

V. ELDERS

The principle of eldership serves as a framework for understanding how leadership is selected and recognized within the church. Leadership should be chosen from among those whose experience, moral life, and abilities are manifest in such a way that the hand of God is evidenced upon them. Such leadership is needed in every dimension of the church's life. This principle applies to those who will provide leadership in "prayer and word" (bishop) and those who provide care for the temporal needs of the church (deacon). It should not, however, be misconstrued that eldership always requires a license within the church. Some will function as elders because of their quality of life and not because of a license in the church. At the same time, it is apparent that those who serve in leadership roles should possess eldership character.

The study presented at the 89th International Assembly, 1996, affirmed the understandings of elders as passed in two previous Assemblies. In the 18th International Assembly, 1923, it was stated, "We recommend that the general overseer's recommendation, as to making all bishops and deacons elders, be accepted by the Assembly . . ." (*18th Assembly Minutes*, 1923, p. 24). The 78th Assembly of 1983 concluded: "We recommend that the minimum age for a bishop hereafter be set at age 30" (*78th Assembly Minutes*, 1983, p. 137).

A. Deacons/Deaconesses (as applicable)

Both biblical and historical records concerning the activities of deacons confirm they served alongside and in harmony with the bishop or pastor as servants to the congregation. They were assigned responsibilities which contributed to the spiritual and social well-being of the congregation. This office functions to . . .

1. complement the office of the bishop or pastor (Acts 6:1-7);
2. serve more in the temporal needs of God's work, such as coordinating relief to the poor and needy (Acts 6:1-5);
3. conduct church business affairs and conferences when officially authorized by the pastor or overseer;
4. teach and defend the Gospel of Jesus Christ; and
5. baptize, and administer the Lord's supper and the washing of the saints' feet.

They constitute a vital part of local church government (Philippians 1:1). The qualifications of a deacon are similar to a bishop, except for the requirements of age and the teaching and direct oversight of the flock. Their qualifications are taken from the scriptural references of 1 Timothy 3:8–12 and Acts 6:4 (as a prototype). The New Testament account regarding the office and function of deacons/deaconesses gives very clear understanding that their activities are generally confined to and carried out in the local congregation. This ministry is local rather than translocal.

Since deacons/deaconesses function in the arena of a local church, they are to be acknowledged (set forth) by the congregation and with pastoral recommendation. They serve first as trial deacons/deaconesses for a period of not less than one year, after which time they are to be recommended to the national/regional/state overseer of their respective area for approval and licensure. Because their service and ministry is based more within a local area, there is no need for them to be licensed through the International Offices.

Deacons/deaconesses are ordained at the local church or national/regional/state convention by the overseer, pastor (if a bishop), and other deacons of their local church. The deacon/deaconess should report quarterly to his/her local conference and annually to the national/regional/state overseer. Should discipline become necessary, the local church would work in conjunction with the national/regional/ state office to address the situation. When moving to a new location, the eldership status of a deacon would continue but would need reaffirmation from the new congregation after an appropriate time. The deacon/deaconess should never attempt to transact business matters, etc. over the desire of the pastor or the local church, nor usurp the authority of the pastor or local church (*66th Assembly Minutes*, 1971, p. 44).