THE PASTORAL TEAM: WHAT & WHY

There are two enduring offices in the New Testament Church today: pastors and deacons. Deacons help serve the practical and/or physical needs of the church. Pastors serve the overall spiritual needs of the church.

A good example of the differences can be found in Acts 6 where the deacons were raised up to free up the apostles to dedicate themselves to the ministry of prayer and the Word. As the early church developed, it appears pastors (elsewhere called elders or bishops) took on more of a “governing” role in the life of the local church.

1 Timothy 5:17 says “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” The word translated “rule” in that passage means to exercise leadership or rule. Pastors are responsible for leading the church in which they serve.

Hebrews 13:17 says to “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.” Here we see that pastors are accountable to God for the congregation over which he has placed them to lead. It also implies that pastors are responsible for the spiritual health of the congregation: individual congregants & the organization as a whole.

Most SBC churches have maintained the offices of pastor and deacon. Disagreement exists on whether there should be a plurality of pastors/elders or only one. Some SBC churches are single pastor/elder churches. Others have a plurality of pastoral leadership.

For years, Broadview was a single pastor/elder church in terms of it’s leadership structure. However, we changed this structure in 2010 with the adoption of our constitution and by-laws. The senior pastor now leads alongside of a pastoral team.

One of the reasons we moved to having a pastoral team serve along the senior pastor is because every time pastors or elders are mentioned in the New Testament, it’s always in the plural. The implication is that there was not a “single pastor” in charge of any one church. Rather, there was a plurality of pastors/elders who helped lead the church as a team.

This is wise on many fronts. For starters, consolidating decision-making power into only one individual sets the church and that individual up for trouble that could otherwise be avoided. Wisdom is gained in many counselors. Having a team of pastors also ensures that there’s a leadership structure in place should the senior pastor leave or be removed.

One of the reasons I’m writing this article is because there can sometimes be confusion about the differences between pastors and deacons. Or, to be more precise, deacon boards and elder boards. (the words elder, bishop and pastor mean the same thing in the New Testament.)
For certain SBC churches the deacons ended up serving as elders. In some cases, this meant they were deacons by name but elders in practice. In other cases, they were deacons by name but played a double role in terms of what they actually did. They took care of the practical/physical needs of the church & also exercised oversight/leadership with the senior pastor.

This is the model that many West Texas churches have right now. The pastor leans on his deacon body to make decisions, appoint committees, deal with personnel problems & gauge the spiritual health of the congregation. This was the model I saw growing up at FBC Roby. There were positives & negatives. Positively speaking, it protected the church in certain seasons because our pastor would often leave after two or three years. There was no consistent “pastoral leadership.” Somebody had to keep things on track with all that transition & the deacons steadied the ship.

Negatively speaking, though, it created confusion around the biblical differences between pastors and deacons. This kind of confusion can lead to problems. It has caused some deacon bodies to abandon the practical/physical work of being a deacon in exchange for the governing/oversight work of pastors and elders.

People pejoratively call these churches “deacon run” or “deacon ruled” churches. This type of structure can end up undermining or frustrating the leadership of a senior pastor. It likewise undermines and frustrates the ability of deacons to fulfill their biblical responsibilities.

In Scripture, you don’t see deacons “running” or “leading” the church. The pastors/elders have that responsibility. But, for many “single pastor/elder” churches, decision making power had to be shared with someone & the deacon body was the easiest board to share it with. Sharing these responsibilities with the deacon body doesn’t necessarily create these problems. It does, though, create confusion that can lead that direction.

Before the establishment of Broadview’s pastoral team, our own deacons served as a blend between a body of deacons and a body of elders. Prior to 2010, we didn’t have a pastoral team. Pastor David leaned on the deacon body to fulfill pastor/elder type responsibilities. Pastor David was the “leader.” But his leadership was shared with & accountable to the deacon body.

None of this structure was documented nor was it informed by any set of by-laws. It just was the way it was. That all changed when we adopted our current constitution and by-laws in June of 2010. These by-laws created clarity concerning the roles and responsibilities of pastors and deacons. A pastoral team was also put in place to serve alongside salaried pastors. We shifted from a single pastor/elder leadership structure to multiple pastors/elders.

The leadership structure at Broadview is unique. It differs from “single elder” type churches. At the same time, it differs from most “multiple elder” type churches as well. Usually, a “pastor led” church that consists of multiple elders will consolidate ALL leadership decisions to that elder board. There are no congregational votes. Decision-making power is centralized and consolidated to that board.
Broadview is a “pastor led, congregationally ruled” church. The senior pastor leads alongside a pastoral team. The pastoral team is responsible for appointing certain ad-hoc and standing committees (ie. Finance Team, World Missions Leadership Team, etc). They also serve as a personnel team and oversee financial accountability.

Significant leadership decisions put forward by the pastoral team must be affirmed by the body of deacons and voted on by the congregation. Examples would include the hiring of full time ministry staff, the annual budget, borrowing money and buying/selling property.

Why did our church choose to structure itself in this way? Why not just be one way or the other?

Some of this is due to the biblical responsibility of deacons to promote and maintain the unity of the church. Ensuring these type decisions are affirmed by the deacon body helps them know what’s going on. It also helps to encourage the congregation to trust and affirm the direction that the church is being led.

Essentially, our structure centralizes decision-making power to the pastoral team. Yet, many of their most important decisions have no muscle unless they’re also affirmed by the deacon body & the church at large. This prevents the pastoral team from leading in a vacuum.

At the same time, clarity is preserved around the differences between pastors & deacons. Deacons are not “leading” but they are affirming leadership decisions put forward by the pastors. Deacons are freed up to do deacon type ministry and pastors are freed up to do pastoral type ministry.

Additionally, the senior pastor is surrounded by men who are biblically qualified to serve in the same role. Not every church makes decisions in this way but it has worked for our congregation these past seven years.

Practically speaking, in our own congregation, the pastoral team serves as somewhat of a sounding board for the lead pastor as he seeks to cast vision and lead the church to walk in God’s will. They are there to listen to him, share his burdens and offer counsel in what’s wise. Decision-making becomes shared instead of consolidated into one individual.

When the senior pastor is leading in a direction that conflicts with Broadview’s mission/vision, the pastoral team can put on the brakes. Insofar as the senior pastor is leading in accordance with Broadview’s mission/vision, the pastoral team is there to encourage and to help.

IN OUR BY-LAWS, THE DUTIES OF THE SENIOR PASTOR ARE AS FOLLOWS:

"The Senior Pastor is the spiritual leader of the congregation. In this unique position, he provides for the equipping of the saints through a regular ministry of preaching, training, and encouraging the congregation as a whole. His goal is to mature the saints through insightful and accurate presentation and proclamation of the Word, stressing both the understanding and application of divine truths and principles."
He provides vital input on planning, ministry challenges, and Biblical guidance to the pastors and deacons during the programs and ministries undertaken by the Church. He is accountable to the pastoral team for the discharge of his ministry. He is also responsible for the management of the church office and supervision of all staff. In the absence of a Senior Pastor the pastoral team will appoint a manager/leader of the church office and staff (I Timothy 4:11-13, 15, 16; Eph. 4:11, 12; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17, 4:2-4; Matt. 5:13).

The pastoral team helps the senior pastor in accomplishing those duties.

IN OUR BY-LAWS, THE DUTIES OF THE PASTORAL TEAM ARE AS FOLLOWS:
1. The primary work of the pastors shall be to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word, so as to keep the mission and vision of the church alive in the Body.

They are responsible for governing the Church under the delegated authority of Christ and the Church, teaching the Word and with the Deacons, tending the flock of God.

They are to lead and shepherd the church in decision-making matters. This means at times they will gather the congregation for prayer, discussion, seeking of God’s will, information, proposals and/or vote.

At other times the pastors will make decisions solely on the administration of their responsibilities. Church votes will be taken on such matters as annual budgets, full-time ministry staff positions, buying or selling of property, the borrowing of money and other things as deemed necessary by the Pastoral team.

2. The Pastoral team will serve to deal with discipline of church members as outlined in these by-laws.

3. The Pastoral team is to oversee financial accountability by developing process and procedures. They will appoint gifted financial members to develop and administer the budget. They will always seek to use members God has gifted to guide the church in matters of business and finance.

4. The Pastoral team will serve as a personnel team. The Senior Pastor is given responsibility to manage the office & staff. The Pastoral team will interview & confirm prospective ministry staff and with the Senior Pastor confirmed by the deacons recommend them to the church for a vote.

[The pastoral team will] be informed and engaged in hiring of support staff, review staff evaluations, conduct review of the Senior Pastor, recommend salaries to the Finance team and be involved in any staff or employee problems.

5. The Pastoral Team will appoint, train and monitor teams/committees (standing and Ad Hoc) that are needed to fulfill the ministry of the church.
6. The Pastors will serve as “guardians” and “discerners” of the Church. The criteria to be used to evaluate the health of the Church will be: (1) The Church’s Mission: see constitution (2) The Church’s Doctrine: see constitution (3) The Church’s resources.

7. At all times church members have the privilege and responsibility to communicate with the Pastors and/or Deacons about any issues. Together they will discover God’s will through His Word and the help of the Holy Spirit.

The Pastors, at all times, are responsible to develop an informed and involved membership, unto the end, all members participate, although all cannot lead.

Some may disagree as to whether there should be a plurality of pastors in a local church. Even so, the New Testament is clear that the church must be led by someone. There has to be someone who is in charge of making decisions and exercising authority.

As the saying goes, “The buck stops somewhere.” In our context, we believe the wisest and most-biblical approach is to share that responsibility with a team of called and qualified pastors - salaried and non-salaried. You can see the qualifications for this office in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. The biblical duties and responsibilities are laid out in the pastoral epistles and the book of Acts.

While the church hasn’t set a defined number for how many should serve on this team, the original board had six men. Three salaried & three lay pastors. After Pastor David’s retirement, the board functioned with five men. Currently, there are only two salaried pastors and one lay pastor on the pastoral team. For this reason, we need to elect new men to this body.

THE SELECTION PROCESS IS LAID OUT AS FOLLOWS IN OUR BY-LAWS:

“At a set time initially set by the Senior Pastor, subsequently by the team of Pastors, every active member will be given the opportunity to nominate any man as a candidate for pastor. The Deacon Selection Committee will gather and evaluate the nominations. If upon investigation by the Committee, it is found that a nominee does not sufficiently meet the qualifications of a Pastor, his name shall be removed without comment.

Once the Committee has discerned qualified candidates then the Senior Pastor and/or the Chairman of Deacons will conduct a background check, applications and interview. The Committee will then present to the Church a qualified and available list of nominees on which to vote. All receiving a 75% vote will be asked to serve. Newly appointed Pastors will be presented to the Church and confirmed by the laying on of hands.”

When Paul appointed elders in the churches on his first missionary journey, he did so with “prayer and fasting.” (Acts 14:23) The men who serve on this team have an important responsibility to promote and maintain the spiritual health of our congregation. It’s not something we should do flippantly or carelessly.
HOW YOU CAN PARTICIPATE:
If you’d like to play a part in this process, here are some things you can do. First, commit yourself to praying for our church during this season. Be informed and engaged about the process. Study the qualifications for yourself.

Secondly, nominate good men. In the final weeks of August members of our church will have the opportunity to nominate men who fit the biblical qualifications. If you nominate someone, do so with confidence that they meet the biblical standard. Ensure that they themselves feel called & qualified to help lead the church in such a role.

Thirdly, pray for the screening committee as they go through names, interview qualified candidates, and eventually determine who gets presented to our congregation. Pray they’ll have the wisdom and discernment to follow the chief shepherd of the church, the Lord Jesus.

Lastly, pray for our church. Unfortunately, the Bible wasn’t comprehensive in its instruction on how to structure the governance of a local church. This is probably because the Lord knew different churches needed to be structured in different ways due to context in which they’re placed. There is no perfect solution. Pray that our church can remain focused and committed to the “main thing.”

The most important thing we can do is join the Lord Jesus in finishing the task of the Great Commission. His job is to build the church. Our job is to make disciples. This process plays a role in that larger enterprise. But the main thing isn’t electing men to serve on a pastoral team. The main thing is making disciples.

A healthy church led by a healthy team of pastors will make it more likely that we excel in that main thing. Let us together trust in the Lord will all our heart during this season of our church’s history and believe by faith that He will direct our steps.

Blessings,

Pastor Wes