

A Proposal for Pastoral Leadership Structure at LifePointe Church

Introduction

On August 21, 2016, we said goodbye to our most recent senior pastor. Through the 138-year history of our church, we have had 27 senior pastors (not including interim pastors), making for an average tenure of 5.1 years per pastor, with the longest stay of 17 years belonging to Dr. William P. Whittemore (1946-1963). As the elder board considered our church's history and evaluated how God brought us to the current point of transition, they determined several things.

First, the current situation did not present an urgent need to quickly find a senior pastor to handle preaching responsibilities and leadership for the staff, as God had provided capable staff to handle these tasks. When we began the transition, the preaching team included of Craig Fortunato, Wes Moore, Zack Yarbrough, and Dale Williams. Combined they bring 40 years of experience on staff at LifePointe (not including Dale's long and valuable tenure as one of our foreign missionaries).

Second, while God has used the church mightily throughout the years, there is a noticeable pattern of attendance that correlates to the coming and going of senior pastors. We see a need to consider ways to establish a consistent growth pattern not dependent upon a single personality, but instead only dependent upon the work and presence of Jesus Christ.

Third, the elder board could not find record of the church previously embarking on an intentional study of the Scriptures to understand what God's Word teaches in regard to the structure of pastoral ministry in the local church. The church had instead (understandably) relied upon the common assumption that the best plan for us was to have a senior pastor.

As the elders considered these three points, they determined that the best, most responsible step of leadership was to invest the time and energy necessary to understand what Scripture teaches in regard to the structure of pastoral leadership. What follows is the fruit of the elders' studies, and their position on this matter. We have already sought input from a number of other leaders in the church, and will continue to do so. We invite the entire church to prayerfully read this paper by exploring the Scriptures studied and consider the questions raised. Discussion will enable us to decide as a congregation (at the annual business meeting on Oct. 29th) whether or not to continue our well-established structure of senior-pastor leadership. Our aim is to lead us, as a church, in the way that will allow us to best fulfill our mission and calling. ***We hope the entire church will prayerfully join us by investigating the Scriptures and considering the key question with us.***

Key Question

How can LifePointe Church best be positioned to implement what the Bible teaches about the leadership of the church?

The Elders' Position

1. The Bible teaches that local expressions of the Church are to be led by multiple Elders

- a. There are three Biblical titles for church leaders – elder, overseer, and pastor. Elder is used most commonly, with overseer and pastor used synonymously with elder.
 - i. Elder (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2; 15:4; 15:6; 15:22-23; 16:4; 20:17, 28; 21:18; 1 Timothy 4:14; 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1, 5)
 - ii. Overseer or bishop (1 Timothy 3:1-2; Titus 1:7) - Used interchangeably with "elder" (Titus

- 1:5-7), emphasizing the leadership and direction-setting function of an elder
- iii. Pastor or shepherd (Ephesians 4:11, noun form; Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2, verb form) - Also used interchangeably with “elder,” emphasizing the function of an elder in shepherding God’s flock
- b. Except where a particular elder/overseer is mentioned by name, elders/overseers are always presented as a plurality (e.g. Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 22-23; 16:4; 20:17, 28; Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1).
- c. The model of the early church was that multiple elders were appointed in each local church, as seen in Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5, which describe the pattern of appointing elders “in every church” and “in every city.” There is no indication the plurality of elders represented leadership over a group of churches, therefore no church was led by a single elder.
- d. A plurality of elders emphasizes that Christ is the head of the church and elders are under-shepherds of the Great Shepherd. Appointing a single man as senior or lead pastor has the potential of confusing this most important hierarchy. The body has only one Head: Jesus Christ.
 - i. Christ is the head of the church (Eph. 5:23; Col. 1:18)
 - ii. Jesus is the Great Shepherd (John 10; Heb. 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:4)
 - iii. Elders are shepherds under the chief Shepherd, Jesus (1 Peter 5:1-4)

2. LifePointe’s by-laws *already* define our leadership structure as a plurality of elders. It is our goal to move from a theoretical model to one that is practically applied in alignment with Scripture.

- a. Our current structure, as defined on paper:
 - i. Elders -> Senior pastor -> Rest of staff
 - ii. There are six actions that require a congregational vote:
 1. Borrowing money
 2. Yearly budget
 3. Election and removal of senior pastor
 4. Election and removal of elders
 5. Buying/Selling land
 6. Changes to the Articles of Incorporation and the By-Laws

Other than these specific actions, the Elder Board generally acts on behalf of the Congregation.

- iii. The Elder Board and the Congregation are mentioned many times in the By-Laws.
- iv. The “Senior Pastor” is mentioned 3 times in the By-Laws:
 1. V.3.e – Election of and Removal of the Senior Pastor is one of the powers exclusive to the congregation.
 2. V.5 – The Senior Pastor shall be an ex-officio Elder during his term of service.
 3. V.19 – The Senior Pastor shall be the head of the staff of the church; The Senior Pastor reports to the Elder Board, through the Chairman of the Elder Board.
- b. Though not defined this way in the by-laws, LifePointe church (the congregation and perhaps the elder board as well) has generally looked to the Lead Pastor to be responsible for:
 - i. Vision for the whole church
 - ii. Direction for the whole church
 - iii. Essentially all preaching

- iv. Leading the staff
 - v. Establishing staff culture
 - vi. Establishing church-wide culture
 - vii. Shepherding every person
- c. Biblically speaking, the Elders are responsible for all of this in a hands-on way; there is not clear Biblical evidence for the elders to delegate most or all of these leadership functions to one vocational pastor/elder.

3. While hiring a single Senior Pastor appears to be permitted by Scripture, it is not mandated or directly described in the New Testament. It may not be beneficial to us; in fact, we see a number of potentially significant pitfalls to appointing a Senior Pastor:

- a. The elders may not, because of high respect, be candid in the decision-making process if they differ from the “senior” pastor’s viewpoint. Thus, the *Senior Pastor model* tends to enable the elders and congregation to abdicate leadership responsibility in the following ways:
 - i. The “CEO” role is borrowed from American business practice and does not reflect the terms used, or function described, in the Bible. These terms include shepherd, overseer, and elder. In the church, the Chief Shepherd is Jesus Christ (1 Peter 5:4) and the body of Christ is a living organism (Ephesians 4), not a business. Ephesians 1:22-23 shows Jesus as the head of the church, which is His body, from whom we get our nourishment (Colossians 2:19). In 1 Peter 2:25, Jesus is the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls. In Hebrews 13:17, those who lead in the church watch out for our souls, as those who must give an account. The term “Head” is only ever used for Jesus as head of the church and a husband as head of his wife. It is not used to describe any other position, including leaders in the church or other Christian organizations.
 - ii. The senior pastor position may have become an idol of sorts for believers, keeping them from relying on Jesus as the head of the church, and instead relying on a man as head of the church. Jeremiah 17:5 says “Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord.” This kind of idolatry reveals itself when the senior pastor becomes a target or scapegoat for some of the congregation, instead of the elders and congregation taking appropriate personal responsibility for the direction and work of the church.
 - iii. Primary responsibility for shepherding, leading, and training is generally placed on the shoulders of one lead man. He may delegate to others, but he alone tends to be seen as accountable. Acts 20:28 says that plural elders are to bear the responsibility to oversee and care for the flock. Ephesians 4:11-12 says that plural leaders are given by Jesus to the Church in order to equip the saints for the work of ministry.
- b. Past Senior Pastor job descriptions demonstrate this tendency to abdicate leadership of the church to one man. They have been written in such a way as to give one man more organizational power than he should have, or is helpful for LifePointe to function, as is taught in the Bible.
- c. Hiring an outside Lead or Senior Pastor means bringing in an unknown person in terms of character, vision, direction, calling, ability to establish and shape culture, and ability to disciple believers to fulfill their calling. In Scripture, Elders were appointed from within the local church; everyone knew about their life, ministry, and character, as shown by the requirements for elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. Jesus warns of the difference between a hired man and a true shepherd in John 10:12-13, and hiring from within helps avoid this potential pitfall. Hiring outside Senior Pastors tends to cause vision,

mission, and direction to switch back and forth every 6-7 years because these changes are not initiated and led by multiple elders who remain, but rather are initiated and led by one man who may turn out to be in a temporary or transient role.

- d. People in the congregation may not connect to the “style” or personality of one pastor or preacher. We view multiple voices in the pulpit (properly vetted to demonstrate the Scriptural requirements of an elder) as a strength that removes stumbling blocks to people hearing, understanding and receiving the gospel.
- e. Placing the above expectations on one man can often prove unhealthy for the pastor, his family, and ultimately unhealthy for the church. Worst-case scenarios present an increased possibility of burnout and lifelong negative impact on the children and wife of a senior pastor.

4. Risks of Plurality Model

Leadership in a plurality provides a number of challenges, as does every form of leadership. Some of these risks include:

- a. Slower decision-making
- b. Potential lack of clarity in final decisions
- c. Potential lack of agreement
- d. Requires a high level of trust within the pastoral/shepherding team
- e. Potential imbalance of gifting/skillset
- f. Potential for a power-play between leaders

First, it should be noted that many of these same risks exist with a single lead pastor.

Most of these risks can be mitigated by carefully choosing men of godly character as elders, based on the qualifications outlined in 1 Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9—being above reproach, humble, gentle, self-controlled, holy, and possessing no desire to constantly argue and seek power. These character traits form the foundation of a team that can trust one another.

While the balance of gifting and skillsets could be considered in appointing elders, the Scriptures do not place an emphasis on this. Instead, we see the 1 Timothy and Titus passages focus on character qualifications and the ability to teach. Ephesians 4:11-13 tells us that Christ gives the church pastor-teachers (elders) who are able “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” We can— and must— trust the work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit to provide the needed balance of gifting among elders. It is our role to recognize each man’s gifting, and apportion ministry accordingly.

While a plurality model may result in slower decision-making, it provides an atmosphere where accountability is increased and *better* decisions can be made. In addition to godly character, if elders are carefully chosen based on their ability to know, handle, and teach the Scriptures (Titus 1:9), then the elder team will be equipped to challenge each other on decisions that lack clarity and instead work toward bold, unambiguous decisions based on the truth of God’s Word.

5. Commonly Voiced Objections to Plurality Models

- a. **“The Moses Model is a better biblical model. Moses was a single leader placed over the people of God, so this is a solid biblical principle to use in church leadership.”**

It is problematic to compare leadership of the entire nation of Israel to the leadership of a local church. Taken to its logical conclusion, this argument leads us to a “pope” model, where one man (who is not Jesus) leads the church universal. Rather than modeling church leadership, Moses was a *Type* or foreshadowing of Christ (John 1:17; Acts 3:22-23; Hebrews 3:1-6). As Moses was the

shepherd and mediator between God and His people, so Jesus is the Great Shepherd and the Great High Priest for the church today (1 Timothy 2:5).

- b. **“The Buck Stops Here is an important leadership principle that can’t be applied in a plurality. Somebody, as in one person, has to be ultimately responsible.”**

A less attractive aspect of the sentiment that the buck must stop with a single leader at the top is that people want to know where to place the target or the pedestal. If things are going well, leaders are placed on a pedestal and heaped with praise. If things are not going well or there is disagreement with a pastor’s decisions, a target is placed on the pastor’s back and the arrows begin to fly. A plurality model exalts Christ as both positive and negative feedback is diffused among multiple leaders.

Another way to voice this concern is, “if everyone is responsible, then no one is responsible.” In a plurality, the responsibility of leadership lies squarely with the elders. In one respect, the so-called “buck” stops with the elders, plural. Good decisions and bad decisions are owned by the elders as a group. But the elders sit under the headship of Christ, so in reality, the success of the church belongs only to Christ Himself. We must trust the sovereignty of Christ in allowing the leaders he has given to the church (Eph. 4:11-13) to imperfectly lead the church.

This question reveals the vital need within a plurality model (truly, any model) for each member to have clearly defined roles and responsibilities.

- c. **“The CEO-type model is a tried and true model in the business world and this can’t be ignored when it comes to a leadership model for the church that can be successful. And, by the way, it obviously works well in many churches today.”**

The Church is not a business. While there are principles of wisdom and logic that are helpful in both the Church and the business world, It is also important to note the differences in *nature* and *purpose* that exist between the Church and businesses. The Church is described by Scripture as an organism, the very body of Christ Himself—spiritual in nature and eternal in existence. Businesses are organizations that exist within the legal framework of this world, human in nature and temporary in existence. The Church’s aim and purpose is to advance the Kingdom of God. While both the church and businesses are used by God, the ultimate aim and purpose of business is to benefit investors and provide for temporal needs of customers.

- d. **“Plural leadership is essentially leadership by committee... and we all know that committees are best at getting nothing done and avoiding responsibility.”**

The reality of a plurality of leadership model is that it will tend to function more slowly. This brings both opportunities and threats. We have received input from other churches that implement a plurality model, hearing the importance for clear lines of responsibility and a designated facilitator of discussions to drive the team forward. These will help mitigate this common weakness. While slower, this model also brings greater consistency over many decades.

6. Common Questions about the Plurality Model

- a. **Do we always need three leaders or pastors?**

No. The makeup of the leaders of the church will change over time, depending on who the elders are. The elders will be made up of a mix between vocational elders (those we have traditionally called “pastors”) and bi-vocational elders (the elders who serve in a non-paid capacity and also work in a

separate paid vocation). Depending on the need of our church at any given time, we may expand or contract the number of vocational elders. If we need more vocational elders, it will be our goal to see those roles filled by our bi-vocational elders or by other men in our congregation who are elder-qualified and who God is calling into full-time ministry as a vocational elder/pastor.

b. Who is my “pastor” for hospital visits, weddings, funerals, counseling, etc.?

If anyone has a specific need, they can contact the church office and the staff will arrange for an elder/pastor, a deacon, a staff member, or another member of the congregation to meet the need. As much as possible, it is our desire to see the members of the congregation do the work of ministering to one another and to allow the elders/pastor to do the work of equipping (Eph. 4:11-12).

c. What if one of our pastors leaves?

See the answer to the question, “Do we always need three leaders or pastors?”

d. Will we ever hire a Senior pastor?

It is not possible to predict whether a future elder board will recommend the appointment of a senior pastor. If they do, it is our hope that the role of senior pastor will be clearly defined and structured in such a way as to continue to fully support the plurality of elder leadership. In such a model, the senior pastor may have specific responsibilities in staff leadership, preaching, building vision, etc., but would not be recognized as the one, primary leader of the church.

The Elders’ Answer to the Key Question

We, the elder board, believe that LifePointe is best positioned to implement what the Bible teaches about the leadership of the church by establishing a model that emphasizes plurality. In this model, a single senior pastor is not appointed, but all elders are recognized as pastors of the church and those that we have traditionally called pastors are recognized as vocational elders serving alongside the bi-vocational elders. Pastors lead in the areas they are gifted, being recognized as the “first among equals.” No single elder is elevated in authority as head over the other elders or the church; each elder has an equal vote and voice in decisions. Each elder applies his individual gifting to corporately meet the spiritual needs of the church – preaching, visionary leadership, administration, shepherding, teaching, and etc.

The elders propose that the church move forward with a plurality of pastoral leadership structure. If approved, this means we will no longer be in an “interim” state and will not plan to search for, or hire, a new senior pastor at this time.

Therefore, the elders are considering the following motion to be brought before the congregation for a vote at the Annual Business Meeting on October 29th, 2017:

The elders move:

- *to operate as a church with a pastoral leadership team that does not include a designated senior pastor,*
- *to remove the interim status that we’ve operated under for the last year,*
- *to validate our current pastors as leaders of our church as part of our elder board, and*
- *to establish a “no senior pastor” leadership structure as an option for our church now and going forward.*

This motion does not eliminate the option of having a senior pastor in the future.