

*Disciples Eldership:
A Quest for Identity and Ministry*

By Peter M. Morgan

Learner's Section:5

A Resource for the Quest

Study Papers, Guidance, Journal Pages

Leader's Section:89

A Guide for the Quest

Course Design, Session Outlines, Suggestions For Leaders

Eldership Voices, a CD, is an essential part of the course.

Sold separately and available through Christian Board of Publication.

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About the Authors

This book was originally a collaboration.

The collaboration began in 1962 when I sat in Dr. Richard Pope's Disciples history class at Lexington Theological Seminary.

Dick Pope knew about elders from more than books: add twenty years, off and on, of eldering at the South Elkhorn Christian Church in Lexington, Kentucky, to his valuable knowledge gained as a scholar.

Neil Topliffe was the second partner in this collaboration. Neil and I had the same group of elders at our first church as ministerial students at Bethany College. Neil succeeded me as pastor of the Chapel Hill Christian Church in Wellsburg, West Virginia. Neil brings the study alive with the audiocassette *Eldership Voices*.

I brought to this original collaboration the influence of some able teachers, the elders who served Marion (Iowa) Christian Church from 1965–1975. They taught me, their pastor, to share ministry with them. Also, I offer to this effort the dialogue with scores of Disciples elders whom I have met in dozens of workshops, seminars, and lectures on eldership across the United States and Canada for the last thirty years.

You have in your hands a revised version of the study originally published in 1983. I am pleased that the work is still in demand and am pleased to update the work by deleting obsolete material and recrafting a few sections based on the experiences of the last twenty years. I do so with greatest appreciation for my original collaborators.

Peter M. Morgan
President, Disciples of Christ Historical Society

Introduction

In the Sunday worship of Disciples congregations, a time comes when an invitation to communion is heard and a communion hymn is sung. During the hymn a group from the congregation comes forward in a kind of processional and takes its place around the communion table. It is led by two elders who stand behind or beside the table facing the congregation. The moment is still. Then the elders gravely and reverently offer prayers of thanksgiving to God for the gift of Jesus Christ. These are not usually set prayers but are composed by each elder in his or her own way. Even so, certain themes often appear and reappear in them. One often hears, for example, some reference to the bread as emblematic of the body of Christ that was broken, and the wine as representing his blood that was shed for us. When all have been served, the elders and deacons return to their places in the congregation. Thus in a simple, quiet, and reverent service an action is completed that Disciples regard as the very heart of their corporate worship. What is unique in the Disciples communion service is that it requires no ordained priest or minister. For the sake of good order, the Disciples service is normally led by elders who have been elected to this office by the congregation. Elders not only lead in the celebration of the Lord's Supper but have fulfilled other ministerial functions as well, such as serving as teachers, guides, counselors, and as shepherds of the flock and guardians of the faith.

This particular concept of the office of elder did not appear suddenly without preparation or precedent in Christian history. To appreciate and understand fully the eldership today and its long process of development, participants need to study the formative influences. The major concern of this study is to provide a brief interpretation of this history and what it means for the church today in planning for the future.

During the course, *Disciples Eldership: A Quest for Identity and Ministry*, students will seek to establish what the eldership is. The course will then move on to help students know about and perform effective ministry.

Attendance at all sessions of the course is important. The sessions will be two to two and one-half hours in length. Participants will be guided through this resource by the leader, who will be aided by a CD. The designers of the course hope that the commitment and discipline called for by this study will be amply rewarded by the dividends of a renewed ministry.

Peter M. Morgan

LEARNER'S SECTION

A Resource for the Quest

Study Papers
Guidance
Journal Pages

This section of Disciples Eldership is for learners. Study papers and journal pages are to help learners in the quest. Leaders and learners who are studying alone will find guidance starting on page 89.

I T E M T W O

Course Outline

Learner's Section • A Resource for the Quest

Formation

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Function

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A Message to the Learners

I sat and visited with some people in a congregation. I asked, “Describe your favorite elder.” Their portraits:

“She knows and cares about me.”

“Joe isn’t afraid of taking on tough issues, but he always does it with unquestionable love.”

“All Marlis has to do is step up to the Lord’s Table and I feel closer to God.”

“He came to be with me when no one else was speaking to me.”

Elders are mature, although often young, Christian leaders who lovingly lead congregations through crises and conflicts, patiently stand by their people as well as before them at the Lord’s Table, and grow in the knowledge of their faith in a thoroughly contagious way.

Two questions in your heart and mind may be the ones I most frequently hear from elders.

1. Why did they choose me?
2. What do elders do?

The first question, “Why me?” shows humility and awe. It is a spiritual question. God does not call us to a ministry and then abandon us. Prayerful reflections on scripture, tradition, and personal experience are the means God uses to address us in our spiritual formation. The first two sections of this study on experience, scripture, and tradition are for our spiritual formation as elders.

The second question, “What do elders do?” will be opened for our discussion in sections three through six. Only after our formation as elders are we ready to address the question of function. Note that there will be no checklist of duties. There will be reflection and conversation to help you work out your faithful ministry with other elders.

This study seeks to foster in elders the best traits possible by helping them discover their ministry as it is now emerging out of its rich tradition.

You and your eldership study group will be using the book *Disciples Eldership*. Each participant will need a copy. The Resource for the Quest section has study papers, plus “reflect and write” pages that may be used and then reviewed as a journal.

A very important companion resource is the CD *Eldership Voices*. I hope you will catch some of the excitement possible in this study in the voices of the elders on the CD.

A Special Message for Individual Students

Although the material is organized for use by a group, it is also usable by you as an individual student.

The simplest procedure is to read the study paper items as you would read a book. The other items which call for reflection and writing may be passed over or used if they have strong appeal. The CD, *Eldership Voices*, could also be a beneficial supplement to your reading.

A more thorough way to do the study is to lead yourself through all the reading and learning exercises. Use the leader's guide in the back of this book and the CD, *Eldership Voices*. It is available from the Christian Board of Publication, P.O. Box 179, St. Louis, Missouri 63166. Stock Number 93A2684.

The most advantageous way of doing the study is to find one or two other individuals who will do the study with you.

Peter M. Morgan

I T E M T H R E E

Course Purposes

1. To improve the congregation's knowledge and understanding of the ministry of eldership, and characteristics desired of those in that ministry
2. To foster elders and their congregations in becoming support communities of ministry
3. To help learners to be formed spiritually and claim identity from biblical and historical rootage for the eldership
4. To help learners perceive and practice eldership as a ministry with flexibility
5. To enable learner's to provide knowledgeable and effective ministry as teachers, shepherds, celebrants of the Lord's supper, and overseers
6. To encourage communication and support in ministry among clergy, diaconate, and eldership
7. To offer ways to enrich the life of prayer of individuals and groups
8. To offer guidance for the ongoing life of the eldership

The greatest needs of the eldership are...

SECTION I

Eldership in Scripture



ITEM FOUR

Purposes for Section I

1. To introduce the course and its materials
2. To begin to foster elders and their congregations in becoming support communities of ministry
3. To help learners to be formed spiritually and to claim identity from biblical roots
4. To offer ways to have elders enrich their life of prayer

ITEM FIVE

The Old Testament—A Firm Foundation

To read, underline, and report to your group

Among many primitive peoples and in the earliest forms of religion, the word *elder* usually referred to the older men of the tribe or village. By virtue of their age they were assumed to be wise leaders, counselors, and judges. They were the custodians of the sacred lore and tradition.

In ancient Israel the oldest and most respected served as leaders, counselors, and judges. For example, God directed that seventy Israelite elders assist Moses, who found the burden of leadership too heavy to bear alone as the Israelites wandered in the wilderness.

In the later history of Israel, seventy elders formed in Jerusalem a kind of supreme court known as the Sanhedrin. Each Jewish community and synagogue had its own “little Sanhedrin” made up of elders who had been ordained by the laying on of hands. This latter action symbolized the conferring of the divine Spirit of wisdom and power. In the time of Jesus there was great respect among devout Jews for “the tradition of the elders” (Mark 7:5c).

Thus, in ancient Israel and in other societies as well, the elders were usually the older men of the village, tribe, or society. Indeed, the word *elder* is a literal translation of a Greek word *presbyteros* which means one who is older.

The Greek word is also sometimes transliterated as *presbyter*.

The New Testament— The Priesthood of All Believers

To read, underline, and report to your group

Prior to the church, Jesus gathered about him a little company of disciples. The total number is unknown, but Paul reported that the risen Christ appeared to more than five hundred people (1 Cor. 15:6). From this “little flock” Jesus had selected twelve apostles, and to them he gave the Lord’s Prayer, the Lord’s supper, and the rite of baptism as continuing elements in their life together. In a pivotal service on the day of Pentecost this small group was empowered by the Holy Spirit, and the church came fully into being. These earliest Christians became ardently evangelical and were bound to one another in a close-knit community of faith. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).

Through the remaining years of the first century the movement spread rapidly through the Roman Empire and to some lands beyond. This remarkable feat of evangelism was not carried out under the direction of a central organization. Although the church in Jerusalem was respected and held in affection, no central office there or anywhere else controlled or directed the rapid growth.

Its advance and spread was largely the work of an enthusiastic and committed membership of unnamed and unknown men and women.

They were not divided into clergy and laity. No priestly class stood between the people and God or was granted exclusive control over the means of salvation. Christ was called “high priest” who became on the cross the sacrifice that once and for all mediated between God and humanity (Heb. 4:14; 7:23–28; and 10:10).

From this perspective Apostolic Christianity was a movement with no distinction between clergy and laity. Insofar as it followed its Jewish parentage, its model was the synagogues and their elders rather than the Temple and its priests. From a sociological point of view, first-century Christianity was more like a dynamic movement than the priestly institution that it would later become. The other side of the coin is that all its members were also described as a “royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:9), and all shared in the general ministry of the church.

Within this general ministry, the early Christians recognized that there were individuals who had been given certain talents and abilities that fitted them for special ministries. For example, the New Testament tells of apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle workers, healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in tongues, interpreters of tongues, exhorters, contributors, evangelists, pastors, preachers, bishops, elders, deacons, counselors, and others besides (Rom. 12; Cor. 12; and Eph. 4).

These special ministries were sometimes recognized by a service of ordination which involved fasting and prayer and a laying on of hands. To ordain persons was to acknowledge that they had a call from God, had special gifts or abilities, and were accepted by the church (Acts 13:1–3). Further, ordination, it was believed, included a commitment on the part of the ordained and a consecration that conferred a special blessing or grace. Such ordination was not a license to rule but an opportunity to serve.

I T E M S E V E N

2 John 1—3; 3 John 1—4

Elders Are Teachers

Second and Third John give us glimpses of elders in the Bible teaching the faith. The opening verses alone of these “correspondence courses” reveal John’s questing for truth and his joy in the accomplishments of his students. The delight of teaching and learning occurs in those wonder-filled moments of the loving convergence of student, teacher, and subject.

Stephen England and Richard Pope, two Disciples elders/teachers of the mid-twentieth century, instruct us on elders in the Bible who taught:

These men (biblical elders) were the teachers of the congregations. By word, precept, and example of life they led the people to know and to understand what God’s revelation of himself in Jesus Christ actually was. By their teaching they safeguarded the churches against insidious heresies, such as that at Colossae, which would have turned Christianity into some strange philosophy of religion. By prayerful experiment, they helped their people to discover what the Christian gospel meant in their moral lives; this was something that no one had ever known, for the gospel was utterly new in the world at that time.¹ —Stephen England

As the church struggled increasingly with problems of order and heresy, it relied more and more on the stability provided by councils of elders, who gave spiritual and moral guidance, presided in worship, and served as guardians of the faith in a society which had in it many competing cults and religions. They functioned as rulers, overseers, teachers, and guardians in the congregations.² —Richard Pope

¹ Steven England—An unpublished paper.

² Richard Pope—A paper written for this resource.

Elders Are Shepherds

Acts 20:17–18, 25–28

Notes:

Scripture to copy and keep where you will read it frequently.

Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. (Peter 5:1–4)

I T E M N I N E ---

Elders Are Overseers

Acts 15:1–31

A space for notes on the story as it is told in the class session.

Later Developments— A Consideration of the Pastoral Epistles

In 1 Timothy and 2 Timothy and Titus, considerable information is given about leadership in the church during the closing years of the first century. Titus was told to "...appoint elders in every town" (Titus 1:5). Elders who ruled well, and were especially effective in preaching and teaching, were to be given "double honor," which apparently meant that they were to receive remuneration for their service. The church thus was moving towards a professional ministry (1 Tim. 5:17). In their discussion of ministry these letters also give a description of the ideal bishop (1 Tim. 3:1–7). The elder should "be above reproach, married only once [in the Greek, "husband of one wife"], temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money" (vv. 2–3). Further, the elder should be well thought of outside the church. Here it should be emphasized that literally and legalistically there are few if any who could qualify for the office of bishop (or elder). For example, women, the unmarried, and those without children would be excluded. Further, such legalism contradicts the basic gospel teaching that Christians of all kinds fall short, and are saved by the mercy of God rather than by any righteousness of their own (Rom. 1:16–17). Indeed, those who think they measure up to this standard may have fallen short; they are at least guilty of conceit.

This statement reflects the particular life situation in which it was written. It lifts up a very high standard of character for leadership in the church which is to be taken not literally, but seriously.

Nancy Heimer, a Disciples minister, adds to our understanding of the Pastoral Epistles:

While the Pastoral Letters need to be taken seriously by Christians, they also need to be understood responsibly. Written at a time when the coming of the Kingdom was no longer viewed as an immediate reality, these letters were a means of developing a stronger, ongoing religious institution within the society. Christian congregations were increasing in number and spreading geographically. Therefore, it was necessary to strengthen the institution by establishing the line of authority and the responsibilities of the ministers and officers. One question became: "Who is qualified to lead?"

Within the young Christian churches, women, such as Lydia, Priscilla, and Dorcas, had provided significant leadership. Such leadership by church women was without parallel in history and apparently was

disquieting to those men who believed in the patriarchalism of the time. For them it was important to establish that the “place” of women in the congregation was one of silence and submission. In 1 Timothy 2:9–15 there is an indictment against women based on the premise that women did not deserve to be leaders because, through Eve, they had broken God’s law. Culminating this statement is the observation that for women salvation is achieved through childbearing! (Is one to make the assumption that no men have ever broken God’s law? Do women and men have different bases for salvation?) This argument against the ability of women to have authority is further strengthened in 2 Timothy 3:6–7 where women are depicted as weak, easily subverted by the crafty persuasions of evil men. These “evil men” were believed to lure women into heretical Christian congregations. Yet one wonders if women turned to these heretical congregations, rather than were lured into them, because of alienating attitudes within the “true” congregations.

According to the Pastoral Letters, the one acceptable place where women could continue to serve the church was the “Order of Widows” (1 Tim. 5:5–6). Even that had careful restrictions to determine a “real” widow! Again, to understand the writings of Timothy, one needs to reflect on the situation at that time. “Real” widows, those women who had no sons, fathers, husbands, or brothers to protect and take care of them, were left two sources of economic security: prostitution and the church. The church recognized and accepted this responsibility to women.

Paul’s words of assurance that in Christ “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female...” (Gal. 3:28) still speak to Christians today. Two-thirds of this message has been heard. Many national, political, and economic differences are no longer barriers to church leadership. Now church people have the opportunity to take the final third seriously and to reopen the doors for primary church leadership to women. Members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), a denomination which so proudly points to the fact that it has ordained both women and men to the ministry for more than a century, cannot continue to deny to women participation as elders and deacons. As women and men are called to serve in the ordained ministry, they are also called to serve in all offices of church life. The challenge to Christians is not to judge but to enable and encourage each individual to use her or his gifts in response to God’s call.

I T E M E L E V E N

Reflections

Take five minutes to reflect quietly on all that you have experienced. You may use some of the suggestions on this page to get started. Notes will help you review your learnings later.

Important new or freshly verified information or insights...

I would like to learn more about...

I'm unclear about...

Reflect on this question:

What have we experienced that will make the most difference for me as an elder or a recipient of ministry from elders?

With All These Witnesses

By faith Abel offered God a more acceptable sacrifice...
By faith Enoch was taken up that he should not see death...
By faith Noah...constructed an ark...
By faith Abraham...went out not knowing where he was to go...
By faith Sarah...received power to conceive...
By faith Moses...left Egypt...
By faith the people crossed the Red Sea...
By faith _____ led me to a fuller life in Christ...
(Hebrews 11 [paraphrase])

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1–2)

Unison Prayer

We feel the tremendous responsibility placed before us, Father, as we consider the implications of assuming the role of leaders in your church, we thank you for the lives and examples of those chosen by you as related in your Word. We thank you, too, for the lives of those in our own time, who have led us to a better understanding of the love of Christ through their personal ministries to us.

We are humbled by having been chosen to be shepherds of your flock.

We would ask that you continue to guide and encourage us as we search together for ways of service.

Help us that, through faith, we may attain the strength and courage that comes from loving obedience to the Christ, in whose name we pray.
Amen.

—Bill Mitchell