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The Importance of Young Elders in the Church

by Michael G. Hasel

It was a bright Sabbath morning. The sun rose majestically over the mountains and cast its rays across the city. A young couple in their late twenties made their way to church to participate in the worship service, and what an appropriate day for worshiping the Creator it was. Communion service was to be held that day along with the ordination of new elders in the church. It was a calling that was taken with grave responsibility, for the young man was to be one of the elders ordained that morning. With reverence he sat in the front of the church awaiting the time of ordination. He prayed for the Lord's strength and for His wisdom as he contemplated the many responsibilities that such an office held. The ordination took place and immediately he was asked to assist the pastor of the church in the communion service. After the service was over, he stood outside the sanctuary and spoke with church members as they were leaving. Many were positive and encouraging, but not a few would make other remarks, such as, "Well, kind of young, but I suppose you will do." A newly baptized church member just a few years older than he remarked, "Aren't you too young to be an Elder? You are younger than I am!" The newly ordained elder, not knowing what to say, simply chuckled and attempted a kind reply. Yet it bothered him and he concentrated to study God's Word concerning this issue.

Perhaps you have met with similar situations in your own experience, or at times may have won-

dered, can relatively young individuals be called to positions of local elder in the church? What does the Bible say about young leaders in the church? What does it say specifically concerning elders? Is not an elder just that, someone who is older?

THE ELDER IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

There are several terms used for "elder" in the New Testament. Each has a slightly different function and meaning and must be studied in context. The Jews often referred to their own elders which were called *presbuteros*, "an individual person older of two, or the men of old, our ancestors" (Luke 15:25; 1 Peter 5:5).¹ This term was also used to denote the members of local councils (Luke 7:3) or members of a group among the Sanhedrin (Matt. 16:21; 26:3; Mark 8:31; 11:27; 14:43, 53; 15:1; Luke 9:22; 20:1). Elders of the Christian church were called by this name as well (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5-9).

These elders were also referred to as bishops. In this case, the Greek terms *episkopos* and *episkop* can also mean "overseer, superintendent, or guardian" and refer to a person who has "a definite function or fixed office within a group" (the Church).² Thus Paul makes a distinction in some passages between the Greek terms and uses a term that is not limited in meaning to age.

Both terms (*episkopos* and *episkop*) are used in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 where the fourteen specific qualifications of the elder are given. Age is also not listed among the fourteen requirements of an elder or bishop

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(see 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). In his letter to Titus, however, both *presbutas* and *episkopon* are used interchangeably in describing the characteristics that such a person should hold. This is also true in Acts 20:17, 28 where both terms are used again. Why use two terms then? It has been suggested that both words designate the same activity with different extended meanings. The word *presbuteros* refers to the *title* of the office which implies a position of respect. On the other hand, *episkopos* or *episkop* is used to name the *function* of the office.³ It seems clear then that while the position is one that demands respect the function of the office itself does not necessarily require a certain chronological age.

It is also made clear from several of the qualifications that the elder must be a spiritually mature individual. An elder is not to be "a new convert, lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation of the devil" (1 Tim. 3:6). Likewise, the elder must "be above reproach" (1 Tim. 3:2) and "have a good reputation with those outside the church" (1 Tim. 3:7). Here spiritual integrity and maturity are emphasized as qualities of the elder.

YOUNG LEADERS CHOSEN BY GOD

Young leaders have been important in the Lord's work throughout history. In the Old Testament it was Samuel who was called by God at an early age (1 Sam. 3:10-19). David was anointed king by Samuel while he was still a young man herding sheep. He was the youngest of his brothers. Other young rulers in Israel followed including such reformers as Hezekiah and Josiah (2 Kings 18, 22, and 23). Paul writes to young Timothy in the New Testament giving him wise counsel in his dealings as a pastor among his church members (1 Tim. 5).

THE WORK OF YOUNG ELDERS IN THE CHURCH

Young elders, humble and dedicated to the Lord, are needed today in our churches. As a young elder you can bring a new sense of urgency and a vibrant energy to the leadership of the church. You can provide a fresh perspective which, together with humble prayer and study, may bring important growth and generate new hope in the church. There are several counsels that could apply to the young elder in the church.

Do not take your calling and the responsibilities of an elder lightly. Remain close to the Lord in all your endeavors. Keep faithful your devotional time daily with Him and spend much time in Bible study and prayer. As an elder you must be "able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2) which means that you must remain knowledgeable in

spiritual matters and stay in close tune with the Scriptures.

Be Christlike in your dealings with others. Always be loving and kind toward your fellow member. Paul urged Timothy, a young pastor, "Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but rather appeal to him as a father, to the younger men as brothers, the old women as mothers, the younger women as sisters, in all purity" (1 Tim. 5:1-2). This applies to the younger elder as well. With a humble heart, learn from older, more experienced church members and if something is done which needs rebuke, speak to your pastor first and seek counsel concerning the matter. Continue to speak in love and in wisdom with that individual. Be slow to speak and quick to listen. With young women especially, be cautious (this concerns unmarried elders in particular) so that your actions may not be misinterpreted. This is what Paul means when he counsels "in all purity".

As an elder you have a responsibility to maintain your reputation "with those outside the church" (1 Tim. 3:7) as well as those within. Be wise, therefore, in your actions. Always remember that people are watching you and you are a witness for the church no matter where you are.

There are tremendous ways in which you can benefit the church through your leadership. As a young person you have a connection with a large segment of the church which the older elders may no longer hold. Take advantage of these and work as the Lord guides you. A few suggestions would be:

1 Begin a Bible study group with young people in the church and meet sometime during the week. There are many areas that can be studied, but perhaps many of them have questions concerning issues which face them in their present life situation. Study from the Scriptures and develop solid principles concerning entertainment, dating, and some social issues that they may be interested in.

2 Plan to involve the young people in some social activities in addition to serious study time. Plan a Sabbath afternoon hike or perhaps go out on Saturday night and spend some time getting to know one another on a social level. Young people are looking for wholesome activities.

3 Get involved with Pathfinders and if your church does not have a Pathfinders club, contact your local conference to find out what is

required to start one. This is a tremendous opportunity and outreach for the youth of our churches.

4 As an elder and church leader you may wish to involve other young people in the church service. Discuss this with your pastor or church board. It gives church members encouragement and hope to see the youth involved in the service and makes the youth feel needed and important to the church. Appropriate ways in which they could be involved would be for special music, scripture reading, invocations or benedictions, and calling up the offering.

5 Just because you are young does not mean that you cannot minister to older and elderly church members. Schedule regular visitation time with church members. Become acquainted with them. Assess and address their needs. If there are those who are hospitalized or must remain at home due to illness be sure to visit with them.

6 As an elder in the church be encouraging to all members. Be friendly and go out of your way to greet them every Sabbath. Have a cheerful and willing attitude. If someone needs help do not hesitate to step in. If someone is missing who was to teach Sabbath School or participate

in the church service be ready to teach or participate in their place.

If God has called you as an elder He surely has a purpose for you in the church. As a young person do not hesitate, but pray and study for the Lord's will in your life. If God convicts you, step forward into the challenge that He presents to you for He has promised that He will guide you and give you strength. With so many of our youth drifting from our churches today, perhaps God has called you especially to minister to their needs. Study with them. Encourage them. As others see your work they may be encouraged and find new hope as well in the leadership of a younger generation. It may be through your work and example, as God gives you the strength and wisdom, that others may be nurtured and strengthened through Christ's redemptive power. **E**

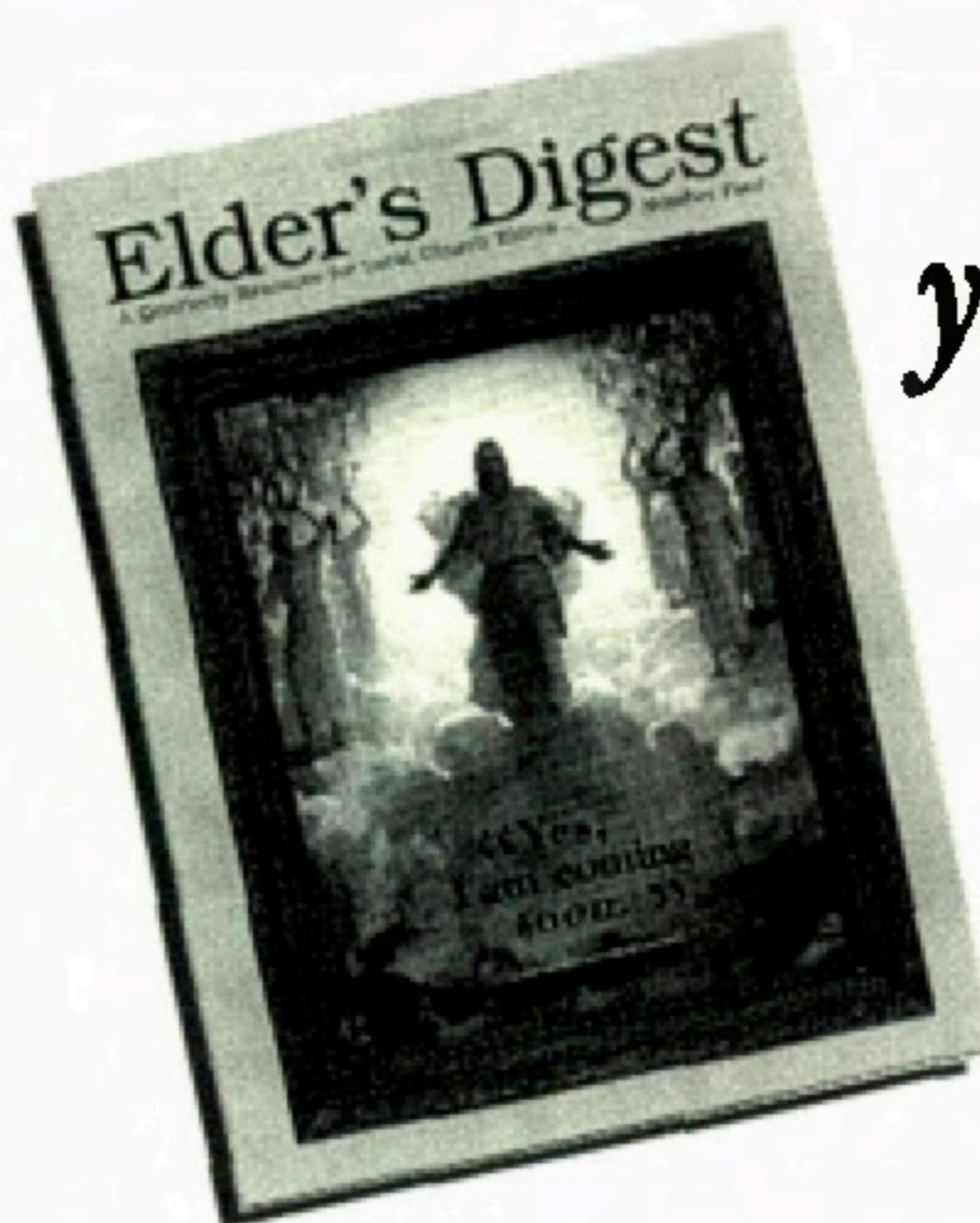
Bible texts in this article are from the *New American Standard Bible*, © The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977.

¹W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (4th edition. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957), 706-707.

²Ibid., 299.

³*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Vol. 6 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publ., 1980), 38.

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Elder

A ministry description for local church leaders

Introduction

God asks the church to be a community of people sharing a common purpose and fellowship, continually growing in faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God. Paul describes the church as "... his body, the fullness of him who filleth every thing in every way" (Eph.1:22).

God calls us into His body for the purpose of establishing a saving relationship with Him and community with one another. The Holy Spirit convicts our minds, leads us to repentance, and plants us within the church.

The symbol of water baptism marks our entrance into the body of Christ and also marks the baptism of the Holy Spirit experienced by a new disciple. "I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of the water and the Spirit, He cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). The Holy Spirit is the vital life force of the church. When you come to Christ, you are prepared by the Holy Spirit, who has already led you to repentance, for service.

When a church serves the world it is an expression of the love of Christ to the world. It is the body of Christ serving the world's needs and being used by the Spirit as an agency of salvation. Thus, the church is a servant body. It was created for service. It serves the Lord in praise, serves one another in love, and serves the world in humility. "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

God calls every member of the church into ministry. The church is a kingdom of priests set free to minister for Christ. Our priesthood is to each other within the church and to the world. An elder, like any other church officer, is a ministering servant of God. Every Christian believer is called to ministry, gifted by the Holy Spirit, and in baptism ordained for ministry (Eph. 4:11-12).

It was during the middle ages that the clergy became distinct from other members as a superior element in the church. The biblical concept of laity includes all believers as ministers in the body. In actuality, the church today still has a great distance to go before effectively applying this concept. You should view the work of an elder as a ministry to which God calls people; it is His will operating in their lives.

Duties of the Elder

The ministry to which a person is called when he or she becomes an elder can best be described in the following ways:

1. **Visitation.** Nurture develops on a horizontal level in the church, with members offering encouragement and spiritual counsel to one another. In such a caring community, even the pastor is nurtured through the membership of the church. An elder can be a vital element in this kind of caring church. The elder can actively visit members in their homes, encourage others to do so, and assist in the training of prospective members.

2. **Commitment.** It is especially important for the local elder to be committed to the outreach of the church. The congregation needs to know that its leaders have a clear vision of the mission of the church. It has been said that church growth is “caught” rather than taught. When an elder enthusiastically models a commitment of his or her time to outreach ministry, others catch the same spirit and commit themselves to the mission of the church. An elder should schedule time for ministering to the unsaved.
3. **Worship leadership.** The involvement and leadership of an elder can make a tremendous difference in the weekly worship celebration service of the church. Quality leadership and participation can transform a dull, lifeless worship service into meaningful celebration and praise. Skills in worship leadership, such as the reading of scripture, offering public prayers, planning the order of service, and in smaller churches at least, delivering the sermon, should be developed.
4. **A spiritual mentor.** The spiritual life of an elder should constantly lead members of the church to seek a deeper spiritual experience for themselves. I Timothy, chapter 3, describes the Christian life of an elder in these words: “...above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle...” An elder should model, by his or her devotional life, Christian personality and spiritual interest, a higher ideal for each member to reach. The elder should reflect the fruits of the Spirit in his or her relationship with others: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.
5. **Church Administration.** An elder should always attempt to make a positive contribution to the organization and progress of the church. While doing this, he or she should not try to dominate or control but rather enable others to participate in decision-making in the church and ministry. An elder often serves in an advisory capacity to various departments, committees, and projects. In doing this, the elder provides unity among the various programs of the church, communicates progress to the church board and encourages a unified mission.

Resources

For a list of recommended resources, free downloads and websites visit MinistryKits.AdventSource.org

For a complete list of resources visit AdventSource.org, select the store tab and then your ministry.

You can call [AdventSource](http://AdventSource.org) at 402.486.8800 for additional information or if you have questions about ministry. For ministry-related articles, videos, and free downloads visit AdventSource.org.

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Discipling emerging adults: A mentoring manifesto

At age 57, I have now reached the median age of my profession.¹ Although I do not mind the gray hairs so much, the aches and pains of a well-traveled life do remind me that more days lie behind me than before me. At this stage of my pastoral ministry, I realize that if I neglect to mentor the next generation, I could very well be culpable for rendering my profession obsolete.

On many fronts, pastoral ministry challenges are daunting. From my vantage point this is especially true when it comes to emerging adults (aka young adults). After graduating from high school, half of them will drift away from our faith communities. While many of them may still endorse faith in the person of Jesus Christ, some will indicate no religious affiliation at all.² The twenty-something years are filled with major transitions and decisions during which young adults shape their future.³ The local church is experiencing a fading influence in the looming generations and, potentially more alarming, in our own young adult children.

What's needed to be effective

Methodologies and strategies so far have had limited success in stemming the hemorrhaging of young people from our congregations, yet much of our current ministry practices remains unchanged. The contemporary context that emerging generations face continues to grow ever more complex. At the same time, the typical local church remains committed

to traditions that have little to no current relevance to young adult life.⁴ Scott Cormode cautions, "The church is perfectly calibrated for a world that no longer exists."⁵

Dear fellow pastors, my hope is that you and I will bravely investigate and deal with these realities with spiritual boldness. May we engage the next generations with an authentic desire for meaningful relationships.⁶ Our leadership is still valued and important.

Three-fourths of church members and pastors surveyed endorsed *leadership* as the primary means of church effectiveness with young people.⁷ In a quantitative and qualitative study of more than 250 churches effectively involving and retaining young people (ages 15–29), more than 75 percent of the members named leadership as the "secret to their effectiveness."⁸ But I have a far more personal question I want to pose to you, fellow pastors: What is your succession plan?

Apprenticing relationships

The admonitions of the apostle Paul to his protégé Timothy may feel more like an ancient biblical exhortation than an applicable premise for contemporary pastoral praxis: "Command and teach these things. Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity" (1 Tim. 4:11, 12, ESV). Might pastors in the twenty-first century also take such a mentoring posture with emerging adults?





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SCAN FOR AUDIO



Six core commitments were identified in “churches that were growing in involving and retaining young people bringing overall vitality to the whole church.”⁹ Notable for me among them were keychain leadership and prioritizing young people everywhere.

Keychain leadership describes giving responsibilities and roles to young people that transcend tokenism and serve as an essential influence and consistent engagement of healthy church life.¹⁰

On Paul’s behalf, Timothy was to assume leadership in the local congregation, despite the pushback that he might encounter given his age. Such a keychain leadership role involved a wholistic approach, including, but not limited to, behavioral modeling, grace-oriented compassion, and aspiring toward virtuous, Christ-centered ideals.

Throughout the Scriptures, and explicitly in Jesus’s relationship with His disciples, we see constant illustrations of the teacher-student apprenticing relationship. Why is it so absent from contemporary pastoral practice? Paul’s teaching and instruction afforded Timothy pastoral leadership and authority, even with Paul absent (1 Tim. 4:13). Through it the apostle anticipated growth in both the congregation and Timothy himself (vv. 15, 16).

This type of intergenerational leadership training, maintains Steve Argue, associate professor of youth, family, and culture at Fuller Theological Seminary, is a powerful conduit in helping new generations constructively pursue answers to life’s most poignant questions. Argue also asserts the importance of identity, belonging, and purpose for young adults.¹¹ If local pastors would consider apprenticing young adults as a succession strategy, the apprentice, the local church, and the pastor would all benefit.

Advocates for young adult engagement with pastors and church leadership include Filip Milosavljević, young adult pastor at Loma Linda University Church, who notes that such mentorship between generations affords beneficial partnerships and increased effectiveness for all parties.¹² Instead of burnout and irrelevance, the local pastor may find active mentoring to be a way of magnifying ministry effectiveness through the life lens of the next generation.

Building strong relational rapport

Many of our local churches deploy ministry in a departmentalized fashion, often siloed except for occasional special emphasis weekends. While such a structuring of age groups does offer

some benefits, the practice has left many of our churches languishing in their sense of community and connection. We can find the local church member completely ignorant of those outside of their own age demographic or stage of life, or worse, prejudicial because of society’s fixation on generational stereotypes.¹³

Given the increased complexity that emerging adulthood poses, young adults may feel alone, neglected, or even abandoned.¹⁴ Many local churches, in clinging to their antiquated ministry departments, do not know what to do with young adults, especially considering that they are postponing marriage and having children later in life compared to previous generations.

The core commitment of “prioritizing young people everywhere” is crucial for establishing vibrant congregational practice.¹⁵ Often, such next-generation engagement gets relegated solely to youth ministry. If any young adult ministry does exist at all, often it may be restricted to singles ministry, with its intrusive question of marital status being the only point of conversation.

The simple sharing of stories between the generations in a church can bring a stronger relational rapport between the various age groups.¹⁶ Learning to empathize and foster relational warmth creates vitality for the whole church. The local pastor who enables such interpersonal connections, especially with young adults, creates powerful bonding in the areas of identity, belonging, and purpose.¹⁷

The proverb “Train up a child in the way he should go . . . , even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6, AMP) serves as a template for communal relationships between young and old. Such collaboration among parents, relatives, congregants, religious educators, ministry leaders, and pastors for the benefit of the next generation will foster a robust faith-forming web that imprints lasting biblical virtues in young lives.¹⁸ Young ones being “trained up” in the local church will have the most resilient faith for life.

If the local pastor, parents, and other church leaders leave the discipling of youth exclusively to the teen program, our young people will continue to graduate and leave not only high school but also church life. Conversely, if in your pastoral leadership, you implement a succession plan that prioritizes the mentoring of young people, it will offer them responsibilities and equipping that will provide spiritual kingdom expansion and relational continuity from generation to generation.

A thrilling venture

In our local congregation we have launched internship, residency, and apprenticeship initiatives in which I engage with youth and young adults in both ministry mentoring and vocational discipleship.¹⁹ It is a thrilling venture, but not without its pitfalls.

In all candor, even considering a succession plan has at times felt like a threat to my value as a local pastor, especially in areas where I seemed most important, most needed. I was struck to the core as Cormode quoted leadership expert Ronald A. Heifetz as saying, "What people resist is not change per se, but loss."²⁰ Would a succession plan affect my power, my significance?

If you relate to this fear, you are not alone as you consider your succession plan. I also struggle, yet I am encouraged that servant leadership is a blessing, a remedy, and a prophetic solution. As the apostle Peter declared:

"And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17, 18, ESV).

Learning to empathize and foster relational warmth creates vitality for the whole church. The local pastor who enables such interpersonal connections, especially with young adults, creates powerful bonding in the areas of identity, belonging, and purpose.

Dear fellow pastors, I am praying we will take the posture of servant leaders with a relationally rich succession plan. I am anticipating the powerful Spirit of the Lord being poured out on all generations, fueling the next generations to succeed. As a median-age pastor, I reflect on days gone by, but I also have dreams of what succeeding generations will accomplish for God's glory. In these last days, may we enact a ministry succession that mentors and empowers our sons and daughters until the day of His promised return.



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