church Order.

There are also biblical expressions of partnership among local churches that are best accomplished in a more centralized manner and with the leadership of appropriately gifted men.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, a *Governing Board* and *Leadership Team* will continue to play a critical role

\_

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Representative polities carry the twin weaknesses of administrative complexity and a flattening of responsibility (e.g., a lack of specialization), the effects of which can squelch mission effectiveness. In reflecting on the PCA's history, L. Roy Taylor, the Stated Clerk of the PCA, observed the following: "After thirty-seven years of operations, in retrospect some founding fathers as well as younger men realize that in the formulation and development of our polity. [sic] There are some instances in which "the pendulum effect" may have been too strong as we reacted against the excesses of our

in extra-local leadership in the central aspects of SG in order to facilitate the pursuit of our mission together. Members of the Governing Board and Leadership Team occupy no higher office than that of an elder. They have no special authority in the churches beyond the limited authority that has been delegated to them by the elders of SG to carry out their specified functions. SGM, therefore, is an instrument of the SG churches that helps to promote shared values and a common mission.

As representatives of SG elders, the Governing Board is responsible to maintain the values of SG, to appoint and assess men on the Leadership Team, and to approve the annual budget of SGM. Members of the Governing Board are elected by the Regional Leaders, who act representatively on behalf of all SG churches. Each candidate for the Governing Board must also be affirmed by a majority of the CE. The members of the Leadership Team are gifted men appointed to serve the church in its broader mission. They do so by focusing on specialized tasks such as leadership in mission, pastoral training, and administrative functions. As with Regional Leaders, we believe that the recognition and deployment of such men not only honors Scriptural teaching and precedent and church history, but is also vital for the fulfillment of the church's broader mission. We also believe that a polity that does not recognize this category of spiritual gifting and deploy such men risks stifling an important aspect of leadership and becoming "polity heavy" to the detriment of mission.

A *Nominating Committee*, consisting of 3 Regional Leaders, 1 Governing Board member, and 1 Leadership Team member, will be established to put men forward to serve in key functions in SG. The Nominating Committee will nominate one man from each Regional Judicial Review Committee to serve on the *SG Court of Appeal*, which is the highest court in SG. The Nominating Committee will also nominate qualified SG elders to serve four-year terms on the Governing Board.

All SG Churches will sign a *Partnership Agreement* stating their agreement with the SG Statement of Faith and the SG Book of Church Order, and will commit to supporting the decentralized and centralized ministries of SG with minimally 5% and ideally 10% of the church's budget (unless, under financial duress, they are granted a temporary waiver by their Regional Assembly of Elders).

# 2. Local Church Polity

The primary governance structure in a local church is its eldership. The elders of each local church have responsibility to govern its affairs under the lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture. Pastors are qualified men who are called and gifted by God to feed, oversee, care for, and protect the flock entrusted to them. They are to be examples to the church and to lead with proper fear, humility, and a heart of service. In SG, appointing a man to the office of elder

is a collaborative effort between the elders, members of a local church, and the Regional Assembly of Elders and its representative *Ordination Committee*. Elders are accountable first and foremost to Christ, but also to the local eldership, the congregation they lead, and the Regional Assembly of Elders.

Each church should strive to have a plurality of elders where possible. Although elders have different gifts and roles, all must meet the same qualifications because all occupy the same office, which fundamentally involves ruling and teaching. While the Bible allows us to ordain part-time elders or those who will be unpaid for their service, the biblical preference is for elders to be paid where possible. In addition to the office of pastor/elder/overseer, the office of deacon serves an important role in the church but is not a governing office.

Church members do not have an inferior status to elders, but are equal in standing before Christ. Under the new covenant, all Christians are indwelt by the Spirit of God, all are children of God, and all belong to the royal priesthood. Believers are called to a shared life together involving fellowship, discipline, and care. Although congregants do not democratically govern the church, each member contributes greatly to the health or demise of the church. A healthy congregation experiences joyful solidarity with its elders, submits to the rule and oversight its elders, tests the leadership of its elders by the Word of God, and is equipped for active ministry by the elders.

However, the idea that human authority in the church rests with the congregation is a more democratic ideal than a biblical one. Throughout salvation-history, God's normal pattern has been to exercise his rule through appointed leaders. The rule of the people or the congregation is conspicuous by its absence. The biblical texts which have historically been used to argue for democratic church government (Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5) do not support it.

#### Matthew 18

Matthew 18 as a whole deals with relationships within the community of God's people. The issue of church discipline *necessarily* involves the action and participation of the church community, but this says nothing about the role of the church's leaders in the process. Indeed, if the text *had* specified the role of elders, it would have sounded suspiciously anachronistic at this point in Jesus' ministry. The likely frame of reference for Jesus' listeners would have been the Jewish culture where such matters where handled by the elders of the city or synagogue. The mention of "two" and "two or three" at least suggests the involvement of leaders/judges in resolving the offense. However Matthew 18 is interpreted, we are obligated to account for the NT's teaching on specific church officers and their authority in governing the affairs of the church.

"This excommunication, as we have proved before, is an act of church authority exerted in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ: and if so, then it is the act of the officers

of the church . . . . for there is no authority in the church, properly so called, but what resides in the officers of it "3"

#### 1 Corinthians 5

Similar principles apply as mentioned above on Matthew 18. While the text emphasizes the congregation's necessary role in church discipline, it simply does not specify what role the church's leadership should play. Paul's address of the entire church is particularly relevant given the church's apathy and permissiveness toward the scandalous behavior in view.

We must keep in mind the *ad hoc* nature of this epistle. Paul's focus on the entire congregation throughout this letter likely reflects a conflict between Paul and the entire church that the letter is intended to address. Paul addresses this entire letter to the congregation. If we deny elders a leadership role in church discipline on the basis of 1 Corinthians 5, then we must also deny them a role in the preaching of the gospel (ch. 3), the Lord's Supper (ch. 11), the church's gatherings in general (chs. 12-14), etc.

# 3. The Rules of Discipline

Church discipline promotes the glory of Christ, the purity of the church, and the restoration of the sinner. Agreeing upon rules of discipline for all SG churches will create an appropriate degree of uniformity in practice, help to avoid partiality and inconsistency in discipline and provide accountability for all members, pastors, and SG leaders.

Local elders are responsible to faithfully carry out the rules of discipline for members under their care. A disciplined member may appeal the elders' decision to their regional *Judicial Review Committee*. All SG churches will agree to a common grievance policy (in the BCO) for bringing charges against an elder. The evaluation and discipline procedures of pastors will apply equally to members of the Governing Board and Leadership Team.

The Regional Judicial Review Committee has responsibility for the public censure and removal of a church. SG has no right to a church's assets. An elder who believes his case was mishandled by a Judicial Review Committee has the right to appeal to the SG Court of Appeal, and the SG Court of Appeal may review Judicial Review Committee rulings at their discretion

# **D. SGM International Partners**

The polity committee did not take up the issue of polity as it relates to SGM's international partners, be they our formal "associate members" or more informal relationships where SGM is nonetheless meaningfully involved. There were a number of reasons for this:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> John Owen, *The True Nature of a Gospel Church*, abr. and ed. John Huxtable (London: Camelot, 1947), 113. Cited by L. Roy Taylor in *Who Runs the Church?*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 166.

- Although polity is not unimportant for any church, the most pressing polity issues within Sovereign Grace at present relate to churches that are, formally, Sovereign Grace churches, with the various governance, accountability, and procedural implications that entails.
- The nature of our relationship with many of our international partners differs significantly from the relationships that exist within the U.S. and immediately contiguous countries. We did not think it appropriate to propose specific polity structures in places where our involvement serves mainly to serve and support our partners through relationship, leadership training, financial support, etc., and does not involve issues of polity/governance.
- The policy proposal we developed has particular relevance for churches that are geographically proximate, and it is uncertain (a) how easily this could be implemented in international settings where SGM's presence is limited, and (b) how appropriate it is (at least in this specific form) to the particular cultural settings of our international partners.

For these reasons, the polity proposal we have put forth applies to our churches in the U.S. and Sovereign Grace churches in contiguous countries. The potential application of this polity (a) to SGM churches geographically distant from the U.S., (b) to SGM churches in countries with very few SGM churches, and (c) to associate churches and to informal relationships, will require more detailed knowledge of those relationships and interaction with those leaders.

As we explore the application of polity to churches that fall into these three categories, the following principles should be recognized and applied:

- 1. The most important factor in our unity with such churches is doctrinal. Although church polity is important, in these relationships it is not determinative and, depending upon the church, it may not be a significant factor in our ongoing partnership.
- 2. A central goal in our polity formulation has been the preservation and facilitation of our mission together. Given the unique nature of these relationships, we do not want to insist upon a polity structure that hinders our ability to support our partners in their mission.
- 3. Although we based our policy formulation on theological foundations, we recognize that (a) there are other polity structures that can be biblically supported, and (b) the precise application of a polity structure may differ in geographically and culturally diverse locations. Therefore, we want to ensure that whatever policy applications are made to our partners are situationally and culturally appropriate, are consistent with the laws in which our churches reside, and therefore serve and not hinder our partners, and strengthen and not weaken our relationships with our partners.

Because of the unique nature of our international partnerships and the strongly relational connections by which they have developed and upon which they are based, we recommend that the board assign the leadership team responsibility, in close interaction with our international partners, for determining how our polity should be applied relative to those partners.

# The Book of Church Order for the Sovereign Grace Churches

# I. General Principles Concerning the Relationship of SG Local Churches and SGM

- 1. Jesus Christ has all authority in heaven and earth (Matt. 28:18), and He reigns as head over His church (Col. 1:18; Eph. 1:22), which he purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:12). All authority in the church derives from Him and is exercised on His behalf.
- 2. A local church consists of any body of baptized believers associated together for the worship of God and for carrying out Christ's commission to disciple the nations (Matt. 28:19-20). The church's worship essentially includes the preaching of the Word, administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the maintenance of corporate holiness through discipline. It also includes the singing of songs, hymns, and spiritual songs, and the exercise of the spiritual gifts for mutual edification.
- 3. Each SG church is an expression of the church universal, and as such, has an essential integrity as an authentic church. A local church does not depend for its essential identity as a church of Jesus Christ upon its institutional affiliation with any other church. Each church maintains control over its own property and physical assets in accordance with its bylaws, and does not relinquish such control by joining an ecclesiastical union.
- **4.** The primary governance structure in a local church is its eldership. The elders of each local church have primary responsibility to govern its affairs under the Lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture.
  - a. The terms "elder," "pastor/shepherd" and "overseer/bishop" all refer to one and the same office.
  - **b.** While officers are not absolutely essential to the existence of a local church, they are necessary for its well-being (Acts 14:23-25; Titus 1:5).
  - *c*. Each church should strive to have a plurality of elders, according to the biblical precedent and prescription (Acts 11:30; 13:1; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; 1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:5; Jas. 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1). This priority, while biblical, is not absolute. The NT can envision a church without a plurality of elders, and the goal of plurality is balanced by the need to have qualified elders (1 Tim. 5:22).
  - d. Although elders have different gifts and roles (1 Cor. 12; Rom. 12:3-8; cf. 1 Cor. 3:5-9; Luke 19:11-27), all must meet the same qualifications because all occupy

- the same office (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9), which essentially involves ruling and teaching (1 Tim. 3:2; cf. 2 Tim. 2:24; Titus 1:9).
- e. Since all elders occupy the same office, they have equal authority, and act as a body (Acts 13:1-3; 15:22-23).
- f. Elders have a right to compensation (1 Cor. 9:6-14; Luke 10:7/Matt 10:10), and congregations have a correlative duty to pay them if possible (Gal. 6:6; 1 Tim. 5:17-18).
- g. Elders, as undershepherds of Christ (1 Pet. 5:1-4), must serve as examples, teach sound doctrine, and guard against false doctrine, care for the spiritual well-being of the church, govern the affairs of the church, equip the church for ministry, and raise up future leadership.
- **h.** Apostles and elders governed the churches of the NT. SG Churches recognize the office of elder as continuing today. The office of deacon continues as well, but is not a governing office.
- in standing before Christ and fellow members of His body. All members of the church-elder and congregant--are sheep under the authority of the Chief Shepherd and posses the same privileges: adoption by God, redemption by Christ, possessing the same Holy Spirit and submitted to God's Word. Church members also have vital responsibilities that contribute to the life and mission of the church.
- *j.* In addition to their vital role and many privileges, church members are nonetheless called to submit to their elders (1 Thess. 5:12-13; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:5) in church affairs, assuming that elders are faithfully teaching and leading in accordance with God's Word, which circumscribes an elder's authority.
- k. The responsibility to receive and excommunicate church members belongs to the church as a whole (Matt. 18:18-20), but is specifically given to the church's governing officers to exercise on behalf of the congregation (Matt. 16:18-19; John 20:23; 1 Cor. 4:14-5:13; 2 Cor. 13:1-4). In addition to a full array of other mutual responsibilities (e.g., love, encouragement, care, etc.), congregants are obliged to lovingly confront one another for impenitent sin (Matt. 18:15-16). Governing officers alone are authorized to hear such charges and render a verdict which they pronounce in the name of the whole church and in its presence, as a corporate appeal for the sinner to repent (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:4-5). Congregants have the duty to carry out the discipline of the excommunicated person by breaking fellowship with them (1 Cor. 5:9-13; 2 Cor. 2:6; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14-15). Governing officers also decide when to readmit the penitent to the fellowship of the church (2 Cor. 2:6-8). It is the duty of the congregants to forgive, comfort, and reaffirm their love for such a one (2 Cor. 2:7-8).

- Congregants help to identify men in their midst who are qualified to serve as officers (Acts 1:23; 6:3a, 5). But only governing officers have the authority to select, ordain, and install church officers (Acts 6:3b, 6; Acts 14:23; 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22; 2 Tim. 2:2; 1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5).
- m. Congregants have the duty to bring charges against immoral or heterodox church officers (2 Cor. 11:4; 1 Tim. 5:19). Governing officers alone have the duty to adjudicate such charges and to pronounce public censure (1 Tim. 5:19-21).
- **5.** Christ is the head of one body, the church universal, consisting of the elect of saints of all ages who share the one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.
  - SG local churches seek to give their spiritual unity in Christ as much concrete institutional expression as is practical. In this way we bear visible witness to our union under one head, Jesus Christ; we benefit from the gifts and wisdom of other leaders and members of the body of Christ; we increase our effectiveness in fulfilling the mission Christ has given to his church; we strive towards and protect the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God; and thus the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, grows up into mature manhood.
- **6.** Moreover, no church is omnicompetent or self-sufficient to carry out the mission which Christ has entrusted to it (Matt. 28:19-20). Each local body stands in need of other local bodies in a relationship of interdependence.
- 7. This interdependence is rightfully expressed when local churches associate together in wider ecclesiastical bodies with shared resources, mission, and cooperation in government. Such cooperation is necessary for the protection of doctrinal fidelity and standards of holiness, the direction of a common mission, and the disposal of common funds. The members of an ecclesiastical body bear corporate responsibility for the holiness and welfare of the whole.
- **8.** Therefore the elders of local churches are accountable for their life and doctrine, not only to their own local congregations, but also to the broader ecclesiastical body as represented by her officers. The authority which a local eldership exercises over its local congregation is not an absolute authority without further appeal or recourse.
- 9. The SG churches express these principles of unity primarily through the Regional Assemblies of Elders and the Council of Elders, which exercise extra-local authority. These assemblies serve as a protection to local congregations, to which its elders are accountable. As an expression of spiritual unity and as a protection to the wider ecclesiastical body, Regional Assemblies of Elders have authority to ordain elders, to censure them, and to judge them morally disqualified from office, and to perform other judicial functions detailed below in the Rules of Discipline.

- **10.** The SG churches comprise an ecclesiastical body, distinct from all others, uniquely and significantly bound together in a common confession of faith, pursuing a common mission, guarding the corporate holiness of all the members, and governed by the assembly of the elders.
  - a. The members and elders of each local SG church recognize the Godgiven authority of the Regional Assemblies of the Elders, the Council of Elders, and the SG Court of Appeal, as that authority is specified below. They therefore submit to the decisions of these assemblies insofar as they can do so without disobeying God (Acts 5:29).
  - Assembly with its committees, the Council of Elders, and the SG Court of Appeal, they must resign from the eldership (and board) of their local churches. If they do not voluntarily resign under such circumstances, their fellow elders will remove them from office.
  - c. Every church or association of particular churches is entitled to determine the terms for admission into its communion, the qualifications of its pastors, and the workings of its internal government as long as it is in compliance with the Word of God. SG churches, based upon mutual love and confidence, have voluntarily determined to approve and appropriate the SG membership agreement and the Book of Church Order as governing statutes and guidelines ordering their fellowship locally and with other SGM churches. This genuine union among SG churches carries with it all the rights and privileges due to each SGM local church.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, union and fellowship within an ecclesiastical body is much more than a temporary means towards a desired end by strategically positioning oneself to receive the benefits of such a union. Union carries with it both benefit and responsibility. Though at present it is not feasible to attain universal doctrinal and ecclesiastical unity within the body of Christ, it is commendable to tangibly demonstrate the reality of the love of God for his Son, his church, and his people by uniting and remaining in bona fide fellowship with other likeminded Christian congregations.

SG's polity gives tangible expression to God's command to pursue doctrinally substantiated unity and love (John 17:20-23) by connecting congregations to a broader ecclesiastical body of affiliated churches. Therefore, just as a church or an individual should not enter into a fellowship of churches lightly, so they should not leave a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> These privileges include but are not limited to: access to specialized theological training through the SGM Pastors College, leadership training at various levels through Small Group Leaders, Worship, and Pastors Conferences, numerous resourcing opportunities such as SGM music products and updates, Administrator Conferences, and church operations websites, special week long Continuing Education Seminars with seminary professors and counselors, domestic and international mission cooperation, college preparatory worldview camps such as the Clash, church planting residencies, and generous church planting grants for qualified and gifted church planters, etc.

fellowship of churches in a casual way. Disassociation often conveys a false message about the bonds of Christian love. Christian churches have a responsibility to work for unity (see Phil. 2:2, 4:2; 1 Cor. 1:10; Eph. 4:3, 12-13) within their formalized affiliations both locally and extra-locally (1 Cor. 1:2). One way that commitment to Christ and his church can be expressed is by willingly yoking oneself to other like-minded churches and determining to remain in affectionate fellowship unless matters of conscience or doctrinal infidelity prevent such association. The same sobriety and reticence that should mark a decision by SG to remove a church should be present if a local congregation contemplates terminating its partnership and interconnectedness to the broader ecclesiastical body. Furthermore, any local church considering disassociation should consider not only the benefits it will forfeit, but the gifts it will deprive from the wider ecclesiastical body by such an acute action. The privilege of association (which includes doctrinal and moral accountability and continued fellowship in an organization of churches expressing the unity and love of Christ) takes precedence over issues of convenience, preference, difficult circumstances, an unwillingness to make minor concessions over tertiary matters, or a position of unqualified independence. In protecting the reputation of Christ every church should make a concerted, vigorous, and lasting effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace modeling the love of Christ in its given communion of churches by only withdrawing from such fellowship in dire or exceptional circumstances or situations.

Therefore, the elders of SG member churches willingly agree that, should they feel compelled to withdraw their local church from association with SG, they will follow the Separation Process articulated in the Book of Church Order. Should their Regional Assembly of Elders deem their reasons for withdrawal good and sufficient, they will release the local church with its elders from the obligations of membership in SG with blessing and commendation. Should the Regional Assembly of Elders deem the church's reasons for withdrawal bad or insufficient, the Regional Assembly of Elders will censure the church's eldership for divisiveness. The member churches with their elderships affirm the duty of the Regional Assemblies of Elders to act thusly.

11. We affirm that the visible church is the only organization on earth commissioned and equipped by Christ to disciple the nations. No other para-church organization has been thus commissioned and equipped as the church of Jesus Christ. Because the visible church should not substantially delegate its mission to another organization, Sovereign Grace Ministries is therefore organized as an instrument of the Sovereign Grace churches that helps to facilitate their cooperation in relationship and a common mission. Its Governing Board, Leadership Team, and employees occupy no higher or different church office than any other elder. As men endowed with a range of gifts to provide leadership to the church in its broader mission, they are commissioned to such unique tasks by the Sovereign Grace elders, to whom they are ever accountable. They have no

special authority in the churches, other than that which has been specifically delegated to them by the elders.

- **12.** We affirm that SG exists to promote the shared values of:
  - *a.* Reformed soteriology
  - **b.** Gospel-centered expository preaching
  - c. Continuationist pneumatology
  - **d.** Complementarian leadership in the home and church
  - e. Elder-led churches
  - f. National and international outreach and church planting
  - g. Interdependent churches united in fellowship, mission, and governance.

# II. EXTRA-LOCAL POLITY

# A. Regional Assemblies of Elders

# 1. What is a Region?

- a. A Region is a group of SG churches within a designated geographical area consisting of 5-20 churches.
- **b.** The Regional Assembly of Elders is the primary place of accountability outside of the local church. This accountability is not to a single man, but rather to the entire Regional Assembly of Elders as a body.
- c. All Regions will have until June 2013 to realign under the advice of the Leadership Team, giving us four months before our 2013 Pastors Conference.
- d. Regions will be organized on the basis of geographical considerations in the states/provinces in North America. This will be facilitated by the Director of Church Care and the Director of Church Planting and Missions.
- e. International Regions will also be formed. This will be facilitated by the Director of Church Care and the Director of Church Planting and Missions.
- f. Any realignment of a Region or additions to Regions must be approved by a majority vote of the pastors within the Region.

# 2. Responsibilities of the Regional Assemblies of Elders

# a. Ordination of all SG elders within that Region

- *i)* The elder candidate must be examined and approved by the Regional Assembly of Elders and its Ordination Committee before he may be ordained in the local church.
- *ii)* Ordination examinations will be standardized within all SG Regions. The Leadership Team of SGM will be charged with compiling such ordination standards for use by the Regional Assembly of Elders, after such standards have been approved by the Council of Elders.
- *iii)* The Region's Ordination Committee shall administer the written and oral exams to the candidate.
- *iv)* If the candidate passes the written and oral exams, the Ordination Committee shall present the candidate to the Regional Assembly of Elders with its recommendation. The Regional Elders may question the candidate concerning his doctrine or life, as the Assembly deems necessary. After questioning, the Regional Assembly will vote on whether to ordain the candidate. A simply majority is sufficient for ordination.
- v) See section III on Local Elders.

# b. Adjudications within the Region

- i) Each Regional Assembly of Elders will appoint a qualified sitting Judicial Review Committee that is trained and equipped in ecclesiastical law and procedure. This Judicial Review Committee has its prescribed authority detailed in the Section IV.E.2.
- *ii)* Each Regional Judicial Review Committee will consist of 5-7 elders, preferably from different churches, only three of whom will serve on any single case. This is to provide for enough Judicial Review Committee members to avoid conflict of interest and allow for necessary recusals.
- *iii)* This Judicial Review Committee will hear cases that are appealed from a local church within the Region.
- *iv)* This Judicial Review Committee will make the determination of an elder's qualification for ministry should there be a disagreement within the eldership of a local church.

- v) This Judicial Review Committee will be a place of appeal for any elder who is removed by a local church eldership.
- vi) This Judicial Review Committee may also hear and adjudicate, if it deems them credible, any complaints or grievances against a local eldership by a member of a local church within the Region.
- vii) The SG Nominating Committee and SG Council of Elders will select one member of each Regional Judicial Review Committee to serve on the SG Court of Appeal. That member selected will then serve as the Chairman of the Region's Judicial Review Committee.
- viii) See section IV.F.1.

c.

#### Removal or censure of a local church within the Region.

- i) A SG church may be censured by the Regional Assembly of Elders if it is determined that the elders of that church have taught false doctrine, strayed from the SG Statement of Faith or Book of Church Order, or have conducted themselves in an egregiously sinful manner.
- *ii)* A SG church may be removed from the Region and, therefore, disassociated from SG if deemed appropriate by the Regional Assembly of Elders.
- *iii)* Every SG church eldership will have the right of biblical due process in the case of censure or removal according to the procedures specified in the Rules of Discipline.
- iv) See section IV.E.2.

# d. Church Planting

- i) Working in conjunction with the SGM Director of Church Planting & Missions and his committee, the Regional Assembly of Elders will have the responsibility to identify and approve all locations for church plants within the Region.
- *ii)* The Regional Assembly of Elders may delegate this responsibility to its Regional Church Planting Committee.

# e. Church Adoptions

- *i)* Working with the Leadership Team, churches requesting adoption into SG will be identified and examined by the Regional Church Planting Committee.
- *ii)* The Regional Assembly of Elders must approve the adoption of any church within its Region with a <sup>2</sup>/<sub>3</sub> majority vote.
- *iii*) All of the existing elders from the adopted church must be approved by the Regional Assembly of Elders.

# f. Care for Churches and Pastors within the Region

- *i)* Regional Assembly of Elders has a shared responsibility for the health and vitality of each church within the Region.
- *ii)* This care may be expressed in a variety of ways including counsel and advice, sending representatives to speak and minister at the request of the local church elders, and through cooperative conferences and Regional Assembly of Elders meetings.
- iii) Regional Leaders will facilitate this care within each Region.

# g. Selection of Regional Officers and Committees and Delegation of their Authority.

- i) Every Regional Assembly of Elders will have the following committees:
  - 1) Ordination Committee (3 members): Conducts all ordination reviews and examinations on behalf of the Regional Assembly of Elders.
  - 2) Judicial Review Committee (5-7 members): Conducts all adjudications at the Regional level.
  - 3) Church Planting Committee (3 members): Works with the Director of Church Planting and Missions and his Committee to identify and approve all new church plants within the Region.
  - 4) Regional Nominating Committee (3 members): Researches, identifies, and nominates the best candidates for the Regional Leader and the members of the Region's various committees. These committee members must be elected by the Regional Assembly of Elders and should include the most

experienced and most capable leaders within the Region. Any elder within the Region may nominate a man for this Committee. When the Nominating Committee Nominating Committee nominates a candidate, he must still be approved by a simple majority of the Regional Assembly of Elders present and voting.

- *ii)* Every Region will select one man to be the Regional Leader
  - 1) The Region's Nominating Committee, with the counsel and advice of the SGM Leadership Team, will put forward a qualified candidate to be confirmed by a majority vote of the Regional Assembly of Elders.
  - 2) The Regional Leader will be selected by the Regional Assembly of Elders every four years.
  - 3) A Regional Leader will serve a four-year term and may serve multiple terms without limits.
  - 4) If a Regional Leader is unable to complete his term, the Regional Assembly of Elders will select his replacement.

# h. Approval of changes to the SG Statement of Faith.

- *i)* 3/4 of the Regional Assemblies of Elders must approve, by a simple majority vote, any changes to the SG Statement of Faith.
- ii) This also requires a 3/4 majority vote of those present and voting at the Council of Elders

# 3. Regional Leaders

#### a. The Purpose of Regional Leaders

Regional Leaders do not occupy a special "office" in addition to that of an elder, but rather are elders whose gifting for these types of broader leadership is recognized by the Regional Assembly of Elders. Therefore, the Regional Leader is recognized and elected by the elders in his region and is accountable to them. He also becomes their representative in the election of the members of the Governing Board. In essence, the Regional Leader (a) is a representative of his Regional Assembly Elders to SG, and (b) provides leadership and coordination of activities within his region.

# b. Roles and Responsibilities of Regional Leaders

- i) Moderates Regional Assembly of Elders meetings.
- *ii)* Oversees the election of delegated committee members for the Region.
- *iii*) Represents the Regional Assembly of Elders at the installation of elders in the local church, or if unable to, appoints another elder within the Region to represent the Regional Assembly of Elders.
- *iv)* Coordinates the giving of aid, assistance, and advice to a church whose eldership is embroiled in controversy.
- v) Gives advice and encouragement to local churches.
- vi) Coordinates care to churches and pastors within the Region. He may delegate some of his responsibilities to other pastors in the Region.
- vii) He represents his Regional Assembly of Elders in the selection of the members of the Governing Board.
  - viii) The Regional Leaders will convene as necessary to elect Governing Board members.
  - ix) His term is four years, with no limit on the number of terms he may serve.
  - x) He may be appropriately compensated for his work outside of his local church.
- *xi)* All of the Regional Leaders will convene as needed to elect their three representatives to the SG Nominating Committee.

#### Qualifications of Regional Leaders

- i) He must have been a SG pastor for at least five years.
- *ii*) He must be relationally strong within the Region.
- iii) He must be doctrinally strong.

c.

- iv) He must have experience in and a heart for SG.
- v) He must be a recognized leader among leaders.
- vi) He must have a heart for and commitment to our mission to plant and care for churches.

#### B. Council of Elders

#### 1. Formation

A representative from the eldership of each church will form the Council of Elders. Churches whose membership exceeds 500 adult (18 or more years old) members may send an additional representative elder.

# 2. The Council of Elders will convene every other year as needed during the annual SG Pastors Conference.

The Governing Board may convene the Council of Elders at any other time it deems necessary. The Executive of Director of the Leadership Team will moderate the Council of Elders.

# 3. The Council of Elders will have the following responsibilities:

a. Propose changes to the Statement of Faith or Book of Church Order. Any member of the Council of Elders may propose such changes.

# b. The Approval of all changes to the SG Statement of Faith

- *i)* Any change to the SG Statement of Faith requires a <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> majority of those present and voting in the Council of Elders convened.
- *ii)* Any change to the SG Statement of Faith requires a 3/4 majority of all the Regional Assemblies of Elders.

# c. The confirmation of the members of the SG Court of Appeal

- i) These candidates are drawn from the pool of current Regional Judicial Review Committee members.
- *ii)* The SG Nominating Committee\* will put forth the most qualified men, one from each Region (see II. C.).
- *iii)* Each candidate must be approved by a simple majority of those present and voting in the convened Council of Elders.
- *iv)* The men selected from each Region will become the chairmen of the Regional Judicial Review Committee.
- v) See section IV.F.1.a.

# d. Adjudication of charges against a Region

*i)* See section IV.F.2.e.

## e. Affirmation of the members of the Governing Board

- i) The candidates are nominated by the SG Nominating Committee and elected by the Regional Leaders.
- *ii)* Each candidate must be confirmed by a simple majority vote of those present and voting at the convened Council of Elders.
- *iii)* Any candidate not receiving a simple majority is rejected, and the Regional Leaders must elect another candidate for the Council of Elders' affirmation.

# f. Confirmation of the Executive Director of the Leadership Team

*i*) After the Governing Board has chosen the Executive Director Candidate, he must be confirmed by a simple majority of the Council of Elders.

# g. Approval of all changes to the SG Book of Church Order

- *i)* Any change to the SG Book of Church Order requires a simple majority of those present and voting at the convened Council of Elders.
- *ii)* The Governing Board will select members to participate on the Polity Committee per section II.D.2.g. The Polity Committee will propose relevant changes for the approval of the Council of Elders.

# h. Approval of the Ordination Standards and Exams

- *i)* The Leadership Team has the responsibility to submit the Ordination Standards and Examinations for the Council of Elders' approval.
- *ii)* The Council of Elders must confirm Ordination Standards and Exams and changes thereunto by a simple majority vote of those present and voting.
- i. Confirmation of the removal of a local church from SG based on their conviction by the SG Court of Appeal (see section IV.F.2.k.iv)

# C. SG Nominating Committee

### 1. Purpose

The SG Nominating Committee will be established to put forth godly and experienced candidates to serve in key functions for the governance of SG churches. Its composition will reflect a broad range of representation (weighted toward Regional Elders but including centralized leadership) while seeking the most qualified members possible. Its function is to bring wisdom, experience, and expertise to the selection of key positions within SG.

# 2. The Responsibilities of the Nominating Committee

- *a.* The Nominating Committee will nominate one man from each Regional Judicial Review Committee to serve on the SG Court of Appeal (IV.F.1.a.), subject to the affirmation of the Council of Elders by simple majority vote.
- b. The Nominating Committee will nominate a qualified SG elder to serve a four-year term as a member of the Governing Board (see D. below). Both the Regional Leaders and the Council of Elders must affirm this selection by simple majority vote.

# 3. The Members of the Nominating Committee

#### a. Composition

The SG Nominating Committee will consist of 3 representatives of the Regional Leaders, 1 representative of the existing Governing Board, and 1 representative of the Leadership Team. The Regional Leaders will select 3 of their own members to serve, the Leadership Team will select one of its own members to serve, and the Governing Board will select one of its own members to serve on the Nominating Committee.

#### b. Term

The members of the Nominating Committee will serve as long as the body that they represent (Regional Leaders, Governing Board, or Leadership Team) is pleased to have them serve.

c. The Nominating Committee must have its full complement of members 60 days prior to the election of the members of the Governing Board and SG Court of Appeal. To ensure this, it is the responsibility of the Governing Board, Leadership Team, and the Regional Leaders to supply their representatives to the Nominating Committee in a timely manner.

# D. Governing Board

# 1. The Selection of the members of the Governing Board

- **a.** The Governing Board will consist of nine members.
- **b.** The Nominating Committee will nominate one or more candidates for each open seat on the Governing Board.
- *c*. A Governing Board candidate must be a SG pastor in good standing and recommended by the elders of his church.
- **d.** The Regional Leaders will elect the Governing Board member by a majority vote.
- e. The Council of Elders will affirm each candidate. If a candidate fails to gain an affirmation by a majority of the Council of Elders, then the process must be repeated.
- f. The Regional Leaders will convene once a year, if necessary, for the express purpose of electing Governing Board members.

# 2. The Governing Board will have the following responsibilities:

- a. To insure that the Leadership Team and its officers are acting in accordance with the mission and core values of the SG churches.
- **b.** To appoint and evaluate the Leadership Team.
- **c.** To steward the financial assets of SGM.
- **d.** To approve the annual budget of SGM.
- e. To determine the responsibilities of the Leadership Team.
- f. To select a member to serve on the Nominating Committee.
- **g.** To select a seven-member Polity Committee, five of whom must be SG pastors. The other two must be members of a SG church but not necessarily pastors.
- **h.** To keep current and maintain the SGM Articles of Incorporation and corporate By-laws and keep them consistent with our Book of Church Order.

- **3.** In an effort to maintain continuity and stability while working toward a more thoroughgoing representational Governing Board, the plan will implemented gradually according to the following schedule:
  - a. In November 2013 the Regional Leaders will convene at the annual SG Pastors Conference and elect three men to serve on the Governing Board beginning January 1, 2014. They will serve a four year term (until December 31, 2017). The Council of Elders must affirm these men before they may serve.
  - **b.** On December 31, 2013, three of the original members of the Governing Board will resign in order to make room for the newly elected members. If none voluntarily resign, then the selection will be made by drawing lots.
  - c. In November 2014, the Regional Leaders will convene at the annual SG Pastors Conference and elect three men to serve on the Governing Board beginning January 1, 2015. Their term will be until December 31, 2018. The Council of Elders must affirm these men before they may serve.
  - d. On December 31, 2014, three more of the original members will resign in order to make room for the newly elected members. If not voluntarily, then the selection will be made by drawing lots.
  - e. In November 2015, the Regional Leaders will convene at the annual SG Pastors Conference and elect three men to serve on the Governing Board beginning January 1, 2016. Their term will be until December 31, 2019.
  - f. The Council of Elders must affirm each man before he may serve. He will be affirmed by a simple majority of the Council of Elders present and voting. These affirmations will be done during a scheduled meeting of the Council of Elders during the annual Pastors Conference.

# 4. Terms of Governing Board members.

- **a.** Once elected and affirmed, the Governing Board member will serve a four-year term.
- **b.** There will be no term limits.
- c. If a Board member resigns during his term or is unable to complete term, then the Governing Board will appoint his replacement for the remainder of his term.
- d. The secretary of the Governing Board will keep accurate records of the terms of each Board Member and give adequate notice to the Nominating Committee, the Regional Leaders, and the Council of Elders of expiring terms.

e. If a simple majority of the Governing Board votes to remove one of its members, and a simple majority of the Council of Elders concurs, the member shall be removed from the Governing Board.

# E. Leadership Team

#### 1. Definition and Rationale

Within SG, the Leadership Team constitutes men that the churches of SG recognize and designate for specialized tasks, such as leadership in mission, pastoral training, and administrative functions for the wider ecclesiastical body.

Members of the Leadership Team do not occupy a special "office" in addition to that of an elder, but rather are elders (or men of similar qualification) whose gifting for these types of broader leadership is recognized by other elders. As such, the Leadership Team emerges from our churches and is accountable to the elders of SG through their representatives on the Governing Board. It is, in essence, a ministry arm of our elders, providing specialized leadership and coordination in aspects of our broader mission.

# 2. Qualifications

Specific qualifications will be determined by the Governing Board. At a minimum a Leadership Team member should be a member of a SG Church, and therefore accountable to its eldership for his moral integrity. We envision certain members of the Leadership Team (e.g., Executive Director, Director of Church Care) being elders in their respective local church due to their specific function.

# 3. What are the Leadership Team's responsibilities?

#### a. The Mandate:

To facilitate and lead as a team in executing the central aspects of our mission according to the values of SG under the oversight of the Governing Board in partnership with our churches, their elders and the Regional Leaders.

- *i)* Specifically, to do all that is delegated to them by the Governing Board, and under its oversight.
- *ii)* These responsibilities can be conceived of under the headings of mission, doctrine/values, and partnership.

# b. With Respect to the Mission:

- *i)* In cooperation with the Regional Assemblies, to train church planters and coordinate the planting of new churches.
- ii) In cooperation with Regional Leaders, to coordinate the care for SG pastors and churches.
- iii) In cooperation with the Regions, to facilitate and administrate International Missions.

*iv)* In cooperation with the Regions, to identify, investigate, approve, and facilitate all church adoptions.

# c. With Respect to our Doctrine and Values:

- To provide leadership, theological instruction, and pastoral care to the SG Pastors College.
- ii) To provide continuing theological and pastoral instruction to SG pastors.
- iii) To develop and maintain SG Ordination Standards and Examinations.
- iv) In conjunction with the Council of Elders, to steward the SG Statement of Faith

# d. With Respect to our Partnership:

- i) To develop resources for ministry within SG.
- ii) To plan and execute SG conferences.
- iii) To coordinate activities and ministry between Regions.
- iv) To communicate on behalf of SG churches to the broader world.
- v) To facilitate communication and cooperation among the church and leaders within SG.
- vi) Under the oversight of the Governing Board, to administrate the collection and distribution of SG financial resources.
- *vii*) To spearhead fundraising.

#### 4. Personnel

The Governing Board determines which positions will comprise the Leadership Team, and who will fill these positions. At a minimum, the Leadership Team must include an Executive Director. The rest of the Leadership Team should be staffed sufficiently to fulfill its designated function. The positions listed below seem wise, and the Governing Board should consider them.

# a. Executive Director

The Executive Director is the presiding officer of the Leadership Team who answers directly to the Governing Board. He must be an elder in a local SG church. He must be confirmed by a simple majority of the Council of Elders. He is responsible to:

1. Ensure the successful operation of the Leadership Team through strategic planning, support, evaluation and movement-wide communication.

- 2. Facilitate the successful operation of the polity and mission, movement-wide, through ensuring that the Leadership Team supports and interacts with regions, regional leaders and internationally associated churches.
- 3. Oversee and support fundraising for SGM.
- 4. Serve as moderator for the council of elders, overseeing official meetings and coordinating all key functions of the Council of Elders.
- 5. Serve as the authoritative point of contact for all Leadership Team ministry functions.
- 6. Promote the health and plurality of the Leadership Team to maximize the effectiveness of each director.

# b. Director of Church Planting and Missions

Coordinates church planting, international missions, and church adoptions.

#### c. Director of Administration and Finance

Administrates the functions of the Leadership Team, coordinate finances, conferencing, resource distribution, etc.

#### d. Director of Church Care

Communicates with the Regional Leaders and coordinate care of all Regions.

#### e. Director of Theology & Training

Oversees Pastors College, stewards Statement of Faith, coordinates theological reviews (e.g., ordination exam.)

# F. Partnership Agreement of the Sovereign Grace Churches

#### **Preamble**

The Sovereign Grace churches together constitute a unified ecclesiastical body which exists to glorify God as an expression of the bride of Christ. The churches share spiritual and material resources for the furtherance of our common mission, under the authority of a common government which enforces fidelity to our common confession of faith and standards of corporate holiness.

A local church joins itself to the Sovereign Grace body of churches when its elders, representing the church, enter into this partnership agreement with all the other Sovereign Grace churches.

# The Commitments of the Joining Church

- 1. All the elders of the joining church affirm the Sovereign Grace statement of faith, without taking any exceptions to it. They promise that if their beliefs change such that they can no longer affirm without exception the Sovereign Grace statement of faith, they will immediately inform their Regional Assembly of Elders.
- 2. All the elders of the joining church commit themselves to promote the shared values of the Sovereign Grace churches, including
  - a. Reformed soteriology
  - b. Gospel-centered doctrine and preaching
  - c. Continuationist pneumatology
  - d. Complementarian leadership in the home and church
  - e. Elder-led churches
  - f. National and international outreach and church planting
  - g. A family of interdependent churches united in fellowship, mission, and governance.
- 3. The joining church commits itself, with its spiritual and material resources, to furthering the shared mission of the Sovereign Grace churches. This mission essentially involves making disciples by planting and supporting local churches.
- 4. All the elders of the joining church affirm and submit to the polity of the Sovereign Grace churches as stated in the Book of Church Order, without taking any exceptions to it. In particular, the elders willingly agree
  - a. To submit themselves to the rulings of their Regional Assembly of Elders, its Ordination Committee, and its Judicial Committee, as well as to the Council of Elders;
  - b. That passing the Sovereign Grace Ordination Exam is a necessary condition for the ordination of a new elder;

- c. To fully participate in their Regional Assembly of Elders and, if they are called to do so, in regional committees and the Council of Elders, unless they are providentially hindered;
- d. To accept the Sovereign Grace Local Church Polity, as stated in the Book of Church Order, and vow to uphold it as the rule of practice in their local church;
- e. To contribute a minimum of 5% (with a goal of 10%) of their church's regular contributions to Sovereign Grace, unless, under financial duress, their Regional Assembly of Elders temporarily releases them from this obligation;
- f. That, should their eldership at any time in the future wish to withdraw from the Sovereign Grace body of churches, they will follow the separation process stated in the Book of Church Order.

# Partnership Vows of the Elders of the Joining Church

"Having prayerfully and soberly considered this agreement, we solemnly pledge to actively support and whole-heartedly submit to the mission, values, statement of faith and Book of Church Order of the union of churches known as Sovereign Grace; and we call to witness Almighty God who searches our hearts and to whom we will give account on the Day of Judgment."

The elders of the joining church shall record their pledge by signing a copy of this Partnership Agreement and pledge. This document will be kept in archives by Sovereign Grace Ministries.

# G. Process of Separation for a Local Church from SG

# General Principles:

- 1. We are an ecclesiastical union. No separation of such a union should be taken lightly or unadvisedly, but soberly, carefully and only in light of strong reasons of conscience or compatibility, and then only after earnest efforts have been made to preserve our unity in the Spirit.
- 2. There may arise by necessity a time in which a local church for reason of a change of doctrine or other unforeseen reasons can no longer in good faith continue to be part of the SG churches.
- 3. Upon separation, SG has no right to the property of a local church and the local church has no right to the property of SG except as qualified below.

4. Beginning with the adoption of this SG Book of Church Order, any local church planted with the financial assistance of SGM cannot leave SG for 10 years without repaying any and all financial assistance that they received. Although this policy is not retroactive to church plants recently funded by SGM, it would be honorable for any church planted in the last five years choosing to leave SG to pay back voluntarily the church plant grant in subsequent years as it is reasonably able. This repayment would honor both the intention of the grant to plant a SG church and the intention of SGM donors to support the planting of SG churches.

#### Procedure

- 1. If a church is considering leaving SG, its elders should contact the Regional Leader and discuss its reasons with him prior to reaching a final decision.
- 2. If the local church, through her elders, decides to pursue separation, its elders must notify their Regional Assembly of Elders in writing of their decision of intent to withdraw from SG.
- 3. At least 30 days prior to withdrawal, the elders of that local church shall appear before Judicial Review Committee of their Region in order to give reason(s) for leaving.
- 4. The Judicial Review Committee of that Region shall, for the good of the local church and our union, examine in earnest the reasons stated for leaving.
- 5. If the Judicial Review Committee accepts the reasons for withdrawal to be valid, then the local church will be commended to the Lord and his grace and is free to leave without censure.
- 6. If the Judicial Review Committee does not accept the reasons for withdrawal as valid, the church may leave, and the Judicial Review Committee will issue a censure against the local church elders stating the reasons why it believes the local church is wrong.
- 7. The Judicial Review Committee will inform the members of the local church and the Regional Assembly of Elders of its position within 30 days of its finding.
- 8. The censure will be sent to all churches in SG, and will be read in all churches within the offending church's region.

# **III. Local Church Polity**

#### A. The Office of Elder

# 1. NT Terminology: Elder, Pastor, Overseer

From the beginning, local churches have been led by elders (Acts 14:23; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) with the assistance of deacons (Acts 6:1-6; 1 Tim. 3:8-13).

# Elder, Pastor, Overseer

The elder is ordained in a church to lead, teach, care for, and protect that local church. While we most often use the term "elder" for the pastoral office of the church, this is only one of several terms used in the NT to describe the role. The Bible refers interchangeably to this office as "elder," "pastor/shepherd," and "overseer."

"Elder" comes from the Greek *presbuteros* (e.g., 1 Tim. 5:1). When used of the office in the church, the implication is that the man is a mature and wise man more than he has reached a certain age (1 Tim. 4:12).

A second term used of elders in the NT is "pastor" or "shepherd" (Gr., *poimēn*) as in Ephesians 4:11, "He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers" (cf. also John 21:16; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-4). Places like John 10 and Psalm 23 remind us of the specific, individual care that God extends to us as our "Good Shepherd," and this models for us what is meant by the term as it is applied to the elders of a local church.

A third term is "overseer" (Gr., *episkopos*) as in 1 Timothy 3:1, "If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task" (cf. also Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:7). This term captures the authority and leadership entrusted to the elders.

It is critical that we see the equivalence of these three terms in the NT: an elder is a pastor is an overseer. We can see the synonymous nature of the terms in Titus 1:5-9 where Titus is told to "appoint elders" (v. 5), and then he is instructed concerning potential candidates "the "overseer...must be" (v. 7). Further, in Acts 20:28 the Ephesian "elders" (20:17) are told how they must "shepherd" their flock as "overseers." In 1 Peter 5:1-4 he addresses "elders" (v. 1) and tells them to "shepherd the flock of God that is among you" (v. 2), specifically by "exercising oversight" (v. 2). While verbs are mixed with the noun "elder" here, the ideas of elder-shepherd-overseer are clearly coextensive.

Thus, we ought to use all three terms refer to the same office. Further, we need to let our understanding of the pastoral office include the connotations of all three terms. We cannot let one term swallow up the other two. Thus, the leadership and authority implied with "overseer" is to be joined to the protection, care, and nourishment implied with the use of "pastor"; and both of these are to be attached to the wisdom and mature discernment implied with the term "elder." The Bible itself must guide our use of these different terms, not how they have become traditionally understood in certain denominations.

### 2. The Responsibilities of the Elder

The elder-pastor-overseer has four broad responsibilities within the local church. They feed, oversee, care for, and protect the flock entrusted to them.

# a) First, pastors are to "feed" the flock entrusted to their care (John 21:15).

Elders are "teachers" (Eph. 4:11) who build the church in their care by "preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17). This is why an elder must be "able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2). Teaching happens through the ministry of the Word on Sunday mornings, but also in the more private "reproof...correction...training" (2 Tim. 3:16), and exhortation (4:2) that happens in the pastor's ministry to individuals.

## b) Second, elders are to oversee the flock entrusted to them (1 Tim. 3:1).

Elders provide leadership and thus manage "God's church" (1 Tim. 3:4-5). This leadership requirement is seen by the use of the title "overseers" to describe an elder (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-2; Titus 1:7). Further, the use of the term "manage" in 1 Timothy 3:5 and the reference to "ruling" (Gr., *proistēmi*) in 1 Timothy 5:17 also support the notion that elders govern the church in a leadership capacity (cf. Rom. 12:8; 1 Thess. 5:12; etc.). Hebrews 13:17, which uses the more general term "leaders" (participle from *ēgeomai*, "lead, guide") commands Christians to "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls," which seems to provide corroboration regarding the management and governing responsibilities of elders. Additionally, 1 Peter 5:2 reminds pastors that they are to be those "exercising oversight, not under compulsion."

# c) Third, pastors are to care sincerely for the flock entrusted to them by God (Acts 20:28).

Just as the great commandments are to love God and to love our neighbor (Matt. 22:36-40), and apart from love we accomplish nothing and are nothing (1 Cor. 13:1-3), so a shepherd must "be genuinely concerned" for the "welfare" of every member of his respective church, not seeking his own interests, but "those of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 2:19-21).

# d) Fourth, elders protect the flock, looking out for "wolves" that can come from without or within the church (Acts 20:28-30).

Elders are to "pay careful attention" and to "be alert" (vv. 28, 30). This is not to give an elder a suspicious heart, but a watchful one; not a cynical heart, but a cautious one. For example, the elder must know the difference between someone who disagrees with him and a divisive man who is actually a "wolf" (Rom. 16:17-18; Titus 3:10). Such attentiveness and discernment is part of the role.

#### 3. Qualifications for Elders

Elders are to be men of exemplary character and adequate gifting. Many of the qualifications detailed for elders are *commanded* of all Christian men. The difference with elders is that they are mandatory for office. Those qualifications are as follows:

# a) Elders are to be men (1 Tim. 2:12; 3:2; Titus 1:6).

# b) Elders must have a sincere and mature faith in Christ, a connotation of the term "elder" (1 Tim. 3:6).

The Bible warns against allowing recent converts to occupy the office of elder because of the danger of pride and the temptations that might accompany pastoral ministry for an immature believer.

# c) Pastors must be men of authentic and exemplary Christian character (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9), even if they are not sinless (1 John 1:8-10).

Elders are called to be godly men. Their role as examples to the church and the temptations that accompany this office make it essential to have men of character perform this service. However, godliness does not equal sinlessness (see 1 John 1:8-10). Elders will not be perfect, though they must still be "above reproach" in the general sense. To call an elder "above reproach" is not to say that he is without fault, but rather, that he cannot be charged with any significant pattern of sin or especially heinous sin that will bring shame to the church or the gospel and ultimately undermine his pastoral ministry.

# 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 give the clearest pictures of what kind of man the elder is to be, and we will summarize those requirements here.

## a. "Above reproach" (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6) and "holy" (Titus 1:8)

The elder's life must not have obvious flaws that make his life open to the charge of hypocrisy or bring shame to the gospel or which would make the temptations that go along with the office of elder too great for him. He is one whom others would call "holy" in the basic, observable, but relative way that all fallen men can be holy.

## b. "The husband of one wife" (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6)

The requirement here does not speak to whether a man has been divorced or remarried, but, if he is married, speaks to a general faithfulness and sexual purity in his current marriage. He is a "one woman kind of man." Of course, a man's marital history is relevant to establish his character, but his marital history is not primarily in view in these verses.

#### c. "Sober-minded" (1 Tim. 3:2)

The thought here is a clear-headedness that leads to rational, clear thinking in difficult situations. The potential overseer must have the ability to see people in a variety of situations and not make rash judgments. Further, the elder must demonstrate a basic wisdom and insight into the human heart. The elder should possess the ability to encounter sin without being surprised and without growing cynical.

# d. "Self-controlled" (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8) and "disciplined" (Titus 1:8)

Having "control of oneself" has relevance in all areas of finances, sexual purity, decision making, spiritual disciplines, use of time, and all areas of general life management. The man's lifestyle ought to reflect intentional thinking and living, prudence, and wisdom.

# e. "Respectable" (1 Tim. 3:2), "well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil" (1 Tim. 3:7), and "upright" (Titus 1:8)

These terms represent the outward sense that others have of the elder. He is a man others would describe as "respectable," which means worthy of respect. He is dignified and proper in this outward sense. Yet, 1 Timothy 3:7 also warns us that his reputation with those *outside the church* is important as well. The idea here is that if even an unbeliever thinks poorly of the man, how could we possibly elevate him in the church? This is speaking to his character, of course. If his reputation is poor specifically because of his stand for Christ and the gospel, or because of slander, that is different. What is in view here is his integrity. It will be a "disgrace" to appoint a man to this office whom even unbelievers think a poor example.

# f. "Hospitable" (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8)

The "hospitality" required of all Christians (1 Pet. 4:9) is to be practiced by the elder. In his life there is a general openness to other people, whether demonstrated by shared meals, giving of his time, or simply being consistent in building relationships with others.

# g. "Not a drunkard" (1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7)

The self-mastery of previous characteristics makes it clear that an elder should not be mastered by wine, drugs, or any other substance, but Paul makes it explicit here. Other potentially 'addictive' types of activities such as gambling, pornography, computer gaming, or any activity that has overflowed its boundaries in the man's life could potentially apply.

# h. "Not violent but gentle" (1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7); "Not quarrelsome" (1 Tim. 3:3), not "quick-tempered" (Titus 1:7)

To be an elder is to face difficult people and difficult situations, and to face emotional conflicts between godly people. Thus, a man prone to bully, fight, or be generally "hotheaded" should not serve in this office. An elder must be "correcting his opponents with gentleness" (2 Tim. 2:25) and must "be patient with them all" (1 Thess. 5:14). There is a general ability to bring "peace" to situations of conflict ("peaceable," 1 Tim. 3:3, NASB). Occasional expressions of anger or impatience are simply part of our fallenness, but if these characterize the man for those who live with him—his family, co-workers, others in church—the man must not be an elder.

#### i. "Not a lover of money" (1 Tim. 3:3) or "greedy for gain" (Titus 1:7)

There are different ways to be disqualified because a man is a "lover of money." It can mean a general greed that motivates someone to exploit the church for his own financial gain (Titus 1:7; 1 Pet. 5:2) or worse, to steal from it (Eph. 4:28). It can also mean a "covetousness" in the man's life that is really a form of "idolatry" (Col. 3:5). Or it could simply be a continual discontentment with what God has provided for him (Phil. 4:10-13; Heb. 13:5). All of these are temptations for everyone, but when they are characteristic of a man he should not serve as an elder.

### j. "A lover of good" (Titus 1:8)

This term in the Greek (*philagathos*) has to do with the heart of the potential elder. It is more than someone described as "a good man," or one committed to do "good works" (Titus 2:14), though it encompasses these. Beneath these is also to be a real love of and commitment to "the good" or "God's best." There is a demonstrated motivation to work for the good in others, in situations, and in his own life. "An overseer's love for people is always to be correlated with a love for what God wants people to be."<sup>5</sup>

### 4. Overseers must be skilled managers of their homes with evident fruit in their children.

Few qualifications for the elder are as sobering as this one, but none are more telling of the kind of leader that a man will be in God's church. The daily interaction, myriad of situations, unpredictability, balance of love and strength, demand for wisdom, and sheer test of character that happen in a home mirror profoundly the kind of labors an elder is called to in the church. Further, a man may keep his true self fairly hidden from his co-workers, but what he truly is will be revealed in his family life.

Yet, while a man's wife and children are a vital evidence of a man's leadership, they are not an infallible one. The heart of the child plays a part in the overall fruitfulness of his or her life. Thus, as we examine a man's household, we must not make hasty judgments.

1 Timothy 3:4-5 and Titus 1:6 spell out the kind of leader in the home that the overseer is to be.

# a. The man must lead his household "well."

The NT says of the elder that "he must manage his own household well, with all dignity" (1 Tim. 3:4). The key word used in Timothy is "manage," a term that means "to lead, rule, direct." How a man cares for his house and property, and how he leads his wife and children, should be included in this requirement.

The passage requires that the man lead his family "well"; all men are the heads of their homes, but we are looking for the man who leads "well." A household kept in order by coercion and threat is clearly inconsistent with the other character traits listed of elders. A potential elder is instead to "manage" his household "with all dignity."

Further, a man who manages his household well is obedient to the commandments related to his role as a father and husband: he is a husband who loves his wife as Christ loved the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> George W. Knight III, The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992) 292

church (Eph. 5:25-33), is living with her in an understanding way (1 Pet. 3:7), and he is a father who is bringing his children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). In other words, there is a pattern of loving discipleship and gracious leadership in his management of the home.

# b. The character of the children must be evident in their response to the father and their overall behavior (1 Tim. 3:5; Titus 1:6).

A chief evidence of the man's parenting is his children. Their character and behavior and even faith are seen as proper signs of how "well" he is parenting. The first and basic evidence to examine is that his children are "submissive" (1 Tim. 3:4), not "insubordinate" (Titus 1:6). A man whose leadership inspires the honor, respect, and basic obedience of his children has likely led his family "well" and "with all dignity," not through the threat of violence.

Titus 1:6 adds that an elder must have "faithful children not accused of riot or unruly" (KJV; cf. NET).

We believe that the requirement here is for a man's children to be "faithful," not that the children be "believing" (ESV, NASB). The word *pista* can be translated in either way with good biblical precedent, but the context in Titus connects "faithful children" to the issues of "debauchery" and "insubordination," and in 1 Timothy 3:4 the parallel Greek phrase calls for children who are "in submission."

It seems then that Paul is referring to the obedience of the child, not their faith. Further, there is the theological issue that we cannot require the regeneration of a child for the father to be qualified. The spiritual state of the child is in the hands of the Lord, not the father, and is determined "before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). For these reasons, we believe that the Bible requires the elder's children to be obedient to him, not that the children be Christians. The requirement also does not apply to grown children, because adults are responsible for their own behavior and are not bound to obey their parents (even though they continue to "honor" them; Ex. 20:12).

This basic obedience in the elder's children certainly does not mean sinlessness, and we ought to be very slow to disqualify a man for a given incident with one or more of his children. The key question is whether the incident reveals the general foolishness of youth or a characteristic and persistent lack of faithfulness in the father.

Lastly, an elder's children must not be "open to the charge of debauchery" (Titus 1:6). "Debauchery" can include drunkenness (cf. Eph 5:18), but the broader sense perhaps fits better here: "reckless abandon, wild living," "loose living." The question in view here is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> For "faithful" as a character trait cf. 1 Cor. 1:9; 10:13; Eph. 6:21; Titus 1:9; 3:8; For "believer" as in "possessing faith in Christ," cf. John 20:27; Acts 10:45).

not a single incident of drunkenness or some other reckless act in the child of a potential elder, but a lifestyle that is out of control in a visible and public manner.

# c. The elder's household is relevant because of the connection between parenting and pastoring.

The Bible makes an explicit connection between caring for your family and caring for Christ's church: "For if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?" (1 Tim. 3:5).

The implication is that effective leadership in the home requires a set of gifts that eldership in "God's church" also requires. We can think of the combination of strategic thinking and personal relationship; the need to be both strong and gentle; the need to speak God's truth clearly, but in an environment of love and affection; the challenge of accepting someone fully for who they are and yet lovingly calling them on to something greater; and more besides. All of these dichotomies come together in the home and in the church. We believe that it is for this reason that God upholds a man's home as a necessary tool for evaluation.

# 5. Pastors must possess an aptitude for sound doctrine.

Elders must also possess an aptitude for sound doctrine, which means that they understand and believe it and can teach and defend it. However, since we are appointing elders and not seminary professors, we might call it an aptitude for <u>applied</u> sound doctrine. Beyond this it includes a facility with the biblical text that demonstrates he is "a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). This aptitude for sound doctrine has four components to it.

#### a. First, the elder must understand sound doctrine (2 Tim. 2:15; Titus 1:9).

From Titus 1:9 we can see that the elder must personally understand "the trustworthy word as taught." A man only barely able to grasp the basics of Christianity will likely be unable to lead others in understanding and believing what the NT calls "sound doctrine" (1 Tim. 1:10; Titus 1:9; 2:1). Having an aptitude for doctrine would also include indications that the man is a proven student of the Bible (2 Tim. 2:15).

#### b. Second, the elder must believe sound doctrine.

This calls attention to the potential elder's personal faith and confidence in orthodox Christian belief. The challenges of the office require that a man "hold firm" to his own faith if he is going to be able to shepherd people wrestling with theirs.

# c. Third, the pastor must be able to teach sound doctrine (Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3:2; 2 Tim. 3:16-4:2; Titus 1:9).

In 1 Timothy Paul says that the elder must be "able to teach" (3:2), but in Titus we get a sense of the purpose of this aptitude. It is "so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine" (1:9). The teaching he received and believes, he is thus to pass along to

others. Such an ability to teach implies a basic ability to organize ideas, accurately exegete the biblical text, and communicate this in a way that encourages, instructs, and even inspires other believers.

# d. Fourth, the pastor must be able to defend sound doctrine (Acts 20:28-30; Titus 1:9).

The final component of the elder's aptitude in sound doctrine brings the first three together: *He must be able to defend sound doctrine to those who challenge or contradict it.* Paul expresses this in Titus 1:9, "He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it." Throughout the pastoral epistles we learn of an array of opponents of the gospel (e.g., 1 Tim. 1:3-7; 2 Tim. 2:14-19; Titus 1:10-16), and throughout the NT we see that the gospel is always being attacked (e.g., Phil. 3:1-12; 2 Pet. 2:1-22). This ability to defend the gospel against its opponents is part of the shepherd's (pastor's) role in guarding the flock entrusted to him from "fierce wolves" both inside and outside the church (Acts 20:28-30).

The skills involved here include: (1) discerning the theological issue in question; (2) understanding the truth to combat the lie; (3) communicating God's truth graciously, which is to find the right word for the moment (Eph. 4:29), or at least a reasonable one. A man cannot be expected to defend all doctrines equally well, but he needs to demonstrate facility with the central doctrines of the church.

This aptitude will likely grow as the man performs the duties of an elder, but to be qualified for ordination to the office there must be some basic ability to do this. The oral exam of the ordination process, conversation about theological topics, and asking a man how he would respond to hypothetical situations all shed light on a man's ability here.

#### 6. Overseers must possess the gift of leadership.

We noted above (Section C.2.) that the elder is an "overseer" in God's church, leading and managing and governing the local church according to the revelation of Scripture and Christian prudence, all for the good of the members of the church and the glory of God.

The elder's *responsibility to lead* means that he must possess the necessary *gifting to lead*. This gifting includes having sufficient wisdom to make good decisions in small and large matters, the ability to communicate and implement those decisions, and biblical wisdom to speak into the affairs of the church.

The elder's leadership will involve thinking theologically about the needs of the church and the future direction of the church. Leadership involves a certain amount of casting vision to the church or a segment of the church. A given elder will likely have more gifting in certain areas of the life of the church than in others, but there must be a basic level of leadership to serve as an elder.

There are three places to look when determining a man's fitness to lead in God's church. The first is the most critical, his family (1 Tim. 3:4-5). The second is his current service in the church. How has he demonstrated responsibility, initiative, care, a command of the Scriptures, and a zeal for God in his volunteer work for the church? A third area is his personal and professional life. Is he self-controlled? Conscientious? Able to handle delegated responsibility? Does he have a well-managed life? Such questions can be helpful when ascertaining a man's leadership gift.

## 7. Qualification of an Elder Versus Removal of an Elder

1 Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 are given to help us know what to look for in elder candidates in the church. These passages also present the gifting and character traits that called men should continue to cultivate in ministry. The description in these passages should not be viewed as a rigid standard that acts as some trigger to automatically and immediately disqualify a man should he be seen to fall short. If a pastor is found to no longer fit the description in the text, the local elders should explore the situation to determine the reason this is the case.

There is an important difference between the selection process and the removal process for elders. Each church should have a clear process in place to handle the care, evaluation, discipline, and removal of elders. 1 Timothy 5:19-21 is given to help guide us in how to handle an elder who has committed scandalous sin or persists in serious sin for which a public rebuke might be necessary. The proper approach for addressing charges against an elder are addressed in IV.D of the Book of Church Order.

#### B. The Elder as Christian First

It is critical for both the church and its elders that leadership is seen in a proper light. Pastors and churches suffer when pastors are seen in an inflated manner or as some "professional" class of Christians far removed from "the rest of us." Here are several ideas that should inform a church's view of its elders and the elder's view of himself.

- **1.** Overseers are <u>men under authority</u> before they are men entrusted with authority (1 Cor. 11:3, Rom. 1:1).
- **2.** Elders are "brothers in Christ" with all those in their church before they are "fathers in the faith" to anyone (Romans 12:10, John 1:12).
- **3.** Pastors are also sheep before they are shepherds (John 10:1-15; 1 Pet. 5:4).
- **4.** Overseers are <u>servants</u> before they are "leaders" (Heb. 13:17, 1 Tim. 3:4-5).
- **5.** Elders must see themselves as <u>only one part of the body of Christ</u> with Christ alone as the head (Eph. 1:23; 4:15-16; 5:23; Col. 1:18; 2:19).

# C. Elders and Plurality

Elders are to serve as a plurality, not alone, though how many elders constitute adequate plurality is not given in the NT. It teaches this by *precedent*, which we see in the fact that all mentions of "elder" are in the plural (e.g., Acts 14:23; 15:2-16:4; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 4:14; etc.).

Plurality is a means of acknowledging that God gives a diversity of gifts to his people (1 Cor. 12:7-11). No one man has all the gifts necessary to lead a local church. While all elders must be "able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2), some will be more gifted than others. While all of them must have leadership to "manage the household of God" (1 Tim. 3:4), some will have gifting along administrative lines and others along more strategic lines.

Plurality will often mean that different elders will have different responsibilities in the church that line up with their gifting as much as is feasible. Further, when decisions are made in the life of the church, often one man possesses more wisdom in a given area than the others. At such times, there is a kind of mutual deference that is most prudent. Even the role of senior pastor or lead elder is merely an extension of this principle (see D. below).

Plurality is one of the key means by which elders are held accountable in an ongoing manner. A man who ministers alone is in a precarious position, able to lean on his own understanding too much and potentially able to walk in secret sins for a length of time. Plurality does not eliminate these dangers, but it does make them less tempting in the normal flow of life.

It is possible that a church plant will have a season in which only one elder is ordained. The NT certainly can envision an authentic church without a plurality of elders (e.g., the period of time prior to Acts 14:23). However, we see this as a temporary necessity that is to be remedied as quickly as possible (without making the opposite error of "laying hands on too quickly"). One remedy is for the sending church elders or the Regional Leader to serve as a functional part of the local eldership until a qualified elder is raised up and ordained. An additional important point is that the second elder, once ordained, need not be full time or financially compensated, at least in the short run.

The precedent of a plurality in the NT cannot be an excuse to overlook the requirements of the man who is to be an elder. These are too clear to be overlooked or minimized, and a church will likely suffer more from elders who are unqualified men than it will from having too few elders in office.

#### **D. Bi-Vocational Elders**

The Bible allows us to ordain part-time elders or those who will be unpaid for their service. If Christian prudence, the needs of the church, and the lack of finances make this seem beneficial, we are not acting contrary to Scripture if we ordain such men. However, the biblical standard to which we should aspire is for elders to be paid when at all possible (1 Cor. 9:6-14; Luke 10:7/Matt. 10:10; Gal. 6:6; 1 Tim. 5:17-18).

1. The NT preference is for elders to be free to devote themselves to their ministries by being compensated for this ministry. 1 Timothy 5:17-18 makes this clear:

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. <sup>18</sup> For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "the laborer deserves his wages."

Paul's first point here has to do with the relative levels of gifting ("rule well"), scopes of responsibility ("especially those who labor in preaching and teaching"), and apparently financial compensation ("double honor") of elders in a given church. That they are paid seems assumed by the mention of "double honor," and especially by the next verse about "the laborer" deserving his "wages."

His second point is about the need to financially compensate the elder. He is the "ox" who is not to be "muzzled" by refusing to compensate him; he is the "laborer" who "deserves his wages" (v. 18). The alternative to paying an elder is not paying him, something Paul labels "muzzling the ox." To fail to support him financially limits his ability and is thus "muzzling the ox." That is a bad thing according to Paul, for it means appointing him to do the work and then hindering him from doing it.

The high value on "preaching and teaching" is confirmed by the command to pay those involved in this labor. We see this same kind of language in Galatians 6:6: "One who is taught the word must share all good things with the one who teaches." As we will see below, 1 Corinthians 9:11 echoes the same idea: "If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you?"

Of course, a church may be unable to fully financially support a pastor for a time. There is nothing that forbids an elder working another job *if necessary*. But, nowhere in Scripture is it said or implied that it would be better to not support an elder.

The NT picture is thus very clear: Except in unusual situations, the elder should be financially compensated for his labors. This enables him to devote himself to the time-intensive and often difficult aspects of his calling, and it allows him to do this "unmuzzled" instead of "muzzled."

2. Since the Bible does not forbid elders from being bi-vocational, there could be situations in which this is necessary, and we are free to do it—church plants and small churches or poorer churches, as indicated above. However, muzzling some of the oxen is not to be for the sake of a "check and balance" to the unmuzzled oxen. While the concept of a balance of power is a good thing when it comes to civil government, the Scriptures never teach that a special category of unpaid or "lay" elders should be appointed for the purpose of "balancing" the power of the paid elders. The Bible's answer to such a need is first a plurality of elders. In SG,

we also benefit from the role of the Regional Assembly of Elders and a Regional Leader, who provide further accountability to such pluralities.

#### E. The Senior Pastor

# Use of the Terms "Lead Pastor," "Lead Elder," or "Senior Pastor"

The role of "senior pastor" or "lead pastor/elder" is supportable by biblical precedent and practical wisdom. It is not a biblical office *per se*. The Bible presents numerous examples of groups in the Bible where a man is or becomes the leader, or at least the spokesman. Whether it is Moses over Israel, heads of tribes and clans in Israel, judges and kings over Israel, Peter over the Twelve apostles, or James in the Jerusalem church, it seems that biblically there is typically a man identified as the leader or spokesman (e.g., Acts 1:15; 15:13ff.). Further, practical wisdom tells us that a group is served when one individual is identified as the primary leader or spokesman, even if he is technically a "first among equals." He is an equal among his fellow elders in the exercise of authority, not another class of elder, but his role is distinct in that he serves as a leader of his fellow elders.

The lead elder is part of a plurality of elders and his character and gifting are not necessarily uniformly greater than the other men. What is distinct is his measure of gifting and capacity in those areas (teaching, leadership) most central to pastoral leadership. The precise nature of the role of the lead pastor may vary depending on the maturity of an eldership, the range of gifts on the team, the level of specialization on the team, etc. The elders decide who will serve in this capacity (with appropriate input from church members and guiding counsel from other leaders in SG).

SG Churches have historically delegated some of the following responsibilities to senior pastors.

- 1. Providing doctrinal leadership through a prominent teaching role
- 2. Developing the eldership into a cohesive leadership team
- **3.** Providing pastoral care for the eldership
- **4.** Facilitating decision-making by serving as Chairman of the Board of local elders
- **5.** Identifying and deploying spiritual gifts among the elders
- **6.** Encouraging efficiency
- 7. Coordinating eldership training
- **8.** Acting as spokesman for the elders.

### F. Procedure for the Repositioning of the Senior Pastor

# **General Principles:**

- 1. Although we affirm both the biblical principles underlying a first among equals and the wisdom of having such a role among the elders of a church, the Senior Pastorate is not a biblical office as such; therefore the Scriptures do not give us either qualifications or procedures for the installation or repositioning of a Senior Pastor.
- 2. The title of a Senior Pastor (Lead Elder, Lead Pastor) expresses the recognition that though all elders are equal in responsibilities and authority, they are not necessarily equal in gifting, especially in the gift of leadership.
- 3. It is often the elder who is the most gifted preacher and leader that is identified as the Senior Pastor.
- 4. It is, ultimately, the responsibility of the eldership of a local church to identify and commission each of its members to fulfill tasks and responsibilities as they see fit, including the Senior Pastorate (see III, E).
- 5. Because of the visibility that a Senior Pastor has and because of the unique and important role in which he serves with respect to the congregation, repositioning him should be done carefully and according to the procedure outlined below.

#### **Procedure:**

- 1. If an eldership thinks that it needs to consider the question of repositioning the Senior Pastor (for reasons other than moral qualifications or heterodoxy), then the matter should be brought to all the elders for the purpose of making an evaluation.
- 2. The concerns of the questioning elder(s) should be honestly and clearly spoken and communicated to the entire eldership. Once the eldership agrees that an evaluation is needed, but before any decision has been made, the elders should send a communication to the Regional Leader that outlines their observations and the reason(s) for evaluation of the Senior Pastor. This formalizes the process of the Senior Pastor evaluation.
- 3. A clearly defined formal plan of evaluation should be established by the local eldership including:
  - a. A clear presentation of the issues precipitating such an evaluation.
  - b. An opportunity for the Senior Pastor to respond to his fellow elders.
  - c. A suitable period of time (at least 30 days) for the evaluation of Senior Pastor in light of the needs of the congregation in order to determine if the elder(s)' concerns are legitimate. If applicable, the Senior Pastor should be given time for improvement on areas of concern.
  - d. The seeking of input and advice from elders in the region and the Regional Leader.
  - e. A suitable means of getting input from other local leaders and those within the congregation.
- 4. A copy of the plan should be sent to the Regional Leader.

- 5. At the end of the evaluation period the elders will make their decision based upon the due consideration of the gifts and abilities of Senior Pastor, his abilities relative to the other elders, and a proper assessment the needs of this local congregation. While the elders may seek advice from the Regional Leader and other SG elders, the decision ultimately rests with the local elders.
- 6. The local eldership will communicate in writing their decision to the Regional Leader who will inform the Regional Assembly of Elders.
- 7. If the decision to reposition the Senior Pastor is made, the one being repositioned has the right to resign with honor if he decides not remain on the eldership. The Regional Leader and the SG Director of Church Care will facilitate, when possible, his transition to another SG church if he so desires. SG is under no obligation to ensure his placement on another church's staff or eldership, but will make an effort to do so. The church that repositioned the Senior Pastor should make every effort to give appropriate considerations to the departing pastor including severance.

### **Subsequent Appeals:**

- 1. If the Senior Pastor believes that the local eldership sinned against him, he will have the right to appeal to the Regional Judicial Review Committee.
- 2. If the Senior Pastor believes that the elders did not follow the procedure outlined above, he has the right to appeal to the Regional Judicial Review Committee.
- 3. If the Judicial Review Committee finds in favor of the eldership, no other appeal will be granted.
- 4. If the Judicial Review Committee finds in favor of the removed Senior Pastor then it may censure the church elders and appeal to them to re-do the evaluation, but it does not have the authority to force his reinstatement.

# **Final Disposition:**

- 1. A Senior Pastor or any other elder who is repositioned, not on the basis of moral qualification or heterodoxy, and who chooses to leave the local church, leaves with honor and remains in good standing within SG, and thus retains his ordination status.
- 2. A Senior Pastor, or any other elder who is removed from office, but not on the basis of moral disqualification or heterodoxy, remains in good standing within SG, and retains his ordination status.

# **G.** Accountability for Pastors:

Because significant authority is entrusted to the elders, it is critical that these men are accountable. They are accountable in several ways.

# 1. Elders are accountable to God.

First and most importantly, elders are appointed to their office ultimately by God: "The Holy Spirit has made you overseers" (Acts 20:28). This means that they must perform their office with a keen awareness of God's watchful eye on them: "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word" (2 Tim. 4:1-2a). Further, we are to perform our duties now in light of a coming judgment: "When the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory" (1 Pet. 5:4).

### 2. There is protection and accountability built into the ordination process.

There is no immunity to sin or temptation this side of our glorification, but we do a great service to the church when we refuse to appoint anyone to this office who does not explicitly fulfill all the prerequisites given in the NT. This is a preemptive measure, but an important one. If we are careless about whom we ordain to the office in the first place, any accountability structures we implement will be of limited value.

# 3. There is accountability that happens within a biblical plurality of elders.

If a church has faithfully appointed a plurality of elders to the office, there is a great accountability that happens here. Some of this accountability will happen through formal, scheduled times of speaking into each other's lives; asking about specific areas of obedience must be a part of a healthy plurality. Accountability also happens in the ongoing flow of ministry as sinful patterns emerge in a man's leadership or lifestyle or in isolated incidents that occur before others. A healthy awareness of each other's behavior and an expectation of input and observations from others will supplement the formal accountability in a helpful way. Truly, to serve in a plurality of elders involves a commitment to ongoing accountability.

# 4. There is a critical layer of accountability that comes from the congregation when it brings observations and appeals to elders or charges against elders.

Just as the man to be qualified as an elder must have a general openness to input, so must the elder remain open to the observations of those in the church. "Fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Prov. 1:7). At times an elder might even be engaged in a matter of personal sin against another person in the church, one that requires a Matthew 18:15-20 process of rebuke, repentance, and reconciliation.

A critical point of accountability is what Paul labels "a charge against an elder" (1 Tim. 5:19). He is not specific about whether this accusation comes from an apostle or a member of the congregation or another elder, but we should probably assume that all three are possibilities.

A member of a congregation must be enabled to pursue such accusations against leaders. Without this layer of accountability the possibility of some version of tyrannical leadership is easy to imagine. Further, denying such due process to the congregation opens us up to a situation where a person could observe an elder failing in his office and be unable to act on it. Of course, the right to do this does not mean that they can do this without any restraints (IV.E.2.e.iii).

# 5. There is accountability that happens through the broader body of Sovereign Grace churches.

In all of the ways specified in this Book of Church Order, elders in a local church are accountable to the other elders in their Region and ultimately to all the elders in SG. Regional Assemblies, with their Judicial Review Committees, and the Council of Elders, along with the SG Court of Appeal, provide authoritative accountability for the life and doctrine of elders in SG.

#### H. The Ordination of Elders

#### 1. Introduction

Before a man is ordained to the office of elder he has been first called, gifted, and chosen through divine initiative (Acts 20:28, Eph. 4:11). In SG appointing a man to the office of elder involves a collaborative effort between the elders and members of a local church and the Regional Assembly of Elders.

The purpose of a process for ordination is simply to appoint men to this office who resemble the NT criteria for the office (especially 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). We are not omniscient and do not know the future, but a process helps us not to miss obvious deficiencies in a man who desires this office.

## 2. Written feedback throughout the process

During the ordination process, members of the candidate's church are asked to submit in writing their observations, affirmation, or critique of the man in question. This is not to propagate gossip and slander, but to allow opportunity to stop the process if there is information the elders lack in evaluating the man. Additionally, affirmation will help confirm the selection of the candidate. Such feedback is an important opportunity for the congregation to assist in the ordination process.

The feedback of members of the candidate's church will not be understood as a binding vote on the ordination of the candidate but may be a deciding factor in his qualification. It will be up to the local eldership to handle the feedback as they deem most appropriate.

#### 3. The Basic Process for Ordination

a. The elders decide to choose a man who is qualified as much as they can determine.

Elders will solicit input from those who know the man and pay close attention to his current service. Such indicators are not infallible, but they do help establish the man's fitness for pastoral ministry. Appropriate counsel may be sought from the SG Regional Leader or other elders in the region.

## b. Input from all church officers and congregants.

In this initial stage of evaluation, input will be solicited from the elders, deacons, and congregation on an ad hoc basis. The elders will together establish if the man is qualified as far as can be seen.

# c. The congregation is informed and input is invited.

Once the elders are supportive of the man for pastoral ministry, they will notify the church and invite their further input.

While primary selection and testing is done under the elders of the local church, the Regional Assembly of Elders, its Ordination Committee, and the congregation has also have a vital role in the ordination process. In order for some elder qualifications to be determined, congregational input is important.

Even though Titus was given the singular charge of appointing elders in Crete (Titus 1:5) the appointment process of potential overseers would seem to require the testimony of other believers in order to determine who was blameless/above reproach, hospitable, not pugnacious, not greedy for gain, whose children were not open to the charge of debauchery, etc. (Titus 1:5-9). Further, attestation to many of these leadership qualifications seem to require proof over a period of time by a local church (1 Tim. 3:10).

Therefore, the active involvement of the congregation is vital in the confirmation of an elder's call and, at a minimum, should require extensive informal interaction with the congregation regarding the suitability of the elder candidate.

#### d. Pastors College

Candidates for the office of elder preferably will attend the SGM Pastors College or the functional equivalent. However, this is not an absolute requirement, and local elders and the appropriate regional leaders will weigh exceptions individually.

#### e. Pastoral Internship

Prior to ordination candidates should ideally serve as pastoral interns. The length and nature of this internship will be decided by the local eldership.

### f. Successful Completion of SG ordination requirements

The pastoral candidate must complete all of the SG requirements for ordination before his actual ordination. These include the written and oral ordination exams administered by

Regional Ordination Committee and approval by a simple majority of the Regional Assembly of Elders, after any necessary questioning.

#### g. Date Set for Ordination

Once the man is established as qualified for this office and the church desires to appoint him to this office, a date is set for the ordination service and is announced to the church.

#### h. Final Written Feedback

Written feedback is allowable throughout the evaluation and ordination process, but should be finalized far in advance of the ordination service.

#### i. The Ordination Service

Local church elders will be present at the ordination service, as well as the Regional Leader (or his representative) who will officially commend the candidate.

During the ordination service the presiding elder(s) will include the following questions for the candidate to answer in the affirmative:

- 1) Do you promise to shepherd the flock of God not under compulsion but willingly, not for shameful gain, but eagerly, not domineering over those in your charge but being an example to the flock? (1 Pet. 5:1-4)
- 2) Do you promise to faithfully guard the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made you an overseer and do you promise to protect that flock from false teaching, division, and dissension? (Acts 20:28-31)
- 3) Do you promise to care for the flock of God, not as a hireling, but as an under shepherd of the Great Shepherd, caring for His sheep as the precious ones for whom He died? (Ezek. 34)
- 4) Do you, in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and this congregation, promise to preach the Word, in season and out of season, and do you promise to reprove, rebuke, and exhort with complete patience, enduring suffering, while remaining soberminded, in all of your preaching and teaching, and will you do the work of an evangelist among those of whom God has given you charge? (2 Tim. 4:1-5)
- 5) Do you promise to preach and teach only that which befits sound biblical doctrine, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus according to our Statement of Faith, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures; and do you further promise that if at any time you find yourself out of accord with any of the fundamentals of this system of doctrine, you will on your own initiative, make known to your fellow elders and your regional leader the change that has taken place in your views since the assumption of this ordination vow? (2 Tim. 1:13-14)

- 6) Do you promise to keep a close watch on yourself and to walk humbly before others, to be self-suspicious of your own motives, to invite criticism from others, and to make yourself accountable to those whom God has put in your life? Furthermore, do you approve of the form of government and discipline of SG Churches, in conformity with the general principles of biblical polity that we may walk together in proper fellowship and accountability? (1 Tim. 4:16)
- 7) Do you promise to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel and to show yourself in all respects, in action and in speech, to be a model of good works, integrity, and dignity so that neither the church, nor our Savior Jesus Christ, nor the gospel may be brought into reproach? (Titus 2:7-8)
- 8) Do you promise to continually seek the gifts of the Spirit that you might serve God's people, not in the energy of the flesh, but in the power of the Holy Spirit and to carry out your ministry without fear of man?

Having answered in the affirmative, the presiding elder will ask the church the following, expecting an affirmative:

- 1) Do you, the people of \_\_\_\_\_\_ church, receive \_\_\_\_\_\_, as your pastor?
- 2) Do you promise to receive the word of truth from him with meekness and love, and to submit to him in the due biblical exercise of his leadership?
- 3) Do you engage to supply him with sufficient material maintenance and to furnish him with whatever you may see needful for the promotion of the gospel and for his comfort among you?
- 4) Do you promise to encourage him in his labors and to assist his ministry and leadership for your spiritual edification, the evangelization of the lost, and the promotion of God's glory?

All the local elders and the Regional Leader will lay hands on the candidate and pray for him. The process of 'laying on of hands' is a public affirmation and recognition that this individual has been set apart for gospel ministry and that the ongoing mercy and attendance of the Spirit of God will be necessary to satisfactorily fulfill the requirements of ministry.

## 4. Elders That Have Not Been Ordained Under SGM

Elders not previously ordained by SGM but ordained by a SG member church by the date of the implementation of this polity will be recognized as duly ordained on a case by case basis, subject to the review of the Regional Ordination Committee.

## 5. The Duration of the Office of Overseer

It is assumed that when a man is ordained to this office he will serve as long as he is qualified and it is in the best interest of the church and his family. In other words, there is no set term on an elder's service. Term limits seem to be a contradiction to the way that God gifts His people and the example He gives us in the NT.

#### I. The Office of Deacon

#### 1. Biblical Basis

There are numerous passages in the NT that use the Greek term *diakonos* and its cognates (Rom. 16:1, Eph. 6:21, Col. 1:7, Col. 4:7, Phil. 1:1, Acts 6:1-6). The word "deacon" (Greek – διάκονος) simply means "servant" or "minister." In one sense, all God's people are called as "ministers" or "deacons." However, there seems to be an official role for some to share that is designated with the title of "Deacon." Although many passages give us a sense that a deacon is a mature servant of the local church, the clearest passage on the qualifications and call of deacons is 1 Timothy 3:8-13.

"Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. <sup>9</sup>They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. <sup>10</sup>And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. <sup>11</sup>Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. <sup>12</sup>Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. <sup>13</sup>For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. (1 Tim. 3:8–13, ESV).

## 2. Characteristics of a Deacon

The qualifications for a deacon parallel those for an elder in almost every way. However, he does not need to have the ability to teach, nor is the qualification to deal gently and hospitably with others mentioned. This likely reflects that the deacon is not expected to have the same intensity of interaction with people required of an elder. However, this office is not merely one that deals with the physical needs of the church; most of these requirements relate to character and maturity, important characteristics to a man given a spiritual charge. Deacons must hold to the gospel with integrity, they must be proven, and they must be examples in

**<sup>7</sup>** Knight 167.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> J. R. W. Stott, (1996). *Guard the Truth: The message of 1 Timothy & Titus*. The Bible Speaks Today (99). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

home life. While all believers are called as "deacons" in the general sense, official deacons must set a pace for maturity in Christ.

# a. "Dignified" (1 Tim. 3:8)

"Dignified" connotes a sobriety of purpose and earnestness of conduct worthy of respect and winsome to others that brings honor to Christ and the office of deacon.

# b. "Not double-tongued" (1 Tim. 3:8)

The deacon is to speak in a sincere and holy manner. He is not to engage in gossip, slander, or deceit.

# c. "Not addicted to much wine" (1 Tim. 3:8)

The self-mastery of previous characteristics makes it clear that a deacon should not be mastered by wine, drugs, or any other substance, but Paul makes it explicit here. We might add other potentially 'addictive' types of activities such as gambling, pornography, computer gaming, or any activity that has overflowed its boundaries in the man's life.

# d. Not greedy for dishonest gain" (1 Tim. 3:8)

There are different ways to be disqualified because a man is a "lover of money." It can mean a general greed that motivates someone to exploit the church for his own financial gain (Titus 1:7; 1 Pet. 5:2) or worse, to steal from it (Eph. 4:28). It can also mean a "covetousness" in the man's life that is really a form of "idolatry" (Col. 3:5), or it could simply be a continual discontentment with what God has provided for him (Phil. 4:10-13; Heb. 13:5). All of these are temptations for everyone, but when they are characteristic of a man he should not serve as a deacon.

#### e. "Must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience" (1 Tim. 3:9)

Deacons are to hold to the Christian faith with fidelity of doctrine and life in such a way that they can operate with a clear conscience, not condemned for heresy or immoral conduct.

# f. "Tested first...prove themselves blameless" (1 Tim. 3:10)

Deacons are to be tested before they are selected for service in the office of deacon. They must be tested for character, doctrine, and conduct in a probationary period. If they qualify according to the biblical standards in a blameless way, then they can serve.

## g. "Husband of one wife" (1 Tim. 3:12)

The requirement here does not speak to whether a man has been divorced or remarried, but, if he is married, speaks to a general faithfulness and sexual purity in his current marriage. The point is to examine his character, and a man's marriage reveals his character.

#### h. "Managing their children and their own households well" (1 Tim. 3:12)

The key word used in Timothy is "manage," a term that means "to exercise a position of leadership, rule, direct, be at the head of." A man who manages his household well is obedient to the commandments related to his role as a father and husband: He is a husband who loves his wife as Christ loved the church (Eph. 5:25-33), is living with her in an understanding way (1 Pet. 3:7), and he is a father who is bringing his children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). In other words, there is a pattern of loving discipleship and gracious leadership in his management of the home.

#### 3. The Role of a Deacon

Scripture does not provide great detail on the function of deacons. Some hold that the office is devoted primarily to meeting the temporal needs of the church. Others hold that the office involves any service that frees up the pastors to govern the church and devote themselves to the ministry of the Word and prayer (Acts 6:2-4). Either view is acceptable in SG. The character requirements in 1 Timothy 3 indicate the spiritual maturity the role demands and underline its significance for the life of the church (cf. Phil 1:1). Deacons are not required to be able to teach, nor are they given the responsibility of church governance; those roles fall to elders/pastors/overseers.

Although we wholeheartedly affirm the vital importance of the ministry of women in our churches, individual churches may differ on the acceptability of having women serve in the role of deacon. If a church decides to appoint women deacons, it is essential that the responsibilities of that role not violate other Scriptural commands that define and delineate the respective roles of men and women in the home and the church (e.g., 1 Tim. 2:12; 1 Cor. 11:3).

## J. The Role of the Congregation

## 1. Congregational Equality

Church members do not have an inferior status to elders, but are equal in standing before Christ and fellow members of his body. All members of the church--elder and congregant--are sheep under the authority of the Chief Shepherd and posses the same privileges: adoption by God, redemption by Christ, and sealing by the same Holy Spirit.

Therefore, there is no fundamental distinction among believers in Christ's body. All Christians—elder and congregant alike—have equal access to God through Christ (Gal. 3:28), are "priests" of God (1 Pet. 2:9), possess the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts (Acts 2:17-18; 1 Cor. 6:19; 2 Cor. 1:22), receive illumination from the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:6-16), and all other spiritual blessings in Christ (Eph. 1:3ff.). All believers--elder and congregant alike--have access to God's Word and stand under its authority. As a result, the historical distinction

-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> BDAG, proistēmi.

between "clergy" and "laity" is an unbiblical idea that creates an illegitimate dichotomy within the body of Christ.

Each member plays an important role in the mission of the church. All Christians are indwelt by the Spirit of God, all are children of God, and all belong to the royal priesthood. Believers are called to a shared life together, involving fellowship, discipline, and care. While the church as a whole does not have responsibility for the governance of the church, each member contributes greatly to the health or demise of the church. The rule of elders in no way contradicts the prerogatives and liberties given to all who are in Christ.

### 2. Congregational Solidarity

Because elders are fundamentally a *part* of the congregation themselves, the relationship between elders and the congregation is meant to be one of joyful unity. Although elders must meet certain character qualifications, those qualifications are traits commanded of all believers. Elders have a responsibility to teach, but they, like the congregation, stand under the authority of God's Word. Elders are to proclaim and guard the gospel, but all believers are to stand firm in one spirit and strive together for the faith of the gospel (Phil. 1:27).

Pastoral instruction and leadership should seek to win a congregation's glad affirmation and forge a congregational solidarity through its manner of leadership. Such pastoral leadership includes:

- a. Humble instruction
- **b.** Informative communication
- c. Alerting the church to evidences of grace
- d. Educating the church as to the fruit of its life, serving, and giving
- e. Involving the church appropriately in the leadership's thinking and plans
- f. Proactive deployment of people according to their gifts (Eph. 4:11ff.)

## 3. Congregational Responsibility

Because of the fundamental equality of believers, each member plays an important role in the mission of the church. Church members are called to a shared life together, involving fellowship, discipline, and care. Although the church as a whole does not have responsibility for the governance of the church, each member contributes greatly to the health or demise of the church. The rule of elders in no way contradicts the prerogatives and liberties given to all who are in Christ. Church members participate, under the leadership of the elders, in the joyful welcoming of new members and the excommunication of unfaithful members. The congregation is involved in the evaluation and affirmation of eldership candidates and has a responsibility to bring charges against a leader in serious sin. All believers are responsible to reject false teachers and unbiblical leadership. All believers have the right to freely approach God through Christ and to study the Scriptures for themselves. All believers are gifted by the Holy Spirit for active ministry in the church. Of course, the congregation must also recognize

the value and role of elders in the church. We should pray for our leaders, maintain the unity of the Spirit with them, and joyfully submit to their biblical leadership.

At various points in the NT, the authors not only address the leaders of the churches to whom they write but the entire church as well. Consider Paul's letter to the Galatians. Paul is writing not only to the Galatian elders, but to the whole church. He calls the church to be responsible to evaluate the teaching that comes from the pulpit. They are not to passively accept anything that comes out of the preacher's mouth, but are to hold it up to the light of Christ and test it by his Word. If the teaching fails the test, the whole church is responsible to quit listening to the teacher - even if that teacher is an apostle like Paul himself.

<sup>6</sup>I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—<sup>7</sup>not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. <sup>8</sup>But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. <sup>9</sup>As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. (Gal. 1:6-9, ESV)

In 2 Timothy Paul lays the responsibility for the presence of false teachers clearly at the foot of the congregation. They are the ones responsible for accumulating to themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires (4:3). They are the ones who do not endure sound doctrine, who want their ears tickled, and who consequently turn from truth to myths. They are the ones ultimately responsible for allowing their own desires to determine the kind of teachers they seek out for themselves.

<sup>2</sup>Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. <sup>3</sup>For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions. (2 Tim. 4:2-3, ESV)

Although authority in the local church is given to elders, they are not to be insulated from the congregation's appropriate observations and concerns and even responsibility to ensure the fidelity of their leaders. Because Scripture affirms the right of church members to bring legitimate allegations concerning an elder (1 Tim. 5:19-21), a church's local polity in conjunction with the SG Rules of Discipline (which follow) outline the relevant policies and procedures by which such allegations can be evaluated. Clear communication about such avenues of recourse will foster both a healthy accountability and an atmosphere of trust.

Additionally, the roles and responsibilities of the congregation may be worked out in SG churches by the following optional pursuits:

- a. Seeking input from the congregation for any pastoral candidate for ordination.
- **b.** Seeking input from the congregation for any deacon candidate for installation.

- c. Creating a church environment where there are vital relationships, active discussion, and cooperation between the elders and the whole church with a clear, comprehensive, and welcoming feedback system.
- d. Providing regular forums of communication and interaction as appropriate.
- e. Establishing and training the church in the use of the channels for feedback and redress outlined by local church policy and the policy and procedures of the SG Book of Church Order.

A dynamic relationship of mutual care and respect and the leadership of godly elders is necessary for a healthy church polity. No church polity will work without the necessary qualifying character on the part of the pastors and the correspondent faith-filled submission of the congregation.

# 4. Congregational Submission

Within the general equality of all believers, God orders and gives leaders to his church. The congregation's submission to Christ finds expression in its submission to godly elders (1 Thess. 5:12-13; Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:5). All ministry to the church is ultimately *Christ's own ministry* and, as gifts from God, elders are an extension of Christ's ministry to His people.

Jesus is the apostle (Heb. 3:1), the prophet (Matt. 13:57), the teacher (Matt. 10:24-25), the shepherd (John 10:11; 1 Pet. 5:4), the evangelist (Luke 4:18), the preacher (Matt. 4:17), and the servant (Mark 10:45). All leaders in the church carry on Jesus' own ministry.

This is a voluntary submission which must not be coerced and which assumes that elders are serving as faithful examples and are faithfully leading the congregation in obedience to God's Word. God's Word circumscribes the elders' authority. Only Scripture can bind the conscience of the Christian, and we forfeit our authority when we deviate from God's Word.

Biblical texts that specifically address the notion of authority with respect to the congregation and its leaders affirm elder rule and congregational submission. .

- a. Elders rule/govern/manage (proistēmi): 1 Tim. 3:4-5; 5:17; 1 Thess. 5:12; Rom. 12:8
- **b.** Elders lead (*hēgeomai*): Heb. 13:7, 17, 24
- c. Elders exercise oversight (*episkopos*; *episkopeō*): Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:7; 1 Pet. 5:2)
- **d.** The congregation respects (lit. "know": oida<sup>10</sup>): 1 Thess. 5:12
- e. The congregation esteems (lit. "think, consider,: hēgeisthai<sup>11</sup>): 1 Thess. 5:13

The verb "to know" has the sense here of "take note of with a view to respecting and appreciating." G.K. Beale, 1-2 Thessalonians (IVPNTC; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 160.

- f. The congregation obeys (peith $\bar{o}$ ): Heb. 13:17
- g. The congregation submits (hypeik $\bar{o}$ ): Heb. 13:17
- h. The congregation imitates (mimeomai): Heb. 13:7; 1 Cor. 11:1; 2 Thess. 3:7, 9

Texts dealing with church discipline undoubtedly demonstrate the important role and responsibility of the congregation in this process, but not in a way that excludes or diminishes the elders' role.

<sup>11 &</sup>quot;The combination of this verb "consider" with the adverb "quite beyond all measure" (*hyperekperissou*) yields the sense reflected in the *NIV*. The Thessalonians should think about them in the highest way possible, and so *hold them in highest regard*." Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 250-251.

#### IV. RULES OF DISCIPLINE

# A. Principles of Discipline

#### 1. The Command

The command and authority to exercise church discipline is given by Christ to the church in Matthew 18:15-22, 1 Corinthians 5, and 1 Timothy 5:19-21.

# 2. The Purpose of Discipline

The purpose of discipline is to promote the glory of Christ, the purity of the church, and the restoration of the sinner.

Holiness in the church is a high priority for all SG churches because it is a representation and expression of the holiness of God (Rev. 4:8). 1 Peter 2:9-10 explains that the church is "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession." Likewise, Jesus precedes his prayer for unity with a petition that God would sanctify his people through the truth of his Word (John 17:17). Unity within the body is to be sought, but never at cost to our holiness. The pursuit and standards of holiness are commanded for all members and especially the leaders of Christ's church.

When discipline involves judicial action against an elder, discipline is for the purpose of publicly rebuking sin, eradicating scandal, protecting the doctrinal and ethical purity of the body, restoring the offender, and defending the reputation of Jesus Christ.

## 3. The Spirit of Discipline

Discipline should be carried out in a spirit of love and impartiality between brothers, pursuing the glory of God above all else. Christ commands the church and its officers to promote the welfare and purity of its members. Discipline is a power given by Christ to the church for this purpose and should not be implemented in a vindictive spirit. The goal of any disciplinary action is one of merciful reclamation and repentance. To this end, discipline serves to protect and promote godliness in the body according to the standards of holiness set down in Scripture (1 Tim. 4:7; 1 Cor. 5:11-13).

# 4. The Name and Reputation of the Elder Protected

Our good name is to be valued, and we are to protect the reputation of others. The Bible tells us that "a good name is to be chosen rather than great riches" (Prov. 22:1), and thus our duty to love others implies that we will also protect their name. This means that sins of slander, gossip, divisiveness, and certain expressions of anger must not be tolerated among the people of God. When the good name of an elder is destroyed, it becomes virtually impossible for the elder to fulfill his office. The process detailed below is meant to balance the proper handling of charges against an elder with the obligation of the church to protect his reputation.

### 5. Peers Able to Judge

The Bible assumes that people are able to judge their peers (1 Cor. 5:12-13; 6:2), and thus there is no need to look outside of the church elders within SG, first locally and then extralocally (whichever is more relevant for the situation) for an objective third-party.

Exod. 18:17-23 describes Moses appointing judges to oversee cases in the nation of Israel. From these passages we see that impartiality is possible among our peers. Paul likewise assumes that within the church matters can be wisely and impartially handled. Therefore, we are not required to go outside the elders of SG to find men who will be able to judge righteously. So while gathering counsel for third parties is allowable and may at times be commendable, SG reserves the right and authority to adjudicate matters between its members and its elders themselves.

# B. Discipline in the Local Church

# 1. Original Jurisdiction

The eldership of a local church has jurisdiction over all who are considered members of said church. Original jurisdiction over an elder belongs:

- First to the eldership with which he serves
- Second to his regional elders, whose authority is represented by the Judicial Review Committee
- Third to the SG Court of Appeal

This means:

- a. Charges must first be leveled against an elder or member in the context of their local eldership. All subsequent appeals will be made following the chain of original jurisdiction.
- **b.** If an eldership refuses to hear charges of a doctrinal or publicly scandalous nature and two other elderships file charges, the Judicial Review Committee of said region shall assume jurisdiction.
- c. If the Judicial Review Committee with jurisdiction over an *elder* refuses to hear charges of a doctrinal or publicly scandalous nature and two other Regional Assemblies of Elders bring charges, the SG Court of Appeal will pick up jurisdiction.

## 2. Local Elders Responsible to Instruct and Lead in this Practice

Local elders have primary responsibility to instruct and lead the congregation in the practice of church discipline and biblical peacemaking. All individuals involved in a disciplinary process should heed the instructions of Galatians 6:1, "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted."

# C. Discipline of a Member

The members of a local church belong to the bride of Christ and as such are to be held accountable for being faithful representatives of Christ on earth. Members are subject to Christ and his Word and, by extension, to the officers he has appointed to lead his Church. As such they are under the leadership and care of their local elders, who serve as under-shepherds of Christ and will be held accountable for all they teach and do.

Members are subject to the practice of discipline laid out in Matthew 18:15-22 and 1 Corinthians 5, under the elders' leadership. Believers have a responsibility to hold each other accountable for the biblical fidelity of their doctrine and deeds and to admonish each other when they stray. The purpose of this is the merciful restoration of a brother from drift, grievous doctrinal error, or sin. The sole standard for judging an offense worthy of discipline is that it is contrary to the Word of God.

The steps of Matthew 18 should be followed carefully and privacy protected. The initial steps are both informal and gradual. The discipline is formalized if the elders uphold the veracity of the charge(s) and the accused continues in unrepentance. If in due course, the member remains in sin, the elders must tell it to the church with a congregation-wide call to repent. If the member persists in their sin after the church has called for repentance, they should be excommunicated from the church. However, the goal of the disciplinary process remains the restoration of the sinner and the salvation of their souls.

A disciplined member may appeal the elders' decision and the churches action to their Regional Judicial Review Committee. Appeal must be made within 30 days.

## D. Discipline of an Elder

All SG churches will agree to a shared grievance policy for bringing charges against an elder, according to the process in 1 Timothy 5:19-21:

<sup>19</sup>Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>20</sup>As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. <sup>21</sup>In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.

*First*, we should note that Paul is addressing Timothy, a partner in extra-local ministry. All of the verbs are singular: "Do not admit," *paradechou*, "rebuke," *elegche*, "keep these things," *phulaxēs*. We see this as establishing the precedent that the right authorities to hear an accusation are the governing officers of the church.

Second, we are not to "admit a charge against an elder" without just cause (v. 19). Not all accusations are to be "admitted." Some can be refused as being personal matters to be handled according to basic forgiveness and reconciliation (or Matthew 18:15-20 if necessary). Some

charges can be refused because they are not matters sufficient to disqualify an elder from office. A charge may also be refused if it appears to be a malicious attempt to harm the elder or the church or is primarily sinfully motivated. A charge is admitted when it relates to the elder's office and is weighty enough to engage in the significant process detailed below.

*Third*, charges are to include "the evidence of two or three witnesses." These witnesses can serve several roles. At times they have witnessed the same sin or sinful pattern in the elder. They can also substantiate a lack of repentance in the elder. Witnesses can provide testimony of one kind or another throughout the process. Once the trial is underway, witnesses also help to guarantee a fair and impartial process—protecting both the accuser and the elder.

Fourth, it is "those who persist in sin" (v. 20) who are to be rebuked "in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear." While not detailed here, the implication is that such a public rebuke combined with unrepentant sin would require removal from office. In other words, for most sins, what is of critical importance is that there is an observed pattern of unrepentance in the elder.

Fifth, because only the impenitent elder is to receive such a public rebuke, the implication is that an elder who repents of his sin or who is cleared from the charge itself, need not receive any public censure.

Sixth, it is possible for a church officer to hear the case of another church officer "without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality" (v. 21). The command to do this implies the ability to do this. Despite the myriad temptations of such a situation, Paul assumes that with a deep awareness of the seriousness of the matter a man will be able to hear such a case wisely: "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality."

# 1. The Purpose of 1 Timothy 5:19-21 is to provide a critical framework for adjudicating the sins (or the suspicion of sin) of an elder.

The nature of the sin or offense requiring removal from office includes any *gross* or *scandalous* failure to comply with the moral requirements laid out for leaders in Scripture (e.g., the moral standards put forth in 1 Timothy 3:1-8 and Titus 1:5-9). As stated above, the tone of such passages is not perfection. Therefore grounds for removal are patterns of behavior, impenitence, or character deficiencies, not isolated events. Exceptions to this include behavior that is automatically disqualifying with a single occurrence (e.g., sexual immorality).

Furthermore, any sins that would lead to church discipline (1 Cor. 5:11; Titus 3:10) can also be sufficient grounds for removal from office. These include but are not limited to: financial impropriety, convicted criminal activity (Rom. 13:1-4), and sexual immorality.

## 2. Requirements for Bringing a Charge

Definition of Offense:

- Public offenses are any sins, heterodox beliefs or actions that are publicly and commonly known.
- Private offenses are those that are known only to one or a select few individuals.
- Private offenses may or may not be personal. Personal private offenses are those which have brought injury to the individual bringing the charge.

# a. The qualifications of witnesses

i. A Member in Good Standing

A credible witness from outside SG can bring forward evidence, but the charge must be leveled by an elder or member in good standing.

#### *ii.* Two or More Credible Witnesses

No charge against an elder is to be admitted unless it is brought by the evidence of two or more credible witnesses (1 Tim. 5:19)

#### iii. Witnesses of Character

Extra prudence should be taken whenever charges are made by an individual who is known to:

- 1) Harbor ill will or a vengeful spirit against the accused
- 2) Be hasty in judgment or quick to accuse
- 3) Lack integrity or a reputation for honesty
- 4) Be under discipline or a process of discipline themselves
- 5) Possess a conflict of interest or would benefit from the accused being found guilty

### b. Within Two Years of the Alleged Offense

Charges must be brought forward within two years of the alleged offense, unless it can be established that unusual circumstances prevented this (e.g. the offended party was a minor at the time, etc.). The eldership with original jurisdiction over the accused have the power to determine if circumstances warrant waiving the two-year statute of limitations.

# c. Submitted in Writing

A charge must be submitted in writing by a member or fellow elder within SG and should include the following:

- **1st.** Detailing the precise nature of the alleged offense<sup>12</sup>
- **2nd.** Detailing relevant Scriptures

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Description of the alleged offense should include as many relevant details as possible in terms of date, time, place, circumstances, description of events and conversations and the names and contact information of any witnesses present.

- **3rd.** Detailing relevant sections of the SG Statement of Faith or Book of Church Order
- **4th.** Detailing any effort(s) made by the accuser to make the elder aware of this deficiency and the response to these efforts.
- **5th.** Detailing the specific evidence for the charge
- 6th. Detailing why the evidence and charge carries sufficient weight for a trial

### d. Sufficient Weight for a Trial

For a charge to be admitted and a trial called, there should be sufficient grounds regarding the seriousness of the offense. An admitted charge should represent a serious breach of *sound doctrine* (as defined by the SG Statement of Faith) or the *character qualifications* for office (1 Tim. 3:1-8; Titus 1:5-9).

Thus, charges cannot be made because a member disagrees with the decisions or the "style" of the elder, with the doctrine of SG, or with doctrines not explicitly or implicitly spelled out in the SG Statement of Faith. Such differences are part of normal church life, as in every relationship, and do not constitute a basis for charges against an elder.

Further, a charge must have sufficient evidence to be legitimate.

Simple hearsay, where the accuser was not directly involved in a situation and only became aware of it through the reports of others, may warrant further investigation but is generally not sufficient by itself to warrant a charge.

## 3. Just Cause - Requirements for Admitting a Charge

A decision will be made by the elders with counsel from a representative of the Judicial Review Committee, about whether this constitutes a charge bearing sufficient weight for a trial, is one that will be dismissed, or is one better handled as a matter of personal reconciliation (e.g., Matt. 18:15- 20) or some other appropriate process.

If the decision is made NOT to hear a charge, the elders will respond in writing (email is not sufficient) with a biblical and clear rationale about why they have decided in this way.

# 4. Accuser May Appeal

If the elders decide not to admit the charge, the accuser may then appeal this decision within seven days. An appeal is made by writing a letter of no more than five pages to the Regional Judicial Review Committee about why the elders have wrongly rejected this charge. The original written charge, the response to the charge by the elders, and this written appeal will be mailed to chairman of the Judicial Review Committee.

The response of the Judicial Review Committee will be mailed to the elders AND the accuser, postmarked within 30 days. The Judicial Review Committee will decide if the decision of the elders is appropriate, if the charge should be heard, or if there is a third option for further action (such as mediation by a third-party, etc.).

### 5. The Rights of the Accused

# The Priority of Privacy

In most situations, the accuser and elder should resolve the incident privately or among the local eldership.

Before this process escalates to the point of making an official charge, it is incumbent on the accuser and the elder to make all efforts to handle the situation face-to-face over a sufficient period of time. If an individual or party knows of the private offense of an elder, they should first approach the man in private, graciously bring their observation or charge, and call for repentance. If he fails to repent or persists in his sin, the charge should be brought to the attention of his eldership. In this case, we heed the wisdom of Paul that "love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor. 13:7). We owe to one another the judgment of charity, assuming the best and seeking to resolve disputes and differences in a godly, humble, and patient manner. The process below occurs when such efforts have not satisfied the accuser.

# b. The Priority of Confidentiality

There is to be a progressive involvement of other people, making nothing public until it is required by the process, and then only through the appropriate channels.

In Matthew 18:15-20, from which we derive our practice of church discipline, there is a progressive escalation of input if a person is not repentant. The matter is not told "to the church" (v. 17) until the person has refused the one-on-one appeal (v. 15) and the "one or two others" (v. 16). The church then makes an appeal, often through the office of the elders (v. 17). Only then is it appropriate to make a matter public. Until this point the obligations of the Proverbs must be appreciated: "Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered" (Prov. 11:13; cf. 10:18; 16:28; 18:8; 20:19; 26:20, 22).

The reputation of an elder is not to be damaged lightly. Secrecy and covering of scandal and sin is not excusable. However, Scripture is careful to protect leaders from hasty judgment and false reports (1 Tim. 5:19). Confidentiality should be carefully ensured until such a time as it is necessary to communicate publicly.

# c. The Right to Face Your Accuser

The accused elder has the right to face his accuser, unless the charge stems from the testimony of a minor.

It is a grave thing to bring a charge against a leader of God's people, and the accuser should be aware that they will have to give account before God for their testimony (Deut. 19:15-19, cf. Deut. 17:7). The accuser should be made aware of the weight of the testimony they are giving.

#### d. The Wife of the Accused

The wife of the accused elder is not required to testify against her husband. She can serve as a witness if she so chooses, but this is not mandated.

#### e. Due Process

Due process must be followed and a presumption of innocence granted until judgment is rendered by the elders. Public pronouncements should be avoided until appeals are finished.

## f. Appeal

If found at fault, the accused elder has 7 days to object the judgment and 21 days to file his formal appeal with his regional Judicial Review Committee. The eldership has the right to suspend the guilty elder, with pay, while he awaits appeal, but is not required to do so.

# 6. Trial proceedings at the Local Level

# a. Commitment to Confidentiality

If a trial is to be held, both parties will be asked to sign a confidentiality statement. This will be a commitment of both parties not to speak of the case or its details or even the fact there is such a process underway with anyone not related to the case or anyone not also willing to sign such a confidentiality statement. Such a commitment would include a party's spouse, witnesses involved in the trial, advisors, the elders involved, etc.

This protects all involved from the needless damage that can occur when the *suspicion* of wrongdoing is communicated to others. We know that "all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do" (Heb. 4:13, NASB), but he can handle it because he knows our hearts and judges all things perfectly. We, however, are frail instruments—finite and sin-bent. Keeping potentially hurtful disclosures to the minimum possible level, consistent with a fair, clean, and thorough proceeding, is part of our effort to follow God's will in such difficult situations and to protect the reputation of the accused.

If the elder is found guilty of the charges, the case will be made known to the local SG church and, therefore, becomes a *public* matter. Further, the case and its results will be made known to the Regional Assembly of Elders and the SG Director of Church Care.

If the elder is found NOT guilty of the charges, the case in essence is a *private* matter between two Christians and is therefore not to be discussed unless absolutely necessary. To do so inappropriately would constitute gossip and slander.

#### b. Rules for Evidence

# i. Written communication (as opposed to electronic):

Throughout the duration of the process detailed below, all official communication between the elders and the parties involved in the trial must be written and not electronic. Further, all communication regarding the case must be included in the final set of documents to be kept on file by the local church and SGM. This is to prevent causing unnecessary harm and to eliminate a potential source of sin for those involved in the trial.

#### ii. Submission of Evidence

- 1) If the elders deem, in a preliminary fashion, that the requirements for admitting the charge and establishing just cause (see IV. D. 3) have been met, the accuser will present the following to the elders:
  - a.) The Official Charge
  - **b.**) Document Evidence
  - c.) Information Regarding Witnesses: their name(s), local church affiliation, description of their role in the hearing, a brief description of what they will share, and an estimation of how long they will need to give their testimony
  - **d.**) Names and local church affiliation of any advisors to be present during the hearing.

All evidence against the accused should be submitted 30 days prior to the elders hearing the case. Additional evidence or witnesses will not be allowed after this 30-day period unless it can be shown to the panel's satisfaction that it was not possible for them to be submitted earlier.

- 2) Upon considering the more detailed evidence and the witnesses required for trial, the elders have the prerogative of dismissing any charges they believe frivolous and/or do not meet the requirements for admitting the charge and establishing just cause.
- 3) If the elders deem that the requirements for admitting the charge and establishing just cause have been met, the accused will present the following to the elders:
  - a.) A Statement of reasonable length responding to the charge
  - **b.**) Document Evidence
  - c.) Information Regarding Witnesses: their name(s), local church affiliation, description of their role in the hearing, a brief description on what they will share, and an estimation of how long they will need to share their testimony

- **d.**) Names and Local church affiliation of any advisors present during the hearing.
- 4) The presiding elders can decide to refuse certain evidence if it is not seen to be relevant or is too weak to substantiate the charge (or the innocence of the elder). The panel may also reduce the amount of time to be given to a witness if it is seen to be excessive and would extend the trial unnecessarily.

# iii. Requests for Documentation

Either party may request documentation from the opposing party. This request will be in writing and a copy also sent to the presiding elders. The party receiving the request must present the documentation or provide a written explanation detailing why this is not possible (unreasonable request, impossible request, etc.).

The presiding elders may request documentation from either party. This request will be sent in writing. The party being requested must present the documentation or provide a written explanation about why this was not possible (unreasonable request, impossible request, etc.).

Such requests and the responses to these requests will be taken into consideration by the presiding elders as they hear the case. For example, reasonable requests for relevant documents will strengthen the party's credibility, while unreasonable requests for unnecessary documents will weaken it.

Each party will be given a brief description of the documents submitted by the other party, as well as brief descriptions of the witnesses who will testify. This is to assist in the cross-examinations.

#### c. Advisors for Each Party

Each party in the hearing is allowed to have one to two persons to assist and advise them during the proceedings (and throughout the entire process). Such advisors must be members in good standing of a SG church (unless prior approval is obtained from the panel). Each party must absorb their own expenses for this (the local church will not pay the expenses of the elder on trial). While the party will represent themselves in the hearing, the advisor may be present to give them assistance.

A party may petition the elders to have the advisor speak on their behalf if they feel unable to adequately represent themselves. The panel is not obligated to accept this petition.

Further, as this is not a jury trial, the panel has the responsibility to make sure that both sides are heard and adequately cross-examined.

# d. A Court Reporter

If a local church can financially support it, it may be wise to hire a court reporter for the hearing and present a final manuscript of the proceedings. If this is too financially severe at the time of the hearing, a recording should be made of the proceedings. The complete record of the proceedings will be kept on file by the local church and SGM for at least 20 years. This is to ensure an accurate record of what is said in the proceedings, to protect all parties involved. It is also for the benefit of the Judicial Review Committee should an appeal of an eldership's ruling be made.

# e. Cross Examination:

The hearing will include cross-examination to see that all evidence and testimony gets treated as fairly as possible. The presiding elders will be entrusted with the task of keeping this cross-examination patient, gracious, and as gentle as possible.

# f. The Hearing

The hearing will last one to two days, during which time the elder and his accuser will face each other.

The role of the presiding elders in this hearing is to make sure that Christian civility is maintained, that the accuser is enabled to appropriately convey their concerns and charge(s), and that all testimony is sufficiently heard and cross-examined. Justice and godliness are to be preserved for the final outcome, but also throughout the process.

Those present at the hearing will be the panel, the two parties (accuser and advisors, elder and advisors), and the court reporter. Witnesses will be present only during their testimony. If a court reporter is not used, someone will be present to handle the recording of the proceedings.

A hearing should include at least the following:

- *i.* Determining the moderator
- *ii.* Opening statements for both parties, not to exceed 30 minutes each
- *iii.* Time for both sides to present evidence and witnesses
- iv. Time for both sides to cross-examine and make objections
- v. Time for the presiding elders to interact with evidence and witnesses, seeking clarification where necessary
- vi. Closing statement for both parties, not to exceed 30 minutes each

#### 7. Trial Results

# A Binding Decision

A binding decision should be reached in no more than 10 days. This decision should be submitted to all parties and the regional Judicial Review Committee in writing and by registered mail. The decision should *not* be communicated via email.

# b. Cleared of Charges

The accused elder is not found to be at fault or there is insufficient evidence to prove guilt beyond reasonable doubt.

## c. Private Rebuke

The accused elder is found to be at fault, but the offense is not sufficient grounds for removal from office and/or it was not deemed appropriate to make the matter public, especially for one who is repentant (1 Tim. 5:20).

#### d. Public Rebuke

The accused elder is found to be at fault and the offense is serious enough to warrant public reporting, but not sufficient grounds for removal from office, especially for one who is repentant (1 Tim. 5:20). The public or grievous nature of the sin, while not disqualifying, warrants a public reporting.<sup>13</sup>

#### e. Removal from Office

The accused elder is found to be at fault for an offense that warrants removal. Written and public explanation of the charges and grounds for guilt should be provided to the local church, the Regional Assembly of Elders, Director of Church Care, and SGM. The elder may be repentant, but the scandalous nature of the sin still requires removal (e.g. serious criminal behavior, adultery, etc.). The elder's ordination is revoked in such a circumstance as well.

## f. Excommunication

The accused elder is found to be at fault and is not repentant.

If the panel recommends a temporary suspension of office or some kind of a leave-of-absence as elder, the hope is that the elder will be restored to office. It is different from the man immediately losing his office and being terminated as a result. If he does temporarily lose his office and the elder desires to be restored, there will be a second appearance before the panel at the end of the prescribed regimen before he can be restored as an elder.

#### 8. Process for Care and Restoration

#### a. Removal from Office

In the case of removal from office, effort must be given to extend care and counsel to the convicted elder, his family, and the local church. The goal of all church discipline is ultimately for repentance, reconciliation, and where possible, restoration.

The Regional Leader will be responsible for coordinating care, in concert with the appropriate local elders, even if a man has no desire to return to ministry at a future date. Reasonable time and effort should be given to caring for the man and his family as he transitions out of ministry. Particular attention should be given to the spiritual well being of the removed elder and his family. While they may be resistant to such care, a good faith attempt must still be made. In the end, it is important to recognize that appropriate time and effort may be given, but the man and his family might remain dissatisfied, unrepentant, or unreconciled.

Additionally, the Regional Leader will coordinate care and counsel of the local church and elders. The primary responsibility for leading the church through such a season falls to its local elders. However, extra assistance, counsel, and care should be extended by the Region of any church that has an elder removed or excommunicated.

If a man who has been removed from office desires to return as an elder in a Sovereign Grace church, he will take initiative to contact the Judicial Review Committee which had the original jurisdiction in concert with the appropriate church and her elders. Restoration implicitly assumes that a man desires to be restored.

The Judicial Review Committee will set the date for the restoration hearing as part of their initial decision. The purpose of this hearing is to decide if the terms and conditions for restoration, detailed in their judgment, have been met. Both the convicted elder and his local elders will speak at the restoration hearing. They will provide testimony to the Judicial Review Committee regarding the man's progress in repentance. Both sides may provide evidence (documents or testimony) that the terms for restoration have or have not been met. The same rules for evidence and cross-examination for the initial trial apply here. The opinions of the local elders about the man's qualification to be restored will be weighed appropriately by the Judicial Review Committee.

The Judicial Review Committee will render a *final* judgment recommending or denying restoration. If it believes progress is being made, but that more time is required, it *may* schedule a subsequent hearing and must articulate in detail the ongoing terms and conditions for restoration.

If the Judicial Review Committee rules a man fit to return to ministry, his ordination and good standing as an elder in SGM will be reinstated.

It is possible the Judicial Review Committee may rule to restore a man, but they or the local elders find it inappropriate for him to return to his former position or church. In this case, the man's ordination and good standing are reinstated, and he will be put in contact with his Regional Leader and the Director of Church Care (or a representative working in his stead) to explore future ministry opportunities.

*N.B.* If the local elders feel that new areas of concern regarding a man's fitness for ministry have surfaced in the time between the Judicial Review Committee's initial verdict and the restoration hearing, they must make a second charge against the man for him to be disqualified or denied reinstatement on that basis.

#### b. Excommunicated

In the case of an elder being excommunicated, the commands of Matthew 18 will be followed and he will be treated, as anyone in that circumstance, as an unbeliever, in hope that he will come to repentance and be reconciled with the church.

# 9. Communication

Communication for the discipline of a qualified pastor will be handled by the local church and according to the wisdom of its eldership. However, any judgment involving suspension or removal from office must be reported in writing to the Regional Assembly of Elders and Director of Church Care of the SGM Leadership Team because it affects a man's fitness for office and broader service within SG.

#### 10. Appeal to the Judicial Review Committee

The case can be appealed to the Regional Judicial Review Committee, provided the appeal is made by an individual from the original jurisdiction or another SG elder within that Region.

### 11. Non-Punitive Removal or Repositioning of an Elder

While not a situation that falls under the jurisdiction of discipline, an elder may be removed from office for deficiencies in the performance of his duties. In particular, a man may be removed if he is shown to be deficient in the areas of leadership, care, teaching, or sound doctrine. He may also be removed for his inability to support the SG Statement of Faith in good conscience. This need not involve heresy, but rather a significant doctrinal variance such that removal from office is warranted. These grounds for removal are *not* of a moral nature and do *not* represent any deficiency of character, per se.

If a pastor is removed for perceived deficiencies in the performance of his duties, he can appeal to his Regional Ordination Committee. If the Committee reaffirms his gifting and suitability for the office of elder, he will be referred to the Regional Leader and Director of Church Care to assist him in finding a position for future ministry.

If, in the judgment of the local eldership, an elder is a poor fit for the needs of his local church or the church can no longer support him financially, the eldership has the authority to adjust his role locally, which may include either removal or repositioning him into an unpaid eldership position. However, in both cases his ordination is retained and, if he chooses, he will be referred to the Regional Leader and Director of Church Care to assist him in finding a position for future ministry in another SG church.

A man who retains a valid ordination in SG but who is not a member of any local eldership is not a member of the Regional Assembly of Elders or of the Council of Elders.

# E. Regional Judicial Review Committees

# 1. Appointment of the Judicial Review Committee

The Nominating Committee of each region puts forward names to be chosen by the regional elders.

Members of the Judicial Review Committee will serve 6 year terms, with no term limits. If an elder resigns before his term is up, the nominating committee will appoint a replacement for the duration of the term.

The Judicial Review Committee will consist of 5-7 pastors in a region, preferably from different churches, with each case heard by three members of the committee. Men are assigned to a case through blind draw. An elder can be exempted for various reasons from time constraints to conflict of interest.

## 2. Powers and Responsibilities of the Judicial Review Committee

- a. The Judicial Review Committee will serve as a resource for informal counsel to elderships walking through a 1 Timothy 5 proceeding at the local level. This is to ensure that the procedural elements of discipline are followed.
- **b.** A local eldership will not publicly rebuke or remove an elder without the involvement and help of the Judicial Review Committee.
- c. The Judicial Review Committee will also serve as a body of appeal for church members who have been disciplined or removed from membership.
- d. If a charge is brought against an elder but is not admitted by the local eldership, the person bringing the charge may appeal to the Judicial Review Committee. The Judicial Review Committee will determine whether or not they will hear the case.

- **e.** The Judicial Review Committee will be a place of appeal for any elder who is removed by a local church eldership.
- f. The Judicial Review Committee will serve as the original adjudicating body for the trial of an accused elder in the case where a local eldership too small (e.g. one or two elder church) to adequately deal with the matter. In such a case, the SG Court of Appeal would handle any further appeal.
- g. If an eldership has failed to appropriately carry out the discipline of an elder, the Judicial Review Committee has the right to examine the case and render a verdict. This result will be a binding decision in which the elder in question is cleared of charges, privately or publicly rebuked, or removed from office.

# h. Public Rebuke or Disciplinary Removal of an Elder

The public rebuke or disciplinary removal of an elder should not occur until the elder has had 30 days to file an appeal, unless he gives permission otherwise (see section IV. D. 5. f.).

# i. Charges Against Extra-Local Leaders

Charges against extra-local leaders (Regional Leader, Board Member, Leadership Team member) that pertain generally to their qualification as elders will be handled by the Judicial Review Committee in that man's region. The evaluation and discipline procedures of pastors apply to all the aforementioned SG extra-local leaders. Charges that pertain uniquely to the performance of their duties as extra-local leaders will be handled by the Regional Assembly of Elders, in the case of Regional Leaders, or by the SG Court of Appeal, in the case of Governing Board members or Leadership Team members.

## j. Public Censure of a Church

### i. A Note on Original Jurisdiction

The elderships of a region have jurisdiction over all churches within their region in matters pertaining to ordination, doctrinal fidelity, and the moral integrity of elders. In such matters the Regional Elders have authority for censure and removal.

## Original Jurisdiction over an Eldership

- First to the elders of their region as represented by the Judicial Review Committee
- Second to the SG Court of Appeal
- *ii.* Any member in good standing may level charges against their local eldership. Any appeal will be made following the chain of original jurisdiction.

*iii.* Likewise, if the Judicial Review Committee with jurisdiction over an *eldership* refuses to hear charges of a doctrinal or publicly scandalous nature and two other Regional Assemblies of Elders bring charges, the SG Court of Appeal will pick up jurisdiction (See IV. F. 2.).

# iv. Circumstances Requiring Public Censure

- 1) Deviation from the SG Statement of Faith
- 2) Divisive behavior
- 3) Sin on the part of the elders
- 4) Failure to uphold SG Book of Church Order or SG Partnership Agreement

#### v. Communication of Public Censure

- 1) Reprimand will be written and sent to all churches in SG.
- 2) Reprimand will be read in all churches within the offending church's region.

## k. Removal of a Church

# i. Circumstances Requiring Removal

- 1) Persistent deviation from the SG Statement of Faith
- 2) Persistent divisive behavior
- 3) Unrepentant sin on the part of the elders
- 4) Persistent failure to uphold SG Book of Church Order or the SG Partnership Agreement
- *ii.* If the Judicial Review Committee determines that the charges against an eldership or church require removal, their judgment will be sent to the Regional Assembly of Elders for a vote of affirmation.

A simple majority will uphold or overturn the judgment for removal by the Judicial Review Committee.

If the ruling is overturned by majority vote, the Judicial Review Committee can do the following:

- 1) Rescind their prior judgment
- 2) Reduce the prior judgment to a public censure
- 3) Appeal the vote to the SG Court of Appeal
- *iii.* An eldership can appeal the ruling of the Judicial Review Committee or subsequent vote of the Regional Assembly of Elders to the SG Court of Appeal.

*iv.* If the SG Court of Appeal overturns the Regional Assembly's majority vote, upholding the regional Judicial Review Committee's original judgment of removal, it will be sent to the Council of Elders for a vote of affirmation.

A simple majority will uphold or overturn the judgment for removal by the SG Court of Appeal.

If the ruling is overturned by majority vote, the SG Court of Appeal can do the following:

- 1) Rescind their prior judgment
- 2) Reduce the prior judgment to a public censure

#### v. Communication of Removal

Removal will be communicated in writing to all churches in SG.

Removal will be communicated and read in all churches within the offending church's region.

- l. SG has no rights to a church's assets and will assume none of its liabilities.
- m. Likewise, no local church will assume either assets or liabilities of any other SG church or SGM, its Governing Board, or Leadership Team.

# F. The SG Court of Appeal

- 1. The SG Court of Appeal is put forward by the SG Nominating Committee and confirmed by the Council of Elders
- a. The Nominating Committee will put forward one Appellate Elder from the Judicial Review Committee of each region. In addition, this man will serve as the chair of his regional Judicial Review Committee. When an appeal is heard by the SG Court of Appeal, the Appellate Elder from the region in which the charge originated will recuse himself in order to prevent conflict of interest.
- **b.** The number of Appellate Elders will correspond to the number of Regions.
- c. These Appellate Elders will be appointed to six-year terms, with no term limits.
- **d.** When a case is appealed, five Appellate Elders will be assigned to determine whether they will hear the case.

e. A blind draw will be used to assign the Appellate Elders to a case.

# 2. Responsibilities of the SG Court of Appeal

- a. The SG Court of Appeal has the right to review cases that have previously been decided by a Regional Judicial Review Committee at their discretion. They can initiate a review of a regional hearing or choose whether or not to receive a case of appeal.
- **b.** The Court has the right to simply support the decision of a regional court and is not bound to grant another trial.
- c. Elders who believe their case has been mishandled by a Judicial Review Committee have the right to appeal to the SG Court of Appeal. This may be individual elders who have been disciplined or removed or entire elderships whose church has been censured or removed by the regional court.
- d. Any member placed under church discipline by their local church and that discipline was subsequently upheld by their Judicial Review Committee does *not* have the right of appeal to the SG Court of Appeal.

# e. Censure or Removal of a Region:

# i. Circumstances requiring the censure or removal of a region include

- 1) Persistent deviation from the SG Statement of Faith
- 2) Persistent divisive behavior
- 3) Unrepentant sin on the part of the elders
- 4) Persistent failure to uphold SG Book of Church Order or the SG Partnership Agreement
- ii. Charges against a region must be brought by 10 members of the Council of Elders. 14
- *iii*. When a charge is brought forward, seven Appellate Elders will be assigned to determine whether they will hear the case. They will be selected by blind draw, minus the representative from the accused region.

The SG Court of Appeal will render one of the following judgments:

1) Not Guilty

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Churches within a Region who register their dissent against the position or action of the region will be exempted from censure or removal.

- 2) Censure
- 3) Removal
- *iv.* If the judgment is for censure, the Council of Elders will finalize or overturn the decision by a simple majority vote.
- v. If the judgment is for removal, a  $\frac{2}{3}$  vote by the Council of Elders will finalize the decision of the SG Court of Appeal.
- vi. If the judgment of the SG Court of Appeal is not upheld by  $\frac{2}{3}$  majority, it will immediately initiate a simple majority vote by the Council of Elders on whether to censure the region.