

APPENDIX 2: AN ELDERSHIP-LED CHURCH

From the beginning of its existence, Christian Fellowship in Upper Hutt has sought to be an “eldership-led” church. This was part of Hudson’s vision for the fellowship – a plurality of largely voluntary leaders who collectively nurtured the direction, shape and culture of the church.

But what do we mean by the phrase “eldership-led”? To begin with, it implies that there are other ways of structuring leadership in a local church. And there certainly are. Our intentionality in choosing to be an eldership-led church does not mean that we think it is the only way to lead a church. Rather, it is the way that CFUH has chosen to operate. It fits best our vision of who we want to be.

Fundamentally though, by “eldership-led” we mean that:

- The group of leaders in CFUH who are ultimately responsible for the church are the eldership
- This group is a team – they are a plurality of leaders, not just one person
- The mandate and authority for others to lead within CFUH comes from the eldership

This document is an attempt to put some ‘flesh’ on this term by:

- Explaining our understanding of ‘elder’
- Considering the unique leadership challenges of large churches
- Establishing some reasonable expectations of elders

The role of ‘elder’

The role of ‘eldering’ is a difficult term to define succinctly and clearly.

The New Testament uses several words, translated variously elder/presbyter, overseer, shepherd/pastor and leader, to denote those assigned to lead local groups of Jesus-followers.

However, like so many other things, the Bible is not totally clear on what the role entails. Eldership is mentioned generally in passing and the New Testament is not intended to be a manual for church leadership and structure. Furthermore, there is diversity within the early church and a variety of structures.

Having said that, all the New Testament writers acknowledge the need for leadership, and ‘the elders’ are the most identified form of local group leadership.

Furthermore, what is clear is the tone of the characteristics elders should possess – as noted by Paul (in particular) and Peter in their various letters to specific church communities and leaders. In these letters the emphasis is clearly on **character** rather than **gifting**, as the prime qualifications for elders.

Because of this, we believe that fundamental to the role of elder is seeking to model what it means to follow Jesus. Elders must lead by example (which is very different to saying that elders must ‘have it all together’!). Their commitment to a life of transformation should be noticeable.

But what do they **do**?

The words 'oversee' and 'shepherd' are most helpful in seeking to understand the role of elders. Elders take care of and are ultimately responsible for the well-being of the church and those who are part of it. They guide the people and the direction of the church.

The eldership is responsible for the big picture of the church and for nurturing, facilitating and overseeing anything that promotes its health, maturity and mission. However, they are reliant on others to lead in specific areas, though of course they will provide counsel, oversight and care for such leaders.

The challenge of large churches

By New Zealand standards, CFUH is a large church. As with all sizeable organizations, the bigger a church becomes the less it can largely rely upon informal relationships and structures to function effectively. Some degree of structure and management becomes necessary (though of course the ideal is this is kept to a minimum and always set up to serve the vision of the church, not dictate it).

It is our perception that most/nearly all large NZ churches end up opting for a different type of leadership structure to that of CFUH – one that is more Pastor-led than Eldership-led. This is, of course, a generalization and paints an either/or picture, when in reality there are often many variations. Having said that, the contrast is, for our purposes, helpful and largely true).

The pastor-led church generally appoints a single leader who acts as a kind of CEO (Chief Executive Officer), responsible for the vision, and the implementation of the vision. In many cases, the business/corporate model is almost entirely followed. Generally such CEO-type pastors are highly visible, do most of the preaching on Sundays, hire and fire the staff, and make most of the important decisions. Because of the size and complexity of the organization, it is necessary to appoint staff and they generally report directly to the Pastor and serve his vision. There is usually a body of overseers (an eldership or board), but their role is generally viewed as one of serving the Pastor's vision.

(A variation of the "Pastor-led" church is the "Staff-led" church, where there is much more of a genuine team leadership – but still within the paid staff of the church.)

We can understand and appreciate why most large churches organize themselves this way. It certainly carries a lot of advantages. For a start, it is a very efficient way of operating a large organization. There are clear lines of command, the decisions and initiatives are centralized, and the church can run a professional, well-oiled machine. Put simply, it does simplify things a great deal.

However, there are some disadvantages, some being:

- It can tend to encourage a "this is my church" mindset on the part of the pastor where the pastor's vision becomes synonymous with the church's vision
- It can easily stimulate a consumer mentality among the people – with the pastor and his team providing "religious goods and services" *for* the people.
- It can often work against a high level of ownership and involvement by the people – they become more spectators rather than active participants

- It may stifle initiative, spontaneity, creativity and Body life
- It can lead to the church becoming more of an institution than a living organism

Our purpose in highlighting some of these advantages and disadvantages is not to disparage such a model. It certainly has real strengths. But the contrast serves to explain why we have chosen to be eldership-led rather than pastor-led. (Note: being eldership-led also has some disadvantages. There is no perfect system!)

Realistic expectations

One of the disadvantages with being an eldership-led church is that the expectations on elders can be unreasonable and oppressive. It is easy to relate to elders as though they should know everything that's happening in church life, be available to everyone at all times, and be responsible for anything and everything that goes wrong!

Eldership in CFUH is essentially a voluntary role. Given that, we must be realistic about what is reasonable to expect in terms of an elder's time and energy. We believe it is realistic to expect elders to give up to 10 hours per week to the task of eldering. They fulfil this role alongside various other responsibilities such as parenting, paid employment, friendship building, other leadership responsibilities etc – in short, attempting to live out their faith in a holistic and balanced way.

Given the limited time and energy most elders are able to give, what tasks specifically are fundamental to their role, and what ones are secondary? While it's difficult to be totally definitive, as elders we are committed to the tasks of:

- Fostering the building of a culture that facilitates character development and the growth of Christian maturity
- Protecting the church from anything/anyone that might threaten its health and vitality and guarding the theological, moral and ethical integrity of the church ("watching over the flock")
- Nurturing a culture and structures that empower people to serve God and partner Him in the building of God's kingdom
- Communicating with the church family regarding direction, purpose and mission
- Appointing (and when necessary, terminating) staff and ministry leaders, and facilitating their effectiveness
- Resolving (preferably just facilitating the resolving of) the many issues that prevent progress
- Prayer, anointing with oil, giving advice/counsel (as opposed to counselling and/or pastoral care)
- Overseeing finances and their allocation.

Areas of responsibility **not** fundamental to eldering include:

- Administration/ the office
- management of Lane Park
- day-to-day finances
- pastoral care
- organization of Sunday morning meetings
- leadership of specific ministries within the life of CFUH
- leadership of specific mission groups

To express it another way, eldership is about oversight and governance, rather than more hands-on and up-front leadership. While some elders may also choose to carry such roles, they are not specifically part of the eldership task.

For example: Elder A may have a particular passion, gifting and time available for leading women's ministry. If they are appointed to lead such a ministry they do so not because they are an elder, but because they are recognized as the right leader for the role. They undertake this role not as part of their eldering commitment, but as part of their commitment to serve the body as a leader in this particular area.

Other points of clarification

Elders who are gifted and available, may take on roles that are not core to eldering – such as pastoral care, preaching, administration, leadership of a ministry etc. However, we will seek to recognize these roles as distinct from their core function as an elder.

It is possible, though not mandatory, that in time, one or more elders may also carry a part or fulltime staff role within CFUH. If and when this happens, the same distinction will be made between their roles as elder and staff.