Pastors and Elders
CARING FOR THE CHURCH AND ONE ANOTHER

Timothy J. Mech

CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE • SAINT LOUIS
Introduction 7
1. Who’s in Charge? 10
2. Elders at Work 24
3. Building Trust between Pastors and Elders 42
4. The Challenge for the Church in a Self-Absorbed Culture 54
5. Working within One’s Vocation 66
6. Accountable to God through One Another 76
Conclusion 82
Appendix A: The Green Sheet 84
Appendix B: Sample Letters 85
Appendix C: Sample Elder Agenda 90
Appendix D: Sample Pastor Report 91
Appendix E: Sample Job Description—Board of Elders 92
Appendix F: The Five Most Pressing Needs of Pastors 95
A resource was needed to assist pastors and elders in caring for the Church and one another. While at first reluctant to take on such a task, the current state of many relationships between pastors and elders and their congregations led me to recognize the great need for such a resource. On the one hand, I have observed pastors become so frustrated with their elders and congregations that they have contemplated pursuing another vocation or have actually resigned. Others have been forced out. On the other hand, pastors who refuse to be held accountable to the congregational leadership have intimidated many elders. This has led, in some cases, to people leaving their home congregation or even the Church. Other issues include elders simply not knowing what to do or not having the tools to carry out the task of assisting the pastor in caring for the congregation. In addition, strengths and weaknesses of pastors and elders have not been identified so that in some areas of ministry the pastor or elder has been set up to fail. Instead of using the gifts of a person’s particular vocation, the pastor or elder has been asked to do something that he is not trained or comfortable doing. On top of that, both pastors and elders are given the very difficult task of addressing members of the congregation, who are bombarded by and submerged into a self-absorbed culture. Pastors and elders are at times perceived as barriers to people doing and getting what they want. A pastor or elder call on a member of a congregation is often not welcomed by parishioners, especially those who are inactive or who are involved in something contrary to the Word of God.

I’ve been a Lutheran pastor for the past twenty-one years. My first call was to a small congregation with an average Sunday attendance of around forty-five people. I currently serve a large congregation of over 1,600 members with a school (3-year-olds through eighth grade) of 155 students. I’ve worked
Pastors and Elders: **Caring for the Church and One Another**

with elders on issues as diverse as helping a struggling congregation survive a scandal to personnel issues that led to a church worker being removed from office through a voter’s assembly. Successful resolutions were reached in both cases because of a relationship of trust between the pastor and elders. The church worker remains a faithful member of the congregation, and my previous congregation not only survives but continues to thrive on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Through these experiences and others, I’ve learned the value of a trusting and respectful relationship with elders. Through the years we have encouraged, taught, admonished, confided in, and forgiven one another. The positive relationships that I have had with elders were one of the reasons I was asked to write this book.

*Pastors and Elders* will address the issues of who is in charge in the Church, what elders do, trust between elders and pastors, dealing with a self-absorbed culture, working within one’s vocation, and how pastors and elders can hold one another accountable to God. This book is also intended to be used as a training guide in the monthly board of elders meetings. Discussion questions at the end of each chapter, along with the videos found on the enhanced DVD (CPH 15-5177), will give opportunity to work through the issues identified in each chapter. My prayer is that this resource will assist pastors and elders in faithfully caring for the Church and for one another.
Jesus [said], “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.”
—Matthew 28:18

A member of the board of elders expresses a concern. His pastor says, “Your job is to keep your ears open and your mouth shut.” A pastor adheres to a particular scriptural practice. One of his elders insists that the church take a survey to determine whether the congregation wants to eliminate this unpopular practice. Both responses are attempts to dictate and control what goes on in the church; they are an effort to grab power for oneself at the expense of others.

But does having more power in the church solve problems or create them? The above scenarios highlight the fact that the source of many problems within the church, especially problems between pastors and elders, is confusion between spiritual authority and power. Rev. John W. Kleinig, who has spoken extensively on this topic, talks about the difference between power and authority.

Power is a limited ability or commodity. A person has power at the expense of someone else. I must disempower others in order to have it and keep it for myself. Those who lack authority use power. When people operate with power the reaction to them is political. If you operate with power than you have a constant battle with the other power people in your congregation. That leads you to manipulation by the great power-monger, Satan. Operate with power and you are operating on Satan’s terms.

Authority is an unlimited ability or commodity. You cannot ex-
exercise authority unless you are under authority. It is never taken. Authority is given to you by someone else. You can only receive it. I exercise authority by authorizing others to act. You don’t exercise authority by keeping it to yourself. The more I give my authority away the greater my authority is. Authority grows with the delegation of authority to others. When authorities speak people listen, even if they don’t agree.¹

The answer for problems in the church, then, is not to have more power, but to exercise proper authority. Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me” (Matthew 28:18). The source of all authority in the Church is Jesus, not the pastor or elder or other members of the congregation. Jesus is in charge, and He authorizes His people to serve in His Church through various vocations.

The apostle Peter writes of all Christians, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. . . . Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God” (1 Peter 2:9, 16). Elders, as members of the priesthood of all believers, are authorized to be servants in the Church.

Strictly speaking, the word “elder” in the Bible (Acts 14:23; 1 Tim. 5:17–19, Titus 1:5–9 and 1 Peter 5:1–4) refers to those who hold the pastoral office. What we commonly call “elders” today are laymen appointed to serve the congregation in its temporal affairs and to assist the pastor in administrative tasks. . . . Later such men came to be known as the “deacons” (meaning “servants”). As you can see, Scripture does not define the exact role of such deacons, only their qualifications (1 Timothy 3:8–13). Scripture gives them no special spiritual responsibilities in the congregation beyond those given to every Christian.

While the office of pastor is divinely instituted and indispensable for the Church, the deacon is an optional office based on apostolic and church custom.
Pastors and Elders: Caring for the Church and One Another

The deacon or elder is a position of lay-service, concerned with the temporal and administrative affairs of the congregation. In many congregations deacons or elders are also charged with oversight of the pastor. But, rightly understood according to Scripture, they exercise only that oversight given to every Christian in the congregation.²

Pastors ordained into the Office of the Public Ministry are authorized by God through the Church to preach the Word of God and administer the Sacraments according to the Word of God. The apostle Paul writes, “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom; preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Timothy 4:1–2). Jesus said of one in this office, “The one who hears you hears Me, and the one who rejects you rejects Me, and the one who rejects Me rejects the one who sent Me” (Luke 10:16).

Concerning this office [of the Public Ministry] we teach that it is a divine ordinance; that is, the Christians of a certain locality must apply the means of grace not only privately and within the circle of their families nor merely in their common intercourse with fellow-Christians, John 5:39; Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:16, but they are also required, by the divine order, to make provision that the Word of God be publicly preached in their midst, and the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, by persons qualified for such work, whose qualifications and official functions are exactly defined in Scripture, Titus 1:5; Acts 14:23; 20:28; 2 Tim. 2:2.

Although the office of the ministry is a divine ordinance, it possesses no other power than the power of the Word of God, 1 Pet. 4:11; that is to say, it is the duty of Christians to yield unconditional obedience to the office of the ministry whenever, and as long as, the minister proclaims to them the Word of God, Heb. 13:17, Luke 10:16. If, however, the minister, in his teachings and injunctions, were to go beyond the Word of God, it would be the duty of Christians not to obey, but to disobey him, so as to
remain faithful to Christ, Matt. 23:8. Accordingly, we reject the false doctrine ascribing to the office of the ministry the right to demand obedience and submission in matters which Christ has not commanded.³

At his ordination, a pastor is given orders to be under authority; to say what the Lord says through this Office of the Public Ministry. The pastor in turn vows to humbly accept this yoke, promising to faithfully preach and teach the Word of God. The robe and stole a pastor wears in the Divine Service beautifully illustrate the terms of his office: who the pastor represents, the extent of his authority, and what he is given to say. The robe covers the man and declares that the words he speaks are not his own. The stole, placed as a yoke around his neck, represents the vow the pastor made to faithfully preach and teach the Word of God.

The robe and stole worn by the pastor teach this even to little children. A little girl who was new to the congregation said to her friend in the pew, “See that guy in the black shirt? That’s the pastor. When he puts his dress, on he’s Jesus.”

Notice the understanding that when the pastor puts on the robe and stole, he represents someone else, namely, Jesus. When faithfully preaching and teaching the Word of God, it could be said by any pastor, “If you don’t like what I have to say, see the Lord about it. I only work here!” But it is important to highlight the fact that the pastor, in his official capacity, is authorized to say what Jesus says, nothing more and nothing less. This means that in other church matters, it would be wrong for the pastor to try to use power to get people to do what he cannot otherwise do solely on the basis of his authority. For example, saying that God wants the congregation to begin a building project or pass a particular budget would be a misuse of the pastor’s authority.

Doctors who made house calls often carried a medical bag that included a number of instruments, each designed to help the doctor diagnose and cure the patient’s pain and ailment. As the doctor would pull the needed instrument from the bag, it sent a subtle, but authoritative message: the doctor is at work. The doctor is at work, and healing is on its way.