
SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST®

ELDER'S
HANDBOOK

PRODUCT SAMPLE

SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST®
ELDER'S HANDBOOK

Prepared and Published by The Ministerial Association
The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists®
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Silver Spring, Maryland 20904, USA
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References to the Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual are from the 18th edition revised in 2010.

References to the General Conference Working Policy are from the 2009-2010 edition.

References to the Minister's Handbook are from the 2009 edition.

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ISBN 0-9634968-2-4

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The work of elders is unique among church leaders. As overseers, they are responsible for everything that is related to the work of the church. As such, the training and directing of elders fall under the Ministerial Association. Because elders work closely with people in all aspects of the church, this handbook includes material from representatives of each department.

THE MANUSCRIPT

To the elders in their ministry to the church, the General Conference Ministerial Association leadership and their counterparts in the world divisions present this updated edition of the 1997 Elder's Handbook. Because this handbook is to be used worldwide, it was sent to General Conference departmental directors, elders, pastors, and administrators for review, input, and suggestions. In consideration of elders in different parts of the world serving in congregations of varying sizes, these basic principles should be applied contextually and locally.

The principal writing was done by Gary Patterson, with the assistance of Rae Patterson. Erika Miike prepared the layout and design. The final approval was made by the in-house Ministerial Association staff at the General Conference office: Jonas Arrais, Robert Costa, Alfredo Garcia-Marenko, Willie E. Hucks, Anthony Kent, Derek Morris, Jerry Page, Janet Page, and Cathy Payne.

Our heartfelt appreciation goes to these and many others who made this handbook possible.

PREFACE

The work of elders in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is extensive and varied. Some churches are large, requiring leadership over thousands of members. Other churches are small, serving a few members, who are sometimes scattered over a large area. In such churches, pastoral services are usually limited, and the elder provides not only leadership, but, in consultation with the pastor, also arranges for regular preaching responsibilities. This handbook has been prepared to assist elders in understanding their calling, and to train them in their leadership role in the church.

“Occasionally no one possesses the experience and qualifications to serve as an elder. Under such circumstances the church should elect a person to be known as ‘leader.’ In the absence of the pastor or a conference-assigned pastor, the leader is responsible for the services of the church, including business meetings. The leader must either conduct these or arrange for someone else to do so” (*Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, p. 75). This handbook is for their use as well.

Because the Adventist Church is a worldwide organization of ethnic and cultural diversity, congregational practices vary. This handbook does not prescribe methods or procedures for all elders everywhere to follow. Rather, emphasis is given to the function of the elder according to biblical principles of organization and leadership, which may be adapted anywhere in the world.

This handbook is part of a set that includes the *Minister’s Handbook* and the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*. These

should be considered companion volumes, and church elders should have access to all three. The *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, voted by the world church in General Conference Session, takes precedence over this or any other handbook prepared for use in the local congregation.

When referencing the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* in this handbook, the page numbers refer to the 2010 edition. While page numbers vary from one edition to another, topics are found in the index.

The terms “minister” and “pastor” are frequently used interchangeably. For clarity, the term “pastor” is used in this handbook except when quoting material from other sources.

Because the work of the church elder and pastor are inextricably entwined both in Scripture and in practice, this handbook closely parallels the *Minister’s Handbook*. The *Minister’s Handbook* would be helpful to the elder who seeks greater understanding of the topics addressed in this handbook.

It is intended that pastors and ministerial secretaries will use this handbook when training elders. Such training stems from a long line of ministry, beginning with the Apostle Paul’s instructions to the elders in Ephesus to “take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28).

General Conference Ministerial Association

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CHAPTER 1

THE CHURCH AND ITS ORGANIZATION

THE EARLY CHURCH MODEL OF LEADERSHIP

Elders in the Church. Scripture calls for the service of elders. From the beginning of the New Testament church, leadership in the community of believers was accorded to “the apostles and elders” (Acts 15:22), and they appointed and ordained elders in every church (Acts 14:23). With this practice as a model, such structure has continued in various forms since the beginning of the Christian era.

At the outset, the disciples not only spread the gospel, but also oversaw the development of the Christian community. But soon, with hundreds then thousands of new believers, a structure was needed for the growing church. Deacons were appointed (Acts 6) to assist in the care of members; then elders were selected to give leadership to the ever-expanding church. And as the original apostles passed away, the elders assumed their leadership roles.

In this tradition of the early church, the *Elder's Handbook* seeks to provide guidance and clarity to the role of elders in the Seventh-day Adventist community of believers. To do so, certain definitions need to be clarified particularly the definition of “church” and “elder,” as they are understood and used in this handbook.

DEFINITIONS

Elders. While the basic definition of “elder” refers to one’s age, in both New Testament usage and current understanding, the word has an additional meaning of “leader” or “ambassador.” Though elders

are generally mature and experienced, it does not mean that only older individuals can serve as elders. The instruction to “appoint elders in every city” (Titus 1:5) indicates that the oldest member is not necessarily the elder: Otherwise, the office would be filled automatically, thus rendering appointment unnecessary.

Even as a young man, Timothy was recognized as a leader in the early Christian community, and it was Apostle Paul who said, “Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers” (1 Tim. 4:12). Indeed, elders are called to this kind of exemplary leadership—regardless of their age.

Church. Since the many uses of the word “church” come with much potential for misunderstanding, it is important to define its usage in this handbook. A church often refers to location, such as a building or property. It may also mean a company of believers or members, or may be used when referring to the divine worship hour. At times it is used to identify and differentiate between denominations, as in the name, Seventh-day Adventist Church.

These usages tend to see the church as something we establish, belong to, operate, or own. And while in this handbook we will primarily address the organization and operation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as an institution, we always remember that God creates and calls the church into existence. A literal translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*, from which the word “church” is translated, is “the called out.”

We do not form or own the church. The church is what occurs when individuals accept the gospel call—the good news of Christ’s saving grace—to be part of God’s kingdom and “proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). It is not a call for a group of people to leave one organization and join another. It is a call for an individual to move from a lost

condition in a fallen world to salvation and righteousness in Christ. And those who accept it will naturally join together as part of God's people. We do not form the church by our individual or corporate will; we become the church by accepting the call of God.

Church is a New Testament concept. The word does not occur in the Old Testament. But this does not mean that people in Old Testament times were not part of God's kingdom: Israel was God's chosen nation, His people who were to receive His saving grace and share the knowledge of His love to all nations and people. Worship and fellowship practices found in the Old Testament significantly influenced the New Testament church. Yet the establishment of the New Testament church is unique in salvation history, and is not an extension of Judaism.

Scripture uses the word "church" in two ways. When used in the broad and general sense, it refers to God's people at all times and in all places. Though we may not be able to see or tally its number, the "invisible church" does exist. God alone knows those who are written in His "Book of Life" (Rev. 21:27). *Church* also refers to specific assemblies in cities such as Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2), Galatia (Gal. 1:2), and the seven churches in Asia (Rev. 3-4). Both the broad and specific understandings of the church will be discussed in this handbook. However, since elders are first of all leaders in local Seventh-day Adventist congregations, the specific meaning of *church* will be most frequently intended.

Purpose of the Church. The purpose of the church is to enable its members to fulfill the gospel commission and "make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:19, NIV). Structure, policies, and institutions all have vital roles to play in the organization of the church, but they are not the church's mission. When the church becomes centered on the preservation of the institution, diverted by arguments about

policy and structure rather than focused on giving the good news of salvation, we know that we have lost the original intent of the organization. The church does not exist for the sake of itself as an institution, but for the sake of its people and its mission.

God is deeply committed to the success of His church, in spite of its imperfections. Christ “loved the church and gave Himself for her” (Eph. 5:25). Of this divine commitment to the church, Ellen White observes, “I testify to my brethren and sisters that the church of Christ, enfeebled and defective as it may be, is the only object on earth on which He bestows His supreme regard” (*Selected Messages, vol. 2*, p. 396). The church is an organism to which Christ Himself gives spiritual life. Therefore, it cannot be defined in merely human terms. Thus, it is very important to see the church as Christ-centered and people-oriented.

A disciplined Christian life grows from experiencing God’s saving grace. The church exists for the sake of people. Every doctrine must be presented not only on the basis of its truth, but also on the basis of how it helps people become Christlike. Thus truth and doctrine become significant and important as they help people grow in grace.

A church is not a museum of relics, but a workshop where ongoing development is in progress. In a museum, items finished long ago are lined up on display. But in a workshop, some items are in the beginning stages, some half-done, and some nearing completion. Changes are taking place. Things are happening. Likewise, it should be expected to see church members in every stage of Christian development.

Taking the mission of the church seriously places tension between the need to separate from the world and the responsibility to reach out to it. A church focusing on either one of these objectives to the exclusion of the other will be out of balance. While we are individually called to be separate from this sinful world, the mission of the church calls for us to reach out lovingly to serve and save the

world. The church must ever be “in the world, but not of the world” (John 17:14-16).

A church can easily become distracted from its mission by becoming absorbed in itself, its meetings, its committees, and its buildings. The mission-driven church, on the other hand, looks at everything it does from the perspective of reaching out to and befriending those in their community. Every church member is to be a minister. “We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20, NIV).

THE NEED FOR STRUCTURE

The call of the gospel is an intensely personal and individual matter, yet it requires corporate responsibility and community. While we are not saved as a company of believers, we find strength and security in the fellowship of a Christian community. We are admonished to “consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together” (Heb. 10:24, 25). We are intended to band together as Christians for the mutual benefit it provides. Clearly, the strength of what we can do together is greater than our individual efforts.

Christ said to his disciples, “Do not be called ‘Rabbi’; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matt. 23:8, 11). The relationship between leaders and those being led is not that of master and servant, but co-workers in the Kingdom of God. Leadership is necessary and should be respected, but church leaders are to be servant leaders. There should be mutual respect in Christ’s church among those of different race, tribe, caste, or gender. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28, NIV).

In his treatise to the Corinthians on church organization and leadership, Paul describes spiritual gifts as being given to the church through its members: “There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all” (1 Cor. 12:5-7). Gifts of the spirit that enable the leadership of elders are not given for the individual, but for the church through their service.

Biblical models of organization. This handbook specifically addresses the organizational and structural aspect of the church. Where God is at work, there is organization; and the church is no exception. “System and order are manifest in all the works of God throughout the universe” (*Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 26).

Israel’s organization as directed by God was precise and detailed. In their march through the wilderness, they went in “divisions” (Num. 10:28, NIV). There were twelve tribes with a prince over each and they were further divided into groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens (Exod. 18:21, 22). Each tribe had its assigned position, both in the camp and when traveling.

One of the most helpful models of the church comes from Paul’s oft-repeated illustration of the body. The human body has a head, arms, legs, as well as vital internal organs (1 Cor. 12:12-28). Although these parts vary tremendously in appearance, placement, and function, the whole body is dependent on each part performing its task properly. The church is referred to as the body of Christ and it operates the same way.

Members from a multitude of racial and social backgrounds are very different from one another. But all become part of one body “for by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free” (1 Cor. 12:13). Just as in the

human body, where the function of each part is vital to the health of the person, in the body of Christ the participation of members is essential to the health of the church. When every part functions well, the church thrives.

The head directs the body and the head of the church body is Christ (Col. 1:18). The body is an extension of His will; it does on earth what He would do if He were here. Through the Holy Spirit, He equips the church with spiritual gifts to do His work. These gifts are to be refined and developed in the service of the church body. Every member is called by the Holy Spirit to a particular ministry, and empowered by the Spirit to perform this ministry successfully.

The early church is an example of how an organization gradually grows and develops as needs arise. The first organizational group consisted of the apostle's council in Jerusalem (Acts 6:2). As the Christian community and its needs expanded, additional leaders were chosen to take responsibility for its developing work. Neighboring churches grouped together in similar fashion, as indicated in Paul's letter to "the churches in Galatia" (Gal. 1:2). The Seventh-day Adventist Church has sought to pattern its organization after that of the New Testament church.

Seventh-day Adventist organization. The pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church questioned the belief systems and structures of the denominations from which they had come and sought to bring reformation to these churches. And when their attempts were rebuffed, the idea to organize a new denomination was met with reluctance, lest it become like the ones they had left. But the necessity of organization soon outweighed the skepticism. "As our numbers increased, it was evident that without some form of organization there would be great confusion, and the work would not be carried forward successfully. To provide for the support of the ministry, for carrying the work in

new fields, for protecting both the churches and the ministry from unworthy members, for holding church property, for the publication of the truth through the press, and for many other objects, organization was indispensable" (*Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 26).

While the Gospel Commission (Matt. 28:19, 20) is not the exclusive purview of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, we have a unique responsibility to take the Three Angels' Message "to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people" (Rev. 14:6). Thus, the Seventh-day Adventist Church must always maintain an emphasis on worldwide mission. Focusing only on local activities to the exclusion of world mission is contrary to the foundation and principles of the Church.

This worldview provides an organizational challenge to local elders and their churches. The task is enormous, so the organization must be efficient. The task is global, so there must be delegation of authority. The task is multi-national and multi-cultural, so the organization must be flexible.

Forms of church governance. Churches generally fall into four types of governance:

1. *Papal*, where the Pope has supreme authority and is regarded as the sole, infallible voice of authority on matters of doctrine and policy.

2. *Episcopal*, where the authority for process and theological interpretation rests with church bishops.

3. *Congregational*, where authority for all action and interpretation of Scripture resides with the local congregation.

4. *Representative*, where basic authority rests with church members, but responsibility for doctrinal development, planning, and coordination of the world church is delegated to governance by constituent groups representing the constituents by whom they were appointed. Seventh-day Adventists follow this representative form of church governance.

The work of each constituent group is reviewed at periodic “sessions.” At these sessions, reports are given, leaders held accountable, and new leadership chosen when necessary. Delegates to these sessions are typically chosen by the entity at the level below the one being reviewed. For example, before a local conference session, each local church chooses delegates from its congregation to represent it at the session.

Constituent organizations. There are four types of constituent organizations in the Seventh-day Adventist church:

1. *The local church*, which is an organized body of individual believers. When a group of believers has grown in membership and spiritual maturity; demonstrates spiritual gifts sufficient to provide for its own nurture and witness in its community; and has sufficient finances to sustain itself, it may apply to the local mission or conference for status as an organized local church. Until then, the group, in counsel with the district pastor or representative of the conference/mission may form a company. When the local conference or mission is satisfied that such a company is ready to assume the status of an organized church, a conference or mission representative will call the company together and officiate the organization of a local church.

2. *The local conference/field/mission*, which is an organized body of churches within a given territory.

3. *The union conference/mission*, which is a body of conferences or fields within a larger territory.

4. *The General Conference*, which is the largest unit of organization, headquartered in Silver Spring, Maryland, USA. The world church is organizationally broken up into divisions, which are designated geographical areas that serve in administrative and leadership capacities for the General Conference.

CONCLUSION

The ministry of elders is vital to the ongoing growth and development of the church. Elders today stand in a long line of dedicated servants of the church from its earliest days. For the most part, elders serve in a fellowship that goes unnoticed because the honor of this position is in service, not recognition. Through unique leadership gifts from the Holy Spirit, elders bless the church and make it the active and effective people of God.

“The elders who are among you I exhort, . . . Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away” (1 Peter 5:1-4).

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