



THE
PLURALITY
PRINCIPLE

*How
to Build
and Maintain
a Thriving Church
Leadership Team*

DAVE HARVEY

Foreword by Sam Storms

“In his concern to promote healthy churches and healthy pastors, Dave Harvey ensures that we understand leadership plurality and have a healthy, functioning team of elders in the local church. I’m not aware of another book that deals with this topic. *The Plurality Principle* is very practical and very helpful!”

Tim Challies, blogger, Challies.com

“Dave Harvey gives us another fantastic book. *The Plurality Principle* is enjoyable, biblical, and memorable. The fact that it is a quick read makes it all the more useful.”

Matt Perman, author, *What’s Best Next*

“God’s design for the church has always been a plurality of elders—but that doesn’t mean plurality is easy. Dave Harvey knows this, and he has provided this straightforward guide to help you cultivate effective plurality in leadership.”

Timothy Paul Jones, author, *Family Ministry Field Guide*; C. Edwin Gheens Professor of Christian Family Ministry, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“It is one thing to believe in the necessity of a plurality of elders but quite another to understand what that means! Dave Harvey does an excellent job of explaining it. He has put into words the reality I have wanted to share with fellow pastors as the dean of a church-based seminary—the type of fellowship that should exist within a team of elders. I thank God for this precious brother and the light he sheds on our path.”

François Turcotte, President and Dean, The Evangelical Baptist Seminary of Quebec

“Every once in a while you encounter a book you wish you’d read years earlier. Having inherited elder teams in three different churches, I can testify that Dave Harvey’s book would have been gold during those transitions. If you are a young pastor, save yourself the heartache of confusion and conflict. If you are a seasoned leader, it could be time for a biblical tune-up. The health of your church, your leaders, and your own soul might just depend on it.”

Daniel Henderson, Founder and President, Strategic Renewal; Global Director, The 6:4 Fellowship; author, *Old Paths, New Power*

“Church leadership is the most perilous job out there, needing nothing short of the on-the-ground, forged-by-fire wisdom Harvey offers. From how elders can care for pastors to how elders and pastors can function together in practical, flock-sensitive, and Christ-honoring ways, this book guides elder teams through one of the most important needs they face: how church leadership teams can thrive in the complex challenges of real people, widely varying contexts, and treacherously subtle dangers.”

J. Alasdair Groves, Executive Director, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation; coauthor, *Untangling Emotions*

“Dave Harvey has done a great service for all who love the local church and have been called by God into leadership. He carefully explains why God calls local churches to be overseen by a plurality of leaders. And he steers us around the reefs and barriers that have left some church boards shipwrecked and their churches torn in pieces. By God’s grace, healthy plurality in leadership not only is possible but can be glorious!”

Bob Lepine, Cohost, *FamilyLife Today*; Teaching Pastor, Redeemer Community Church, Little Rock, Arkansas

“*The Plurality Principle* will be of great help to any church eldership seeking to lead and care for the people entrusted to them. Dave Harvey has zeroed in on the key principles and has put very useful feet to them. This book will serve our eldering deliberations in the years ahead.”

Mike Bullmore, Senior Pastor, CrossWay Community Church, Bristol, Wisconsin

“Being a pastor or elder is no small task. That’s why I’ve found Dave Harvey’s book so helpful. With a compelling vision and clear manner, Harvey makes the practice of developing a healthy plurality of elders both understandable and desirable. If you are planting or leading a local church and you want to see a healthy church last far beyond your leadership, pick up and implement this book. It may be the most humbling thing you will ever do, but also the strongest way you will ever lead.”

Jeremy Writebol, Lead Campus Pastor, Woodside Bible Church, Plymouth, Michigan

The Plurality Principle

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The Plurality Principle

*How to Build and Maintain a Thriving
Church Leadership Team*

Dave Harvey

Foreword by Sam Storms

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To Wayne

*Who needs superheroes,
with a big brother like you!*

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Foreword

REALLY? AN ENTIRE BOOK on why our local churches should be led by a plurality of elders? Aren't there more pressing and urgent issues that call for our attention? After all, among the many "-ologies," shouldn't we emphasize Christology (the study of Jesus Christ) and soteriology (the study of salvation) and eschatology (the study of the end times) and hamartiology (the study of sin)? Is ecclesiology, the study of the church, terribly important? Does it matter all that much?

My answer, and the answer that Dave Harvey provides in this excellent book, is a resounding yes! I once heard J. I. Packer say that "bad theology hurts people." So, too, does bad ecclesiology. That statement may catch many of you by surprise. You struggle to believe that the way a local church is organized, led, and governed could possibly cause much damage. And yet, unbiblical leadership structures in the local church can wreak havoc on the people of God and bring reproach on the name of Jesus Christ. A failure to honor the clear teaching of Scripture on how a church should be governed is a recipe for disaster. Simply put, as Dave Harvey repeatedly asserts, the quality of elder plurality determines the spiritual health of a church.

One need only survey the landscape of recent train wrecks in several local churches to see how true this is. In virtually every instance where a gifted leader or pastor succumbed to temptation—be it sex, pride, isolation, bullying, or monetary mismanagement—the problem can be traced to a singular, authoritarian “pastor” who largely avoided meaningful accountability and built the ministry around his own giftedness and personality. I have in mind the sort of senior leader who never loses a vote; who regularly intimidates his staff, elder board, or deacon board; and who is rarely willing to admit that others might have greater insight and wisdom on a particular issue than he.

There are numerous reasons why I so highly recommend this book. Dave Harvey is himself a veteran of ecclesiological train wrecks. He has experienced firsthand what happens when churches fail to heed the clear teaching of Scripture. His wisdom and humility combine to chart for us a clear path forward as he deftly describes the countless reasons why plurality of male leadership in the local church is the most beneficial and spiritually healthy model to embrace.

This should not be taken as an indictment of every church where “the man of God” mentality or the so-called “Moses-model” of leadership is endorsed. Some of you reading this book likely attend a church where the senior pastor is the sole elder. I’ve known a handful of such men who functioned reasonably well in this capacity. In most instances, however, the deacons (or elders) exist only to rubber-stamp his decisions, and his unavoidably limited perspective is the only factor shaping the church’s vision. Admittedly, there are always a handful of exceptions where, by God’s mercy, an unbiblical model of local

church life succeeds. But that is no justification for ignoring inspired Scripture.

One of the challenges in a plurality of leadership is the relationship between the lead or senior pastor and members of an elder board. Many envision the senior pastor as the “boss” of the board, while in other churches he is often “held hostage” and rarely permitted to provide the sort of leadership and influence essential to a healthy spiritual family. One of the many strengths of this book is that Harvey argues persuasively for a plurality of leadership while simultaneously making a convincing case for the principle of a “first among equals,” a senior or lead pastor whose gifts, calling, education, and spiritual maturity qualify him to exercise a greater degree of influence and cast vision for the body as a whole.

Harvey’s practical counsel on how a senior pastor works in tandem with a plurality of elders is nothing short of profound. Harvey does far more than simply defend the biblical reasons for plurality. He speaks directly and with great wisdom into the many concrete issues that arise on a daily basis in virtually every local church.

He rightly points out that the lead pastor does not possess unilateral veto power over the consensus of the other elders. He is alert to the dangers of a top-heavy, authoritarian, celebrity-pastor mentality. He is also wise in the way he warns against a failure to let leaders lead. He reminds us that a plurality is not an egalitarian enterprise that denies individual gifting, removes roles, or demands equality in function or outcomes. Even among equals, there must be leadership. And this calls for the all-too-rare combination of humility and courage.

FOREWORD

Harvey addresses other critically important issues and questions with a balanced convergence of biblical instruction and common sense. He stresses the need for lay elders, provides practical insight on how much a pastor or elder should share with his wife, and speaks wisely on the sticky issue of how the lead pastor should negotiate his salary and benefits package. One trend spreading among numerous megachurches today is an external board of advisers that in many ways supplants the authority of the elders. Harvey's critique of this decidedly unbiblical model is alone worth the time spent reading this book.

I've been reading books on the structures and dynamics of local church leadership for many years. Honestly, when I was asked to write the foreword to this short treatment, I wondered if Dave Harvey would have anything to say that I hadn't heard countless times before. You may be asking the same question as you decide whether investing time into reading this volume will prove profitable. I assure you it will, far beyond what you can reasonably imagine.

As far as I'm concerned, this is the go-to book on the nature, role, and responsibility of local church elders that I will happily and energetically recommend to others in the days ahead.

Sam Storms
Lead Pastor for Vision and Preaching
Bridgeway Church
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Introduction

Why a Book on Plurality?

TWO DAYS AGO, the alternator on our car died. Back in the day (three days ago), I was blissfully ignorant of all-things-alternator. Now I know way more than I want to. For example, how much one costs. But I also learned that the alternator is part of the electrical system that powers the engine, charges the battery, sparks the ignition, heats the interior, and runs all the other electrical stuff in my vehicle. It's hardly visible and rarely comes up in discussion, but this unseen piece of machinery pretty much ensures that the whole car remains powered and moving forward.

A plurality of leadership—that is, a *team* of leaders—is like the alternator for the church. Most of the time, it's operating out of sight, and most people don't even know how it works. When it functions as designed, the church remains charged and moving forward. But where the functional plurality of a leadership team is absent, churches stall. Oh, and like alternators, pluralities can be very expensive when they fail. They require inspection and a dose of preventive maintenance. That's why my premise for this book is that *the quality of your elder plurality determines the health of your church.*

Looking in the Mirror

Shared leadership is about power, trust, accountability, and responsibility. As a result, it's relevant at every stage of ministry. But think about all the ways teamwork can break down. Maybe you are painfully familiar with one or more of these scenarios:

- *Plurality can be missing at the start.* Rico successfully started a church, but he lives confounded. “I’ve spent the last two years driving most of the ministry myself. How do I help our church become a place where the saints are equipped to do the work of the ministry? Where do I begin to transition this ministry from *me* to *us*?”
- *Plurality can be lost in transition.* Cameron was hired to be the primary teaching pastor at his church. The board of elders ran the hiring process, but now he feels like he’s on the outside looking in. “I pressed the team on this issue, but they told me that they’ve been together for years. They just see me as the next hire; these men assume they’ll be here long after I’m gone.”
- *Plurality can be challenged in crisis.* After a leadership failure, Darnell inherited a large congregation, a functional facility, and a dysfunctional eldership. “As I’ve gotten to know these men, I’ve realized that half of them aren’t qualified to be elders. Can we operate as a healthy team when half of the men shouldn’t be a part of it?”
- *Plurality can be undervalued.* Reese is a gifted man, and no one is more aware of it than Reese. He can preach, understand organizational leadership, and seems to possess an innate instinct for identifying problems and proposing helpful solutions. The elders and other leaders around Reese feel pretty unnecessary.

Deep down in his heart, Reese pretty much agrees. When he was recently asked why he didn't delegate more responsibility, Reese observed, "God has blessed my ministry, and the church is best served when the plurality backs me up."

- *Finally, plurality can be ungrounded in reality.* Kyle woke to another day knowing the cloud of disapproval would shade his whole morning at the office. When he first accepted the role of lead pastor, the elders and staff were falling over each other in an effort to care for him. Now his flaws appeared in some form on almost every meeting agenda. Kyle was feeling crushed under the weight of expectations. What should a lead guy do when those around him confuse plurality with fixing all his weaknesses?

Every single church, no matter its governance, has to attend to the problem of plurality in leadership—to its presence or absence, to its beauties and absurdities. But we should see this as an opportunity. We all have plurality problems, but moving people toward a shared vision of doing ministry together is worth it.

Plotting Our Course

My first pastorate lasted twenty-seven years in the same church. For most of that time, I was the senior pastor, and we continually tuned and retuned our understanding of plurality until it served the church well. We made plenty of mistakes, and it was painstakingly hard work. It meant having men get to know me down to the level of my dreams, desires, giftings, and temptations. But I treasure those memories and the fruit that plurality bore in my life and in the life of our church.

Since then, I've served on various teams in different roles. Sometimes we've applied the principle of plurality well; sometimes we've made some big mistakes. But through it all I've only become more convinced of this key truth: *The quality of your elder plurality determines the health of your church.*

In this book I will share what I have learned about how to define, experience, and assess a healthy plurality of elders, and I hope it helps you. We'll look at what makes pluralities durable and what makes them so unpredictably delicate. We'll talk specifically about why and how a healthy plurality contributes to a healthy church, including

- how healthy pluralities keep the church moving forward,
- how healthy pluralities can be designed to work,
- how healthy pluralities create a context for elder care,
- how healthy pluralities offer authentic community that's characterized by vulnerability, honesty, and growth through self-disclosure, and
- how healthy pluralities, and the unity they enjoy, become a microcosm for the entire church.

Plurality matters. You see, the health and character of your team trumps the skill of the individual members. Ultimately, the health and character of your plurality will determine the health and vitality of the church. Together we will learn not to assume the health of our unity but to ask questions that will diagnose the strength and substance of our plurality. Together we will ask:

- Do we *agree* with each other?
- Do we *trust* one another?

INTRODUCTION

- Do we *care* for each other?
- Do we *fit* together?

But it's about you too. A lot rides on your doing well in ministry. There aren't many vocations out there of which it is said: "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Tim. 4:16). Thriving in God's church amid the chaos of a fallen world is too difficult to be managed alone. For you to flourish, it takes a team.

My friends, we're not merely looking for a few laughs, a season of growth, some decent conferences, and a nice retirement package. We want pastors and churches that last. But to achieve that goal, we need strong pluralities. Denominations, networks, collectives, and local churches will be successful to the extent that they encourage, and help in building, strong teams. Why? *Because the quality of your plurality determines the health of your church.*

PART 1

BUILDING A
PLURALITY

A Plurality Primer

IT HAPPENED AGAIN. Another phone call, another crisis, another pastor walking alone. My heart aches for this guy. Leadership has always been a lonely experience for him, dependent solely upon his highly polished gifts. I hope he sees the different path of leadership we discussed—a road less traveled but in keeping with God’s design for flourishing churches.

Human beings are created for community (Rom. 12:4–5; Heb. 10:24–25). We’re made in the image of God just as our God dwells in the delights of eternal community (Matt. 28:19; John 1:1–18). Yes, as God exists in community, we are made to exist in community. We are relational creatures who derive our existence, salvation, identity, and hope from a relational Creator (Gen. 1:26–27; 5:1–2; 9:6; James 3:9). This remarkable experience of community shapes what it means to be truly human. The theme of connectivity flows across Scripture and—to the particular point of this book—informs church leadership. Leaders are called to community, connection, and collaboration.

I would love to tell you that I came to these convictions by seminary study, by analyzing healthy church models, and through

examining what's been most effective in the history of the church. Actually, my convictions began from a spiritual slap more than from anything that might earn me a pat on the back. This defining moment was a sort of holy headlock where the Spirit graciously grabbed me in my sin and pointed me in a different direction. Let me tell you about it.

Years ago, Kimm and I joined a church plant in the Philadelphia area. From the beginning, the church grew rapidly. Within eighteen months, I was invited onto the pastoral staff to help

*Leaders are called to
community, connection,
and collaboration.*

with evangelism, singles ministry, administration, and—well, you know—anything else that needed to be done. A few years later, some issues surfaced in the life of the lead pastor that raised some questions about whether or

not that was a good role for him. Through a long and difficult process, it became clear that he wasn't the guy to lead the church.

These events raised the obvious question “Who should be the church's next leader?”

At that time, there was another man on staff who had helped to start the church. He was a lovable, pastoral, fatherly guy who had been one of the church planters. Since day one of the church plant, his house became the center of care and community. This guy was a respected voice, and he possessed the love and trust of the people.

As I look back, it seems like a no-brainer that he should have been the guy to lead—at least until the church was stabilized enough to think more clearly about the future. After all, he was

thirteen years older than me and far more experienced in ministry. Yet, instead of humbly advocating for him, I made too much of a certain weakness in him and resisted his appointment. Looking back, I had what the world might call remarkably high self-esteem. In Bible speak, that's a prideful and exaggerated self-assessment. I secretly believed that I was more suited for the role. In fact, I was stupefied that my qualifications weren't obvious to others! Pretty ugly, huh? It is to me. Even as I type these words more than three decades later, I'm still pierced by a stab of shame.

You see, the leadership vacancy gave opportunity for my jealousy and selfish ambition. The reality of my blindness was pretty serious, but my pride made me think my sight was sharper and more discerning than it was. As a result, I competed daily in the verbal trifecta of fools—speak often, listen little, never doubt. Maybe reading about me has you instantly nodding, because you have lived through a situation like this yourself. Perhaps you had a one-man show like Dave in your church. Or maybe *you* were Dave.

The good news is that God met me in a powerful way. But before I tell you about the experience, I want to tell you about how it drove me toward the Bible and the lesson it planted deep in my soul.

The Biblical Case for Elder Plurality

The Bible rarely talks about stand-alone leaders. Instead, it speaks of plurality. When I use the term *plurality*, I'm referencing the scriptural evidence that New Testament churches were led by more than one leader. They were, in fact, led by leadership teams. J. L. Reynolds describes it this way: "The apostolic churches seem,

in general, to have had a plurality of elders as well as deacons.”¹ Alexander Strauch agrees when he writes, “On the local church level, the New Testament plainly witnesses to a consistent pattern of shared pastoral leadership.”²

In the New Testament, the term *elder* is used to designate an office to which a man is appointed—whether by the other elders or by the congregation—on the basis of particular gifts and character qualities he possesses (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9). Various terms are used to describe the role of pastor or elder in the Bible,³ and

- 1 J. L. Reynolds, *Church Polity, or The Kingdom of Christ in Its Internal and External Development* (Richmond, VA: Harrold & Murray, 1849), chap. 9, cited in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 349.
- 2 Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 1995), 37.
- 3 The New Testament appears to use the words for “elder” (πρεσβύτερος/*presbyteros* and its variants), “overseer/bishop” (ἐπίσκοπος/*episkopos* and its variants), and “pastor” (ποιμήν/*poimēn*, literally “shepherd,” and its variants) interchangeably. Three passages justify this assumption: (1) In Acts 20, Paul calls the elders (τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους / *tous presbyterous*) of Ephesus to himself (v. 17) and then, in v. 28, addresses them as overseers (ἐπίσκοπούς/*episkopous*). In that same verse, he instructs them “to shepherd the church of God” (CSB), using the infinitive form of the verb ποιμαίνω/*poimainō*, which is a cognate of ποιμήν, our word for pastor. (2) In Titus 1, Paul appoints elders (πρεσβυτέρους) throughout Crete (v. 5) and goes on to describe the character and gifting of an elder (vv. 6–9). Midway through Paul’s list of character qualifications, he switches to the noun for “overseer” (ἐπίσκοπος) proclaiming, “For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach.” Paul finishes the list in this verse but continues through v. 16 giving pastoral admonitions similar to those found in Acts 20:28–30, encouraging the elder, or overseer, to defend sound doctrine in the church as a means of protecting God’s people. Clearly, that’s what I call shepherding! (3) In 1 Pet. 5:1–2, the chief of the apostles exhorts his fellow elders (πρεσβυτέρους) “[to] shepherd [ποιμάνατε/*poimanate*] the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight [ἐπισκοποῦντες/*episkopountes*].” This isn’t an exhaustive list of the places where these terms are used together, but these three instances illustrate that when the New Testament authors write about an elder, an overseer, or a pastor, they appear

there are a variety of ways that pastoral teams organize in churches. But one key conviction grounds this book: *The New Testament terms for pastor, overseer, or elder are never used to talk about a single leader ruling or governing the church alone.* Instead, they are used to reference plural leadership. Here are some examples:⁴

- Elders (plural) are appointed to every church (Acts 14:23).
- The elders (plural) and apostles work together to resolve a major dispute (Acts 15:6).
- Overseers (plural) shepherd the flock in Ephesus (Acts 20:28).
- Paul writes to the overseers (plural) in Philippi (Phil. 1:1).
- A council of elders (plural) laid their hands upon Timothy (1 Tim. 4:14).
- Elders (plural) direct the affairs of the church (1 Tim. 5:17).
- Paul instructs Titus to appoint elders (plural, Titus 1:5).
- Peter instructs the elders (plural) as a fellow elder (1 Pet. 5:1–2).
- Peter tells younger men to submit to their elders (plural, 1 Pet. 5:5).

Passages like these bear strong testimony toward collaborative leadership within the New Testament church.⁵

to be writing about one interchangeable role. While this point does not forbid the separation of the role of pastor, a staff role, and an elder (a non-staff governance role, as practiced in certain traditions), it does suggest that New Testament churches kept these roles unified in one group.

⁴ Elder pluralities also are mentioned in passing in Acts 11:30; 15:2, 4, 22, 23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18.

⁵ While I believe some elders should be compensated in their roles as pastors, I believe it's highly important that some are not. I'm also not overly concerned by churches that elect to use the title *pastor* for a paid ministry position and *elder* for nonvocational pastoral work. Others may choose to shed blood on this hill, but I will not. My years

*We receive plurality
as a gift—if we can
only accept it.*

Now, just to be clear: advocating the view that God assigns responsibility to a group of leaders is hardly a pioneering approach to church polity. Our Reformed forebears practiced this form of church government years ago.⁶ Louis Berkhof suggested that it is precisely the practice of coequality among elders that distinguishes Reformed polity from that of other groups:

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

I believe Christ gave the church a plurality of leadership. We receive this plurality as a gift—if we can only accept it.

in ministry have convinced me its largely inconsequential, particularly when measured against the larger issue of whether they operate together in a plurality.

6 Samuel Miller wrote, “And as the whole spiritual government of each church is committed to its bench of elders, the session is competent to regulate every concern, and to correct everything which they consider amiss in the arrangements or affairs of the church which admits of correction.” Miller, *An Essay on the Warrant, Nature, and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publishing, 1832), 201.

7 Louis Berkhof, *Summary of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1938), 589.

My Plurality Turning Point

When I felt called to ministry, I had no idea that being a pastor would become an essential means for exposing my sinful heart. Looking back on that early ministry experience that I described above, I can now see that I was undergoing a kind of open-heart surgery. I think what was happening in my heart is well described in James 3:16: “For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.” Just think about it. I had an opportunity to partner with and serve alongside a guy more experienced than me—a guy who was trusted throughout the church and endowed with pastoral gifts. That was a slam dunk if there ever was one. But to my shame, I questioned his leadership and the wisdom of his appointment. My pride confused and corrupted me in an exceptional way. Anarchy reigned within me.

Little did I know these events were unfolding in a way that would profoundly shape my vision of ministry. My first experience of plurality—leading with another guy through a difficult situation—reached in and squeezed my disordered heart. Much to my dismay, what was inside my heart came spilling out. But that was the point. God had a plan.

If you’re new to working with a team, you’ll soon see how often plurality uncovers and forces you to deal with the heroic dreams and fleshly desires you have for ministry. When you think about it, this makes sense. To serve as part of a healthy elder plurality, a pastor must know his role, be willing to come under authority, learn humility, traffic in nuances that are neither black nor white, and be willing to think about his gifts and position through the lens of what serves the church rather than

his personal agenda. Leading in community puts us under a holy spotlight. We have to learn to lead *under* some, *alongside* others, and *over* still others.

But it's all part of God's plan and protection. In fact, he will insist upon experiences of love or submission that will either break us free from our self-sufficiency or crush us beneath it. Plurality will expose our false identities, our preferences and prejudices, our high opinions of our own gifts, and our ungodly ambitions.

Had I known all of that back then, I'm fairly certain I would have chosen car sales.

But I didn't. Instead, God used that first ministry experience to expose my heart. It happened one day when I was sitting in the other leader's office. I was arguing with him—once again—over something irrelevant and unnecessary. At one point in our conversation, he stopped, became quiet and solemn, and gently asked: “Dave, isn't this just about your pride? Isn't this just about your unwillingness to serve and humble yourself before someone who may have more experience and be better suited for this role right now?” That's when it happened.

As I write these words, they may seem like the usual questions of a verbal sparring partner. But the words of this man's mouth had an arresting effect. God suddenly entered my personal space and authorized that twofold question as if it had been spoken directly by the Holy Spirit. It was one of those rare moments—and, quite honestly, I haven't had many—where the clarity of a simple question felt like the convicting voice of God's assessment. The man's words became a sledgehammer that broke open my soul. *This was about my pride, my self-glory!* A wave of conviction crested over me. I knew he was right.

Nathan stood before me saying, “Thou art the man” (2 Sam. 12:7 KJV).

A torrent of tears welled up within me. It was a beautiful moment, but I cried ugly—like a naked soul before a holy God. My greatest need in that moment was not to find the right role; my greatest need was repentance. I needed to humble myself.

My friend—I can truly call him that now—wondered whether this was some kind of breakdown. Should he call 911? Indeed, as I went back to Scripture, God was breaking down pride, selfish ambition, lofty opinions, and self-righteous assessment, both of me and of this other leader. My problem was not physical; it was spiritual. And when God flipped on the light, it illumined the road to repentance.

As an aside, I’m the kind of Christian who believes this sort of stuff still happens. In fact, I wish it happened more often for me, and I hope the same for you. But the most amazing thing about this experience was how God adjusted my perspective. God flipped my view so that I began to see things differently. In the days that followed, I immediately recognized that my friend was the right man to lead the church. And he did.

God’s Purposes in Plurality

As we study the Scriptures, we see that a plural-leadership model is foundational for the local church. Plurality not only reflects the coequality, unity, and community expressed by the Trinity (2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 4:4–6; 1 Pet. 1:2; Jude 20–21). It not only is, as we’ve explored above, the prominent and essential feature of New Testament church polity. But it also serves the church in at least six other ways:

1. Plurality embodies and expresses the New Testament principle of interdependence and the diversity of gifts among members of Christ's body (Rom. 12:4–6; 1 Cor. 12).⁸
2. Plurality acknowledges human limitations by recognizing that no one elder or bishop can possess the full complement of gifts God intends to use to bless and build the church (1 Cor. 12:21). This approach, in fact, discourages narcissistic personalities who look to exercise unique and exclusive authority or control within a team.
3. Plurality creates a leadership structure where men must model the unity to which God calls the whole church (John 17:23; Rom. 15:5; Eph. 4:3, 13; Col. 3:14). Plurality calls forward timid leaders to share the weight of governing responsibility.
4. Plurality creates a community of care, support, and accountability that guards the calling, life, and doctrine of the leaders (1 Tim. 4:14, 16; Titus 1:6–9; James 5:16). Where plurality truly exists, pastors and elders remain appropriately engaged, loved, guided, and harnessed together.
5. Plurality provides a mechanism to deal wisely and collaboratively with the institutional necessities of the local church.⁹

8 Bill Hull writes, "Regardless of what polity conclusions one draws, the leadership structure of the local church placed authority in the hands of a small group of men, not just one man." Hull, *The Disciple-Making Pastor* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1988), 78.

9 Gordon Smith, *Institutional Intelligence: How to Build Effective Organizations* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 8, writes:

Pastors need to be encouraged to view the work of administration not as a necessary evil, a distraction, but as rather an integral part of what it means to provide congregational leadership. Indeed, if their vision for a vital commu-

6. Finally, plurality contradicts the idea of a singular genius and replaces it with what the Bible calls an “abundance of counselors” (Prov. 11:14; 24:6; see also 15:22) who collaborate, lead, and guide the church together. This isn’t simply a clever constitutional maneuver. It’s a recognition of the New Testament pattern. According to the biblical authors, the authority for the local church was given to the entire eldership, not just to one gifted leader. In other words, the responsibility inheres in the group, not the man.

The strength, unity, and integrity of this shared leadership model infuse the church with durability for its mission and care.

The strength, unity, and integrity of this shared leadership model infuse the church with durability for its mission and care. The church can’t afford to sidestep this vital issue. Plurality is God’s means of leading the church to fulfill its purpose, but it’s also a means of growing its leaders.

The Rest of the Story

As time passed, my friend realized that he was not gifted to lead our elder team in a way that would ultimately be fruitful for the church. It was another mark of his consistent humility. So the

nity of faith is going to happen, they will need to attend to the institutional dynamics of church life—the administrative, financial, personnel issues of what it means to be the church. Their theological vision for what it means to be the church will be housed within particular practices, institutional practices that embody that vision.

senior leadership role fell to me, the last man standing. When I think back, the whole thing makes me smile. Some men are born leaders, others are appointed by vote, and still others have leadership thrust upon them. For me, I suppose I'm in the thrust category—I was the only guy left. Appointment through the process of elimination! Suddenly several hundred people were waiting for twenty-nine-year-old Dave Harvey to get up and lead the next Sunday service.

But the story isn't over, because a few months later the original senior pastor returned to our staff. He took his place next to my friend, who had also been the senior pastor of our church. Somehow, in an inexplicable twist of providence, I inherited two older men, both of whom were ten years my senior and had already led our church. It seemed to me that this could easily become either a sitcom or a disaster flick—I just didn't know which. After all, these experienced guys were neither timid nor overly impressed with their new lead man. They certainly supported me, but they also had opinions, preferences, and clear ideas about how the church should be run. Somehow, we needed to find unity as a team; we needed to learn what it meant to collaborate.

For me, being the leader of this group meant thinking hard about God's point and purpose in plurality. I began asking questions like these:

- What does it mean to lead a church through a team?
- What does it mean to be a senior leader within a plurality of pastors/elders?
- How do you build a healthy plurality among a group of elders or leaders?

- How do you lead men who are older than you and have more ministry experience than you do?

Both of the other men were exceedingly patient with me, and their experience aided my training as their leader. Over time, I began to truly recognize a hidden truth about local church ministry. Sharing leadership with other men was going to achieve things I never expected. Our pursuit of plurality was neither an academic ideal nor a trendy leadership technique; nor was it merely a means for getting stuff done. Plurality was going to become an extraordinary means of grace for each of us—a grace that would deepen our experience of God, reveal our hearts in unique ways, bring clarity to our roles for service, ensure that each of us experienced genuine care, and make ministry a source of deeper delight.

My first experience of eldership plurality switched on the light bulb for me. That's when I learned that *the quality of the leadership plurality determines the health of the church*. I knew that failing to lead alongside these men would mean weaker souls and a weaker church. It would mean potentially forfeiting the mission. But succeeding with them would ensure a level of God-glorifying success in our spiritual lives that would spill over into the lives of the congregation.

And so our adventure began.

Essential to every healthy church is a biblical model of leadership. In the New Testament, church leadership is built around a team of elders working together, each bringing his own unique skills and gifts to the cause of shepherding the flock God entrusted to them. However, in many churches today the principle of plurality in leadership is often misunderstood, mistakenly applied, or completely ignored.

Dave Harvey encourages church leaders to prioritize plurality for the surprising ways that it helps churches to flourish. This book not only builds a compelling case for churches to adopt and maintain biblical elder pluralities guided by solid leadership but also supplies practical tools to help elders work together for transformation.

“Dave Harvey ensures that we understand leadership plurality and have a healthy, functioning team of elders in the local church. *The Plurality Principle* is very practical and very helpful!”

TIM CHALLIES, blogger, Challies.com

“Every once in a while you encounter a book you wish you’d read years earlier. Having inherited elder teams in three different churches, I can testify that Dave Harvey’s book would have been gold during those transitions.”

DANIEL HENDERSON, Founder and President, Strategic Renewal;
Global Director, The 6:4 Fellowship; author, *Old Paths, New Power*

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