

OVERSEERS @ ST MARK'S A THEOLOGICAL EXPLANATION

Introduction

The following is offered as an explanation for the Overseers leadership structure at St Mark's Northbridge. It is intended that this document will help congregation members understand the purpose and role of the Overseers teams, and it is envisaged that it might be especially useful to those joining St Mark's for the first time. This statement represents the shared and unanimous thinking of the Overseers at the time of writing, but it is also the fruit of many years of thinking, discussing, and reflecting on the Scriptures. Here we give a theological account of the Overseers structure under four headings: plurality, function, appointment, and accountability.

1. Plurality

As we read the New Testament it seems clear that the early churches operated with teams of elders rather than solo pastors. In Acts 20 we discover that in Ephesus an eldership group was providing leadership to the fledgling congregation, and Paul earnestly pleads with these overseers to take their responsibility seriously- their responsibility to keep watch over the flock (Acts 20:17-35). When Paul writes to the Philippian church he addresses his letter to the holy people in the church at Philippi together with the overseers and deacons (Philippians 1:1). When Paul writes to the Thessalonians he refers to a group of leaders who care for the believers in the Lord (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13). But, in particular, it's when we get to Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus that we find our best insight into how Paul was seeking to establish the longer-term leadership patterns for the first century churches. Paul speaks in 1 Timothy of the 'elders who direct the affairs of the church' (1 Timothy 5:17)- clearly a group of people exercising a responsibility that was distinct from the role Timothy played as a "visiting leader". Perhaps most significantly there's the opening of Paul's letter to Titus. We read in 1:5: 'The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.'

Down through church history, many denominations have recognised this Biblical precedent for a plurality of overseers. Admittedly, Anglicanism has not been strong on it, although at various times in our history Parish Councils have perhaps operated in this way. Yet the Biblical case seems strong. The New Testament doesn't seem to expect at any point that churches would be governed by a Rector, minister, or pastor in whom rested singular authority. Instead, the New Testament seems to expect churches to be led by a group of overseers.

In our particular (Anglican) set-up, we seek to apply this Biblical model by having a group of mature and well-respected leaders from amongst us shouldering the load of oversight together. Their responsibility is to pray together, search the Scriptures together, decide things together, and pastor people in a cooperative way. The overseers are not simply a support or advisory group for the Rector (Senior Pastor), but, as fellow-elders with him, they share equally in authority even though

their roles are different. So whereas traditionally in Anglican churches the Rector has exercised a singular and sole authority, at St Mark's our Rector has chosen to share his delegated authority with others (thereby exercising the freedom granted by the Diocese in determining leadership structures).

Of course, whenever the New Testament speaks of the authority leaders are given by God in the church, its unwavering expectation is that this authority will be exercised as the Lord Jesus himself exercised his- in humble service of others. So whilst our overseers have real authority, we understand ourselves not to be "wielding power" over the church but "responsible to serve" the church. No other kind of authority is worthy of Christ.

We consider the Rector to be one of the overseers, although obviously with a unique role. We recognise that the Rector has training, skills, and experience which enable him to play a particularly visible role as a congregational leader, especially in pastoral care and teaching. We also recognise that he has a unique role as a pastor to and leader of the other overseers. By the same token, the un-paid overseers have a unique role in providing special support and special accountability to the Rector. Nevertheless, we do expect all the overseers to share an equal concern and responsibility for the oversight of the church. The "buck stops" with a group more than with an individual.

The Bible uses the term "overseers" and the term "elders" in a similar way but we have chosen to use the term "overseers" because we believe it better expresses the role of these congregational leaders.

2. Function

We see our role as overseers to provide leadership to the congregation in holiness of life, in prayerful shepherding, in providing for the faithful teaching of the Scriptures, in the appointment of leaders, and in decision-making that affects the direction, culture, and ministries of the church.

We are convinced that modelling the Christian life and conduct is primary in the function of the overseers. In fact, we are convinced that godly modelling is one of the fundamental ways God grows people in Christ-likeness in the church (see Titus 2:7-8, 1 Peter 5:2-3). But he also grows people through the ministry of the word and prayer, so these are crucial priorities for church leaders as well (see Acts 6:4, Acts 20:32, 2 Timothy 4:1-5, Titus 1:9). In 1 Timothy 4, Paul brings these priorities together in one of the clearest summaries of eldership responsibilities anywhere in the New Testament (especially 1 Timothy 4:11-16). There he speaks of setting an example 'in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity', but also of the need to be devoted to the 'public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching'. His final words in that chapter are these: 'Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.'

When it comes to decision-making we see God's wisdom in establishing this kind of leadership plurality, for there is great benefit in decisions being made and directions being agreed when there are multiple minds and voices around the table. One of the great weaknesses in those churches where decisions are made just by one individual, or even just by a group of staff (where volunteer/lay leaders are not involved), is that often all the angles aren't really considered and there are not enough perspectives brought to bear. The decision-making process is undermined by too much

homogeneity. But good decision-making and direction-setting is often the fruit of diverse opinions. This is also the key reason why the St Mark's overseers teams have been in the habit of consulting on issues with others too, and especially with the wider staff team. This ensures that we hear lots of wise voices (both male and female).

When it comes to pastoral care we also see God's wisdom in the load being shared. Pastoring the congregations is tiring and taxing work. It can also be very lonely. Having others to share in the shepherding of people is a great encouragement and help to the pastoral staff. Likewise, the pastoral staff, by virtue of being the paid employees of the church, are able to serve the overseers by doing the lion's share of the pastoral work.

Whilst the overseers will seek to make all major decisions about the life of the congregations together, we also want to avoid slowing down ministry in any way by unnecessary preoccupation with issues of secondary importance. We therefore expect other paid and lay leaders (and especially the paid staff) to make many day to day decisions for the smooth running of the church, and other such decisions as are delegated to leaders by the overseers.

When the overseers teams meet, our key objectives are to pray, to read and reflect humbly on the Scriptures, to encourage each other and keep each other accountable for godly living, and to discuss matters of importance with courageous and loving honesty for the good of the church and the honour of Jesus.

3. Appointment

3.1 Character

When it comes to qualifications for appointment as an overseer, by far the most important consideration is Christian character. Here we observe what key passages like 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 explicitly state and emphasise. Moreover, what's most striking about these lists is that there is very little comment made about the elder's leadership ability. By contrast there is a lot of attention given to the person's character and way of life. That is, a person does not make a good potential overseer primarily because of their gifts, or skills, or experience, or training, or charisma. Instead, a person makes a good potential overseer if they are above reproach, known for their godliness and integrity, and full of humility and spiritual maturity. This underlines that their primary role is not making decisions, or fulfilling certain other functions. Their primary role is to model the Christian life. Above all else, they should be a group to whom the congregation can look (and the world outside too) to see what the godly life of following Jesus is like. Indeed, that is why there can be no controversial selections of people to be overseers. Rather, those chosen should be seen, from a character point of view, as the "obvious choices". Those appointed should be those who already have the respect and trust of the congregations. They should always be men of outstanding reputation both within and beyond the fellowship.

3.2 Competence

Those chosen to be overseers should also be fit for the task. Each overseer must be 'able to teach' (1 Timothy 3:2) which means that they will have a clear and strong grasp of the Biblical message such that they can encourage others in sound doctrine and stand against what is false or distracting

(Titus 1:9, 1 Timothy 4:6-7, 2 Timothy 4:1-5). Each overseer must also have demonstrated (especially within their own family) that they have the ability to manage God's household (1 Timothy 3:4-5, Titus 1:7).

3.3 Gender

Of less importance is the question of gender. Nevertheless, when we speak above about the church being led by a group of mature and well-respected leaders, we actually mean a group of mature and well-respected men. This is not because we have any kind of prejudice against women. Instead, we have the highest regard for the women of our church as fellow image-bearers, as co-sharers in the grace of Christ, and as equally gifted and wise leaders. Rather, we have a male-only team of overseers at St Mark's because we are persuaded that this is what the New Testament expects. We feel constrained in our consciences to take this position purely because of what the Bible teaches (and for no other reason). The lists of eldership qualifications we're given in the letters to Timothy and Titus seem to assume this (eg. 1 Timothy 3:2-7; Titus 1:6-9). But, in particular, we find in 1 Timothy 2 that Paul mounts a case for men and women conducting themselves differently in the church, not just because that was the custom of the day, but because God has stitched into the fabric of life from the beginning a distinction between men and women (1 Timothy 2:8-15; see also 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, Ephesians 5:21-33). It's not a distinction in value, or in giftedness. Rather it's a distinction in role. As such, Paul instructs Timothy to ensure that there are some things in the church that only men do. One of those things is exercising certain kinds of authority. Indeed, it's only because the role of overseer carries with it certain authority that the question of gender is even an issue.

As has been the case throughout most of church history, in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney (of which we're a part) it is the received tradition and continuing policy of the churches that the overseers are only male. That is why only men are invited into the role of Rector. However, whilst we seek to be faithful to that policy, we have also created a "plurality" of overseers (rather than relying on a single Rector as "overseer").

We recognise, of course, that male-only eldership is a controversial dimension of our approach- in the world, no doubt, but even in the church (and we do not in any way "require" everyone at church to share our convictions about this). This is not the place for a fuller and more careful discussion of the gender questions we've raised here. But we are very happy to discuss these issues in greater length with anyone who would like to at any time (including discussing exegesis/interpretation of particular Biblical passages referred to above).

The Bible makes a distinction between the roles of men and women which we think has to do with preserving patterns of family life which please God. Thus, the role of overseers is a role the Bible reserves for godly men. So, our conviction is that we should stay close to the Bible on this question, as with every other question.

3.4 Term

It is our expectation that overseers will not be appointed for a fixed term of service. Rather, in keeping with what the New Testament seems to assume about elders, we see overseers serving in this role over the longer term, providing, over time, an established model of Christian maturity,

and stable leadership for the ministry of St Mark's. We thus believe it's important that the Rector has no authority on his own to remove an overseer from his role. Any decision about an overseer stepping down or being removed should always be made collectively by the relevant overseers team. Whilst we anticipate that there may be changes in the overseers teams over time, the ideal we aim for is leadership continuity in the long term. We acknowledge that there are always risks associated with such long leadership (risks which can be mitigated through careful accountability-see below); but we are persuaded that the benefits to the church in this far outweigh the risks.

3.5 Process

We are committed to all overseers appointments being made by the combined overseers team as a whole. This would be in the event that an overseer needs to be replaced, or in the event that we decide it would enhance the church's oversight to add to the team. However, we will only appoint a new overseer if a suitable person is available and willing, and only after extensive consultation with the person concerned and with others from the congregation who can comment on the individual's suitability. All appointments will also need to be ratified by the Parish Council of St Mark's (which is an annually elected governance team).

4. Accountability

4.1 Mutual Accountability

A weakness we've observed in churches where one individual carries final authority is the possibility of leadership being exercised with little to no real accountability- either for their decisions, or their way of life. We don't want that to be the case at St Mark's. It's vitally important for all leaders that they are surrounded by people who will challenge their thinking, correct them where they need to be corrected, and argue with them when disagreement will be productive and lead to greater wisdom.

The last thing we want at St Mark's is a leadership group filled with people simply acting as "yes men" in relation to the Rector (or to any strong or prominent leader). Therefore, as overseers we encourage each other to speak up and to share conflicting perspectives where necessary. As a result, our experience has been that we have often made decisions that we would not have made as individuals. We are all well aware of the limits of our own wisdom, and we are persuaded through experience that our leadership is better for our team-work in it.

Moreover, this more organic mutual accountability is also enhanced by a regular and more formal practice of bravely reviewing each other's lives and leadership, incorporating input from those who know us best (eg. wives/close friends) as well.

4.2 Accountability to Other Church Leaders

Our team of overseers acknowledges the authority exercised in our Anglican system by the Rector of the Parish and by the elected Parish Council. We exercise our ministry of oversight in good fellowship with those structures of leadership prescribed by the ordinances of our Diocese.

To this end the Parish Council and the overseers operate under a formal agreement which stipulates a role for Parish Council in the appointment of overseers (see above), which articulates

the difference in role between the two groups (with the Parish Council focussed on governance and resource management, and the overseers focussed on ministry), and which spells out a process by which either group might initiate discussion of relevant issues and communicate with each other as needed. Copies of the document outlining this formal agreement are available on request.

4.3 Accountability to the Whole Church

Whilst the Parish Council has a role in providing accountability to the overseers teams, there is nevertheless a real sense in which the overseers teams are accountable to the church as a whole. Since the purity and health of the church is the responsibility of the whole body, the overseers welcome scrutiny of their lives, leadership, and decision-making by all members of St Mark's. To that end we seek to act transparently, and listen to and weigh any criticism humbly. If at any time a congregation member develops a concern about the character or conduct of an overseer we would expect that they would raise that concern with an appropriate person (eg. overseer, member of the pastoral staff, Church Warden).

4.4 Accountability to God

Ultimately, however, the St Mark's overseers are accountable to God. The apostle James warns that 'we who teach will be judged more strictly' (James 3:1). This is because, as the apostle Paul reminds the Ephesian elders, the sheep we shepherd are the 'church of God, which he bought with his own blood' (Acts 20:28). This is also why Paul can speak of the rigorous judgement to which Christian leaders especially will be exposed in the end- a judgement where the quality of their work will be tested by God's holy fire (1 Corinthians 3:13). These are sobering realities which rest heavily on the shoulders of every St Mark's overseer.

For this reason, the thinking we have articulated here is, as with all else, worked out in submission to God's authority in the Bible.

It is also for this reason, that whilst we are called overseers, we nevertheless acknowledge the sovereign oversight of God in our church, as in the world, and the sovereignty of his son the Lord Jesus- the shepherd and overseer of all our souls (1 Peter 2:25).

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