



**Who Is an Elder and What Do They Do?**  
**The Role of Elders in**  
**Emmanuel Evangelical Church**

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# Introduction

There are two offices in the church described in the Bible, elders and deacons. Elders are primarily responsible for teaching and leading the church, and deacons are mainly responsible to serve the practical needs of the church. This document describes all things relating to elders in Emmanuel Evangelical Church.

The Bible also uses the words overseer (1 Timothy 3:1) and pastor (Eph 4:11; 1 Peter 5:2) to describe an elder. Overseer, pastor, and elder are just three different words used to describe the same position, it's not three different positions. In daily Sorani Kurdish, we use the word Qasha, though that word is not in the Bible. I will choose to use the word elder in this document as it's the most common word in the Bible for that position.

## Who is an elder?

The word Elder does not mean that the person must be old. Someone young in age can be an elder as long as they meet the Biblical qualifications. Timothy was young and in 1 Timothy 4:12 Paul tells him, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity."

1 Timothy 3:1-7 describes the qualifications of an elder:

*1 Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. 2 Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3 not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. 4 He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. 5 (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) 6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. 7 He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.*

An elder is a godly man who meets the qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9, who is selected by the members of a church to lead the church primarily through teaching the Bible, setting an example of a godly life, and

overseeing the affairs of the church. Elders are God's gifts to a church to lead a church according to God's word for the glory of God.

The character, health, and effectiveness of any church are directly related to the quality of its leadership, and churches should represent the name of Christ to the world. That's why Scripture stresses the importance of qualified church leadership and gives specific standards for evaluating those who would serve in that position.

While we believe that the role of deacons can be for men and women, we believe that the Bible teaches (1 Timothy 2:12) that only men may serve as elders.

## What are the responsibilities of elders?

- Prepare sermons and preach the word of God (2 Tim 4:2)
- Devote time to prayer (Acts 6:4)
- Live a godly life as an example for the members to follow (1 Tim 4:12)
- Manage his own family well (1 Tim 3:4-5)
- Shepherd the members (1 Peter 5:2)
- Examine and instruct prospective members and recommend to the church those they believe to be qualified for membership
- Examine and recommend all prospective candidates for deacons and elders
- Oversee the work of the deacons
- Organize the weekly worship services and other meetings of the church
- Administer the ordinances of baptism and communion
- Oversee the resources and ministries of the church
- Oversee the finances of the church and prepare a budget each year for managing the church finances
- Equip the membership for the work of the ministry (Eph 4:11-12)
- Raise up other elders (2 Tim 2:2)
- Admonish and correct error in the church (Titus 1:9-16)
- Oversee the process of church discipline for any members who stray from Christ and the church
- Lead the church to seek to plant other churches and build up other churches
- Lead the church to take the gospel to the nations
- Maintain connection and partnership with other churches
- The elders are further to ensure that all who minister the Word to the congregation share our fundamental convictions concerning the means of salvation. This includes outside speakers.

## How does an elder lead?

An elder doesn't lead according to the world's standards. According to many cultures, a leader is someone who puts others down in order to make himself bigger. Worldly leaders want all the power for themselves and are threatened by the raising up of other leaders. They don't put systems in place that provide accountability and transparency, but they make everything run through them. Worldly leaders use their power for their own benefit and want others to serve them.

But elders, leaders of the church, are the opposite of this. They are to be humble leaders who serve others. Their position of leadership should not make them distant from the members, but they should be near to the members and caring for and loving them. They are not to use their position or authority to make themselves bigger, but rather to humbly lead people to trust our Lord Christ as their chief shepherd. Good elders strive to help others grow and develop as elders to help the church be stronger and not dependent on them.

## How should members relate to elders?

Elders are not perfect people. They are also weak humans who are sinners and in need of grace. Therefore, members should see elders as brothers in Christ and give them grace and encourage them as they seek to lead the church. Below are three ways that members should relate to pastors.

### **1. Members should honor elders.**

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 says, "Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other."

Elders are chosen by the congregation and accepted as gifts from God to help lead the church to live for Christ. Therefore, members should love and respect their elders as people who are seeking to help them grow mature in Christ. Members should assume the best of their elders and trust that their elders are working for their good, even if they disagree with their decisions.

## **2. Members should obey and submit to elders**

Hebrews 13:17 says, “Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.”

If the elder is leading according to the scriptures, submitting to an elders authority, counsel and teaching is for the good of the members. Members should listen carefully to the preaching of the elders and seek to apply it in their lives as they teach the words of God. They should seek guidance from elders in major decisions in life and listen to their counsel and advice as long as it's according to scripture.

However, members also have responsibility to ensure an elders teaching is according to scripture. Therefore, members should evaluate the teaching and counsel of the elders. For example, the Bereans examined the Scriptures to ensure the things spoken by Paul were accurate. Acts 17:11 says, “Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.”

## **3. Members should imitate elders**

Hebrews 13:7 says, “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.”

Members should watch an elder's life for several reasons. One reason is to help him stay faithful to Christ, keep him accountable to be above reproach, and correct him if needed. But also, members should watch their elders' lives and spend time with them to get to know them so they can learn from them and imitate their life and faith as they follow Christ.

## **Does an elder have to have a degree from a seminary?**

It can be helpful, though it is not necessary. Just because someone has a seminary degree doesn't mean they're qualified to be a pastor. The majority of the qualifications in the Bible for an elder have to do with their character and their love for God and his people. An elder should know the Bible well in order to clearly teach it and defend the church against false teaching. A seminary degree is certainly helpful in preparing someone to fulfill these duties, but this knowledge and understanding of the Bible can also be obtained through church and personal study.

## How many elders should a church have?

The Bible doesn't give a number for how many elders a church should have. But when the Bible describes elders, it mostly always describes them as plural. For example, James 5:14 says, "let them call the elders of the church to pray." 1 Peter 5:1 says, "To the elders among you." Acts 20:17 says, "From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church." These are only a few examples. Therefore, according to the Bible, a church should have more than one elder. While one elder may preach more than the others, it's not Biblical for a church to have only one elder who rules the church single-handedly. All elders in a local church are equal to one another in making decisions for the church, and none should function like a dictator over the others.

There may be cases where a church doesn't have more than one qualified man to be an elder. In this case, having one pastor is better than having men who are unqualified to serve as elders. But having one pastor is not ideal. In the case that there is only one pastor, the pastor should work hard to raise up other elders or find other elders to come lead the church with him. In general, if there are men in the church who desire the office, have the qualifications, and are already caring for and discipling members, they should be recognized as elders.

## Must an elder receive a salary or work full-time for a church?

No, it's not required that elders be paid by the church. Many churches have elders who work other jobs in the community. It's not required that elders work for the church as employees. Having elders who don't work for the church is a great example to the members of what it looks like to serve the church while working a job in society.

Elders do not serve for money, but "because they are willing, as God wants them to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve" (1 Peter 5:2). However, the Bible does teach that the work of an elder is worthy and deserving of pay (1 Timothy 5:17-18). If all elders are busy working other jobs, it can be difficult for them to devote enough time to preparing to preach well and caring for and overseeing the church. The health and ministry of a church will suffer if the burden on an elder is too much for him to carry.

Therefore, throughout history, many churches have thought it wise to use part of their giving to pay at least one of their elders (or more than one if they are able)

to work part-time or full-time for the church. The purpose of this pay isn't that the elder receives money just for being an elder. No, the purpose of the pay is to free up their time so they don't have to work another job, so that they can devote their full time to leading the church.

Not every elder will receive pay from the church, as elders don't serve for money. However, our church will seek to give to a level that can support the living of at least one of the elders to allow him to devote his full time to overseeing and leading the church. This may take a long time before we reach this level to support an elder. But we will work towards this goal according to our ability. It is not healthy for a church to forgo its responsibility to support one of its elders and continually rely on outside funding.

## How long can someone serve as an elder?

The Bible doesn't give any limit to how long someone can serve as an elder. However, many churches have thought it wise to put in laws in their churches that say after every few years, an elder must be reaffirmed by the congregation to continue as an elder. The purpose of this reaffirmation is to help ensure that an elder is actually continuing to fulfill the responsibilities of an elder and has not become lazy and simply holds the title without fulfilling its responsibilities.

Therefore, for our church, we will say that an elder should be reaffirmed by the congregation every three years.

## How can an elder be removed?

1 Timothy 5:19-20 gives instructions about this. Any two members with reason to believe that an elder should be dismissed should express such concern to the elders and, if need be, to the congregation. The process of removing an elder should be done in accordance with the instructions of our Lord in Matthew 18:15-17. After due process has been followed, if necessary, an elder would be removed from his position by the decision of members at a members meeting.

## What's the process of electing an elder in our church?

The process electing an elder shall be interpreted and carried out to fulfill the following principles:

- Substantial prayer, both individually and corporately, should be an integral part of the election process;
- All elder candidates should be treated with the grace, kindness, and honesty appropriate in evaluating fellow believers;
- The election process shall express that spirit of mutual trust, openness, and loving consideration that is appropriate within the body of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The steps of the process are as follows:

1. The elders look for men who are living a godly life, faithful to the church, and eagerly discipling others without having the title of elder.
2. The elders invest in that person and help them grow in the character, knowledge, and skills necessary to serve as an elder.
3. The elders do a formal interview process with that person about their life and beliefs to see if they're qualified to serve as an elder.
4. After interviewing that person, if the elders agree that person is qualified to serve as an elder, they will recommend to the members to receive the person as an elder.
5. Time will be given (normally 2 months) for the members to consider whether or not to receive this person as an elder. During this time, the members should pray about this decision and speak to the person and the elders if they have any concerns.
6. In that time, if no reason has been raised that would prevent the man from serving as an elder, in the next members meeting, the man will be appointed as an elder.
7. The person will be recognized as an elder at a church gathering.

## The process of vetting an elder candidate

Before presenting someone as an elder candidate to the congregation, the elders will conduct an interview with the person, where they will ask the following questions in order to help determine if they are qualified to serve as an elder.

1. Describe your conversion and how you have seen growth and repentance in your life.
2. Describe your history of involvement in churches in the past before coming to Emmanuel.
3. Do you wish to be an elder (1 Tim 3:1)? Why?
4. If you are married, what does your wife think about the possibility of you serving as an elder?
5. According to your understanding, what are the responsibilities of an elder?
6. Do you have the time to devote to fulfilling the responsibilities of an elder? (This includes prayer, pastoral visits, phone conversations, interventions, preaching as needed, emergencies, and elders meetings)
7. Are there any circumstances in your job, family, schedule, or other responsibilities that would make it difficult for you to serve as an elder?
8. Do you have any plans to leave the country, Erbil, or the church?
9. Are you open with your family, friends, or neighbors that you're a believer? Are you willing to be known as an elder in the community?
10. Do you believe there is any reason that you should not serve the church as an elder? If so, what is it?
11. What areas do you see that you need to grow in order to better serve the church as an elder?
12. Describe your practice and belief in the following areas...
  - Daily bible reading (have you read the entire Bible?)
  - Prayer
  - Leading your family in worship
  - Scripture memory
  - Reading books for personal growth

- Caring for, calling, and visiting other members
  - Sharing the gospel with non-believers
13. Do you regularly attend all the meetings (main service, prayer meeting, and members meetings)?
14. An elder must be above reproach (1 Tim 3:2)
- Are you aware of anyone who might say that you are not above reproach?
  - Can you describe a time when you were “below reproach?”
15. An elder must be faithful to his wife (1 Tim 3:2)
- Have you ever had sex with someone who is not your wife?
  - How do you think about interacting or spending time with women who are not your wife?
  - Have you ever been divorced? If so, under what circumstances?
  - Have you ever looked at pornography?
  - Have you looked at any pornographic images in the last year?
  - How are you trying to guard yourself against pornography or looking lustfully at women?
16. The scripture says an elder should not be violent (Titus 1:7).
- Do you, or have you ever, hit your wife or your children in anger?
17. An elder must be hospitable (1 Tim 3:2)
- What do you believe it means to be hospitable?
  - How do you show hospitality to people? How often? With whom?
  - Do you have a plan for showing hospitality?
18. An elder should be someone who makes disciples and helps others grow in Christ.
- What do you believe it looks like to disciple someone?
  - Describe how you are currently discipling people.
19. An elder must not be a drunkard (1 Timothy 3:3), not quick-tempered (Titus 1:7), and be self-controlled (Titus 1:8)

- Do you have any addictions (alcohol, tobacco, pornography, food, medications, gambling, etc.)?
- Do you drink alcohol? If yes, do you have self-imposed limits? What are they? Do you follow them?
- Have you been drunk or been accused of drunkenness in the last twelve months? How did you respond to it?
- Describe your temper. When was the last time you were angry at something or someone? What things make you angry? How do you handle anger?
- What are your habits of using social media or watching TV?
- What are your habits of sleeping and waking up?
- How do you spend your free time?
- What are your hobbies?

20. An elder must not be a lover of money (1 Timothy 3:3)

- Are you content to serve as an elder and not receive any pay from the church?
- How are your finances?
- Do you have any personal debt? If so, how much?
- How do you manage your finances? Do you have a budget and do you stick to it?
- Are you adequately providing for the future needs of your family?
- Do you tithe (or give to the church)? For how long has this been your practice?
- Do you give to other people / ministries / churches other than your normal giving (tithe) to the church?

21. An elder must be gentle, not quarrelsome (1 Timothy 3:3)

- Have you had any quarrels in the past year with anyone in the church or outside of the church? If so, what were they and how did you resolve them?

- Give an example of how you have shown gentleness to someone lately?
- How do you avoid conflict when it is not necessary?
- Give an example of a time when you avoided such a conflict.
- Have you criticized a decision of the elders or deacons in the last year? What was it, and how did you follow up on it?

22. An elder must not be covetous (1 Timothy 3:3)

- Where are you discontent?
- What are your goals in your career and for your family?

23. An elder must manage his own house well, and his children should be submissive with all dignity (1 Timothy 3:4-5)

- How would you describe the quality of your marriage?
- How do you lead and care for your wife spiritually?
- How do you help and serve your wife practically?
- Do you and your wife argue about things? How do you handle conflict together?
- How do you lead and care for your children spiritually?
- How do you correct your children? Give examples.
- Do your children honor their father and mother?
- Are your children walking with the Lord now? If not, what are you doing about it?

24. An elder must not be puffed up with conceit (1 Timothy 3:6)

- Describe a time you sinned and had to be reconciled and forgive a brother.
- Do you have any unresolved conflicts with anyone in our local church? What about anyone else outside our church, believers and non-believers?

- Do you know of anyone who would claim not to be reconciled with you or has a grudge with you?

25. An elder must be well thought of by outsiders (1 Timothy 3:7)

- What person outside the Church is most likely to have a poor view of you, and why?
- Are you associated with any groups (e.g., political, racial, religious, social, professional) that might be considered controversial by others? If so, please describe.

26. An elder should hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught (Titus 1:9)

- What is the gospel?
- Is there anything you disagree with in the Statement of Faith of EEC?

27. An elder must be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it (Titus 1:9)

- Give an example of a time that you rebuked a brother in regards to their action or belief? How did you go about it?

28. Please describe your views on the following topics:

- Abortion
- Homosexuality
- On the role of women in the church
- Divorce and remarriage
- What is the mission of the local church?
- Should foreigners be allowed to attend the church? What about becoming members or pastors, or deacons? If so, how many is too many?
- As the church gets bigger, what would your plans or hopes be for handling the growth?

- Do you have any plans or hopes in regards to our church planting other churches in Erbil or other towns in Kurdistan?
- Spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues and healing. Prophecy and dreams and visions.
- How would you advise the parent of a young child who comes to you and with the desire for their child to be baptized?
- What is your view on receiving support from outside for ministries in the church?

29. What is something you would like to see prioritized or dealt with in the church?

30. What are things you would like to change about our church? Is there any practice or way that the church is managed that you would like to see changed?

31. Is there any decision the church elders have made that you have disagreed with?

32. Are there any differences you have with any of the other elders in belief on any issue that you are aware of?

33. Do you wholeheartedly agree with EEC's polity? (For example, our processes of membership, baptism, Lord's supper, discipline, congregational authority, electing elders and deacons)

34. If you are presented as an elder to the church, are you aware of any members of the church who would likely vote no or oppose you becoming an elder?