



“Riverview’s Leadership Structure” by Noel Heikkinen

During a recent series on the book of Titus, I addressed the leadership structure at Riverview. I have had several requests for copies of the diagrams I used. This paper is a loose transcript of that message, along with a few extra things thrown in (including the diagrams).

A few people also asked about Deacons. This paper doesn’t address the office of Deacon or any other ministry leader although they are key parts of the church body. In particular, it addresses the role of pastor/elder because that is a frequently asked question at Riverview.

When you look at the book of Titus, you see how God has called the Church to live a “razor’s edge” lifestyle: not falling off the edge into legalism or off the other edge into ungodliness.

This translates into our relationships with non-Christians, the government, and authority figures in our lives. Paul also addresses how we are to live a Razor’s Edge lifestyle as older men and women, and as younger men and women.

Basically in the book of Titus, Paul was saying, “Titus, there are legalists and ungodly people in your churches, there is a culture to influence, there are elders and younger that need instruction, and there is a key to getting this work done.”

Titus 1:5 I left you on the island of Crete so you could complete our work there and appoint elders in each town as I instructed you.

The key to this work getting completed was Titus appointing elders in each town.

“Appointing elders”

This is a leadership structure that is pretty well defined in the New Testament and the Church would have known what it was. So when Paul said to Titus, “Appoint Elders,” he would know what that meant. But 2000 years of history, language barriers, and cultural dynamics have distorted this a bit.

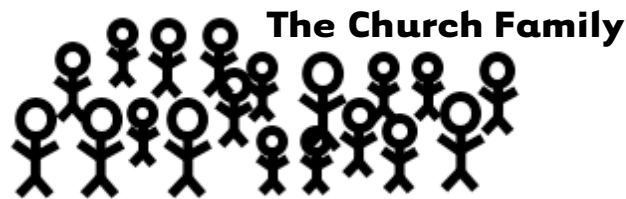
I suspect that if I interviewed everyone who reads this paper, I would find that your current or previous church had a wide variety of structures. The term “elder” has become confusing. Alexander Strauch writes this:

Although the term elder is the predominant New Testament term used to describe local church leaders and is especially suited to the nature of New Testament churches, it conveys to the overwhelming majority of Christians and non-Christians today ideas that are different from

those found in the New Testament...much of our church vocabulary is unscriptural and terribly misleading. Words such as clergyman, layman, reverend, minister, priest, bishop, ordained, and ministerial convey ideas contrary to what Jesus Christ and His apostles taught. Such terminology misrepresents the true nature of apostolic Christianity and makes it difficult, if not impossible, to recapture it.

Before we talk about what the book of Titus has to say about elders, I am going to attempt to draw a pretty picture, which I think will help us get a little context.

This is the church body, with the little dudes representing all of us:



Each one of us has a specific role to play in the church. I really appreciate Rick Warren's word picture of how each of us is wired. He says we each have a SHAPE, which stands for

Spiritual Gift
Hearth
Ability
Personality
Experience

Each one of us is wired differently and that wiring determines where we fit into the body. It says in I Corinthians 12:25-27,

This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad. All of you together are Christ's body and each of you is a part of it.

Paul continues this theme in Ephesians when he says in 5:10,

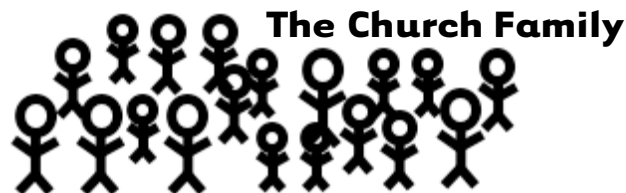
Speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.

We all have responsibilities within this church body, based on our wiring and if you are not contributing to the body in some way, we are all suffering because of your decision not to be involved.

It would be like your left arm saying, "Nope...I've decided not to help out...good luck with that." So your arm just hangs there, useless, while the whole body suffers.

So, in this body we all have different roles and down through time churches have structured themselves in different ways, trying to figure out how to lead this thing that we are all a part of. There have been, and continue to be, a wide variety within the body of Christ. I have good friends who disagree with me greatly on this issue, and that's fine. I'm not willing to separate with someone over this.

Now with that said, there are three predominant models in the American church. This is the first structure:



It has no structure at all. This model attempts to be biblical by quoting Jesus:

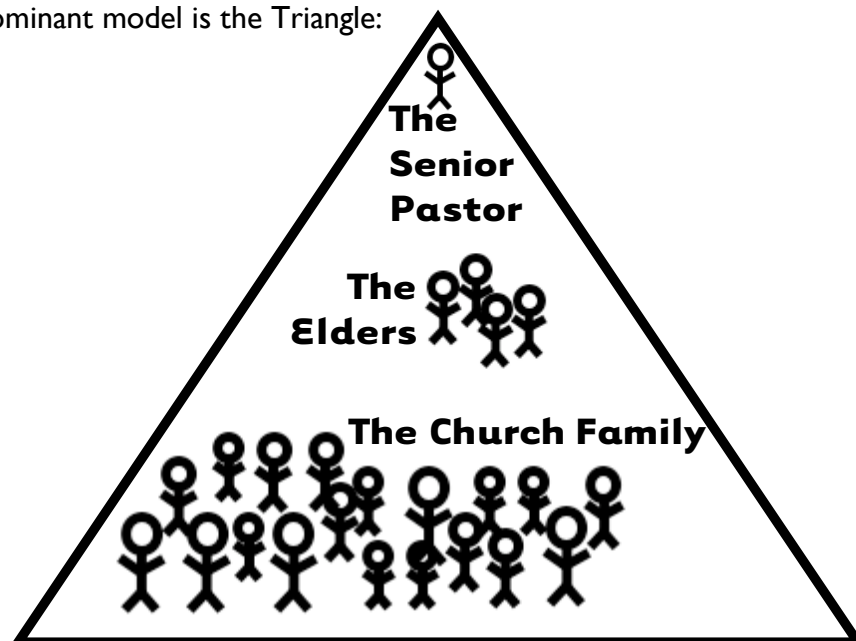
Matthew 18:20 "For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them."

But it's limited by the fact that it ignores a lot of other scripture, such as

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your spiritual leaders, and do what they say.

It's easy to obey your spiritual leaders when you don't have any!

The second predominant model is the Triangle:

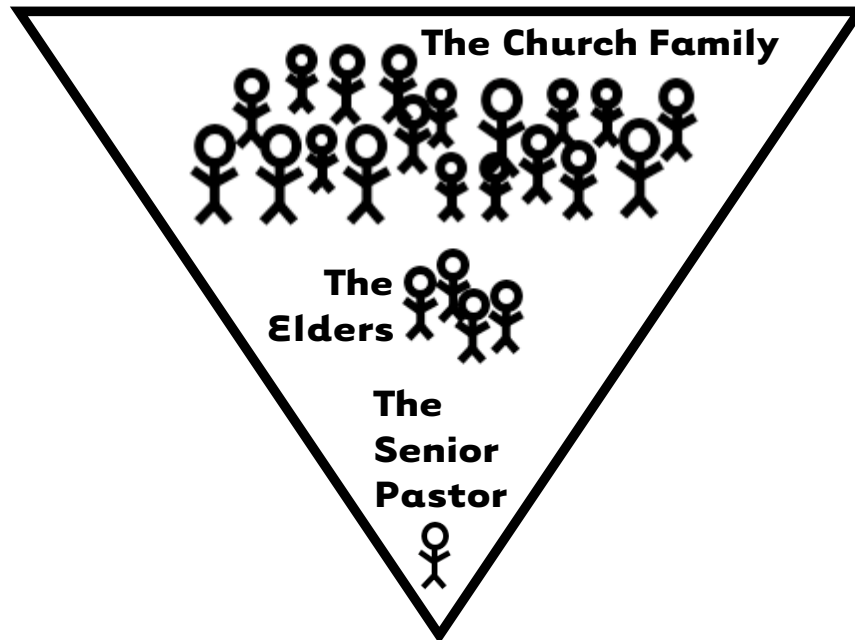


This model puts a guy called the Senior Pastor at the top, where he oversees a bunch of people called the elders. Together, they oversee the church.

Now, in this model the Senior Pastor calls the shots and his team pulls the trigger. This model attempts to be biblical by saying, “See, we have spiritual leaders!”

Unfortunately, it’s limited by the fact that it often becomes a cult of personality. The church takes on the strengths and weaknesses of the Senior Pastor and no matter how godly or humble he is, it’s hard to question the decisions he is making.

The third popular model is the Inverted Triangle:



In this model, the congregation is in charge and they vote in a bunch of guys called the elders. The elders then oversee a guy called the Senior Pastor. This is the American democratic model, where the ultimate authority lies with the congregation. The elders and the pastor are really hired guns serving at the pleasure of the church in this model.

This model attempts to be biblical by quoting this verse:

Revelation 1:6 He has made us a Kingdom of priests for God his Father.

This is an absolute biblical truth! We are a kingdom of priests, with Jesus as our high priest. Unfortunately, basing a system of church structure on this ignores a lot of scripture. It’s limited by the fact that the elders are supposed to lead the church. But in this structure, they cannot lead strongly in unpopular ways.

In the U.S., we’re enamored with voting on everything and while it is the basis of our representative government, it doesn’t work in the church.

Think about this for a second. People complain all the time because politicians waffle on their positions based on opinion polls. Why do they do that? Because their jobs are on the line!

The job of an elder is to have authority over the church and when they are on the bottom of the pyramid, they can't do it. They have to tread lightly lest they get fired. Like the first model, it really creates a structure without authority because it neuters the leadership of the church. Mark Driscoll has written:

"As I studied the Bible, I found more warrant for a church led by unicorns than by majority vote."

Now, we are structured a little different at Riverview. We don't have a triangle, but we still have a church family, elders, and a Senior Pastor. Our Senior Pastor's name is Jesus.

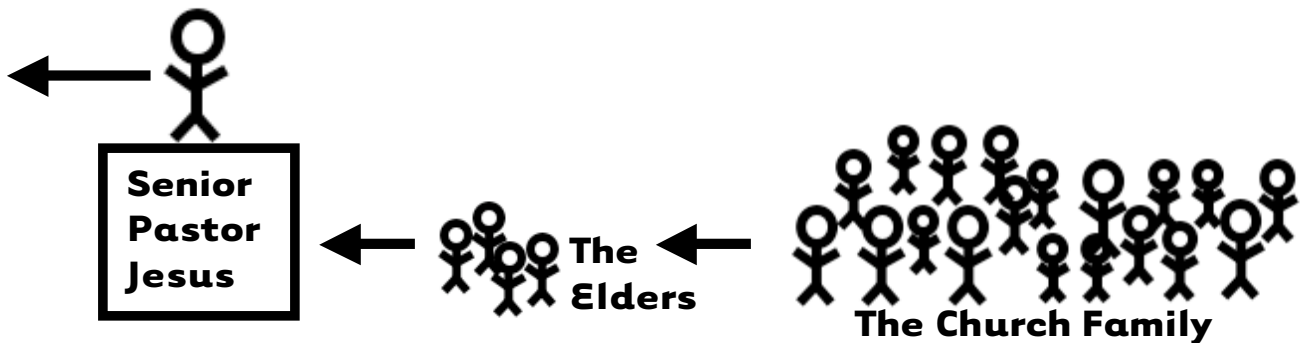
Colossians 1:18 Christ is also the head of the church, which is his body.

Jesus is the boss. Everything we do is because of Jesus. He is ultimately the person leading this church and He has given us a mission:

Matthew 28:18 Jesus came and told his disciples, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. 19 Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. 20 Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Jesus is the boss and for that reason, we are going to put Jesus on a pedestal in our diagram because he is the only one who deserves one: He is ultimately in authority over all of us.

Here is our leadership structure:



Jesus is leading us and we're going somewhere. Following after Jesus are the elders and they are in authority over the church. Now, there are a few things we need to understand about Elders.

First, Elders are the single form of local church leadership talked about in the New Testament

Acts 20:17,28 From Miletus [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church...“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”

In this passage, you see three different words used to describe the same people: “Elders,” “Overseers,” and “Shepherds” (which is where we get the word “pastor”).

Now, at Riverview, we use the term “pastor.” The best title would be elder, quite frankly because being a pastor (or shepherd) is one of the callings of an elder, but it doesn't describe all that an elder does. We use “pastor” because our culture understands that term better although we understand it carries baggage.

For instance, there are many people in the church who have a “pastoring” or “sheperding” gift, but they are not elders. So we would, in our context, not call them pastors. So when you hear me use the word “pastor” or the word “elder,” I am referring to the same person.

Secondly, notice the “s” in these passages: “Elders”

As you flip through the New Testament, you see this pattern repeating itself over and over. As the church expanded, elders were appointed to lead each local church. It was never “elder,” it was always a team of elders. GW Knight wrote:

“An analysis of the data seems, therefore, to indicate the existence of oversight by a plurality of church leaders through the New Testament church in virtually every known area and acknowledged or commended by virtually every New Testament writer who writes about church leadership...for example, every church in which leadership is referred to in Asia Minor under Paul and his associates or under Peter’s ministry has a plurality of leadership.”

Thirdly, notice there is no hierarchy in the Elder Team

Remember, there is a difference between hierarchy and authority or role. Here's dictionary.com's definition of “hierarchy”:

*Any system of persons or things ranked one above another.
An organized body of ecclesiastical officials in successive ranks or orders.
Government by an elite group.*

Hierarchy always implies “elitism,” it's a stack of something. A biblical church structure only has hierarchy in one place: Jesus over the Church.

Within the elder team and within the church, there's no hierarchy. At the same time, we all play different roles. The elders have the role of being in authority over the church and within the elder team, we all have different gifts. We play very different roles on the team.

It's important to make a distinction here. Different roles and different authority doesn't mean different value or inequality. For instance, in a marriage husbands and wives have different roles but there isn't a hierarchy: they are equal.

Fourth, notice that Elder is the one official role in the church reserved for men

I don't have time in this short paper to give this sufficient treatment, so I will be brief. Consistently through scripture, the highest religious office is reserved for men. In Israel, there were priests, Jesus had his disciples, and the first century church had elders. Each of these was consistently men and it wasn't an afterthought!

God had a plan when he created us male and female. Woman can be CEOs, they can lead armies, and they can be lawyers, doctors, musicians, and garbage-persons! I can't wait for there to be a woman president in the United States, I believe it's about time we elected one.

But God says, "There are a few times I want to paint a picture of Who I am." The first place is in the family and the second is in your spiritual family: the church.

At Riverview, we get the question a lot about why we don't have female pastors and it would be a lot easier if we did. But if you are going to interpret the Word normally, you must come to this conclusion.

For a longer treatment on this issue, check out *The Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* online at <http://www.cbmw.com>.

Where do elders at Riverview come from?

They come from within the church, which just makes sense! Someone from this church knows this church: they know the doctrine, they know the culture, they are "one of us." Erwin McManus writes this:

The church overwhelmingly hires from the outside. Even mega-churches tend to hire from the outside. Every church seems to have a leadership crisis, whether there are two hundred people or twenty thousand. It seems abysmal that in a church of ten thousand, you wouldn't be overwhelmed with emerging leadership, and yet these churches tend to hire proven leaders from other congregations. We seem to be better at growing congregations than at developing leaders...the development of indigenous leadership is critical to creating and shaping ethos.

Raising up leadership from within is a high value at Riverview. So how is it that someone becomes an elder? Well, several things happen, and it starts with God picking a guy for the job.

Look back at the verse I quoted earlier...

Acts 20:17,28 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church...“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you [elders], to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”

Who made them into elders? The Holy Spirit did, because this is God’s call. And one of the ways he does this is he lays a desire on the man’s heart. Paul writes in I Timothy 3:1,

This is a trustworthy saying: “If someone aspires to be an elder, he desires an honorable position.”

There is an aspiration there: he must want the work of an elder because the work is hard and it calls for a high level of servanthood, accountability to the lifestyle God requires, not to mention one of the scariest verses in the Bible:

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your spiritual leaders, and do what they say. Their work is to watch over your souls, and they are accountable to God...

One day, the elders of Riverview will stand before God’s throne and give and account for each of your souls--that’s a little freaky. The desire is the **work** of an elder--not the fame, certainly not the fortune--the work. And that’s why the desire alone doesn’t cut it. I have had a lot of guys tell me they want to be elders, and they tell me often. “Good,” I tell them, “now go serve your butt off. And when you live a godly lifestyle and you desire the work of an elder and God is in it: you will become one. At that point, the church will see it.”

Now obviously, most of us will never be elders in the church. But we should all aspire to live the kind of lifestyle God calls elders to. Paul says to Titus,

Titus 1:5-9 I left you on the island of Crete so you could complete our work there and appoint elders in each town as I instructed you. An elder must live a blameless life. He must be faithful to his wife, and his children must be believers who don’t have a reputation for being wild or rebellious. For an elder must live a blameless life. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered; he must not be a heavy drinker, violent, or dishonest with money.

Rather, he must enjoy having guests in his home, and he must love what is good. He must live wisely and be just. He must live a devout and disciplined life. He must have a strong belief in the trustworthy message he was taught; then he will be able to encourage others with wholesome teaching and show those who oppose it where they are wrong.

You can really break these qualifications down into four areas. In this paper, I will only detail them briefly. If you want to dig deeper there’s a book I recommend highly: [Biblical Eldership](#) by Alexander Strauch. If you surf over to <http://www.RivWarehouse.com> you can order a copy.

Paul says, an elder must have four relationships worked out.

First, his relationship with God must be worked out

These passages say an elder must live a life above reproach. Now this doesn't mean he is perfect, because then it would be impossible to have any elders in the church! It's just that he must not have any justifiable accusation against him.

He must be able to teach and this doesn't mean he has to have this great gift to wow you in his preaching, but he knows the Word: he can teach correct doctrine from the Word. Being able to do so implies a solid relationship with God.

He must not be a new believer because he's got to have depth that comes from time. Age doesn't matter when it comes to being an elder in the church, but age with the Lord does. In fact, at Riverview, we have two elders in their 50's, one in his 40's, one in his 30's and one in his 20's.

An elder must have a strong belief in the message of Jesus, because you really don't want some guy leading the church who doesn't believe in Jesus. Believe it or not, I've met some pastors like that! If you don't believe in Jesus, you're not qualified to be a pastor! Duh!

The bottom line is an elder must have a solid relationship with God. This should really be a no-brainer.

Second, his relationship with himself must be worked out

Paul says an elder must exercise self-control and he gives some specifics:

- He is not a heavy drinker
- He's not violent
- He isn't quick tempered or arrogant
- He isn't addicted to money (or dishonest with it)

This is guy who has his life together. He is not mastered by anything other than Jesus and he lives a devout and disciplined life. And this shows big-time in the next area.

Third, his relationship with his family must be worked out

Paul says he must manage his household well. That means he must be a one-woman man who is dedicated and faithful to his one and only wife. Now that doesn't mean if his first wife died he couldn't remarry or if there was a biblical divorce that he couldn't be an elder. It also doesn't mean that you have to be married to be an elder. Paul was single, for example. It just means the elder is faithful to his wife.

He also must have obedient and respectful kids and that makes sense. As Paul said, "If a man cannot manage his own household, how can he take care of God's church?"

I love what Alexander Strauch has to say about this:

“The contrast made is not between believing and unbelieving children, but between obedient, respectful children and lawless, uncontrolled children. The strong terms [“wild and rebellious”] stress the children’s behavior, not their eternal state. A faithful child is obedient and submissive to their father...those who interpret this qualification to mean that an elder must have believing, Christian children place an impossible burden upon the father. Even the best Christian fathers cannot guarantee that their children will believe. Salvation is a supernatural act of God. God, not good parents, ultimately brings salvation.”

Finally, his relationship with others must be worked out

An elder must enjoy having guests in his home, he must encourage others with wholesome teaching and at the same time, he must show those who oppose the message of Jesus where they are wrong. He must live a life that inspires people who are outside the church.

That’s quite a pile! But as these four relationships (God, self, family, and others) are set in order in a man’s life, he begins to show the character of an elder. And when God does this work in a man, it becomes evident to the church and it becomes evident to the elders in the church. You see that God has been up to something.

It is at that point that the elders of the church appoint this new elder to join the team. And this new elder is not an “Associate” or “Assistant,” he is an equal with the other elders from that moment on.

So what happens when this team gets bigger and bigger? That’s the beauty of this model! As the team gets bigger, groups of pastors hive off and start new churches! In Riverview’s history, we have raised up somewhere in the neighborhood of 20 pastors who are now all over the world serving God.

Our dream as a church is to “make sacrificial followers of Christ who make sacrificial followers of Christ who go.” We want this to happen at the individual level, we want this to happen at the ministry level, and we want this to happen at the church level.

We have planted many churches in our history, and we plan to plant many more as the years go on. And this will only happen as we raise up more elders and other people with elder-level character in the church.



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