HOW ELDERS ARISE IN CHRISTIAN CONGREGATIONS
Galen Currah, 7th February 2005

This short paper advances tentative answers to two questions: Why is it so hard to become an elder? and Is there another way? Its thesis is that elders can first appear as non-ordained shepherds of small, new congregations, get trained on the job by elders or church planters, and later will be ordained as elders.

Why is it so hard to become an elder?

In the West, theologians have identified what they feel are three allowable forms of church polity: the episcopal, the presbyterian and the congregational. In episcopal structures, high-ranking elders rule churches and appoint lower-ranking elders. In presbyterian structures, a college of elders appoints elders who rule over congregations and answer to the college. In congregational structures, local congregations appoint a ruling board that hires elders who lead congregations and answer to the board. Theologians and church elders in the West preach, teach and write about those three structures, arguing about which one be more biblical, more historical, more theocratic or more democratic.

Whilst those three forms continue to dominate in Western and Northern churches, Eastern and Southern churches have rightly observed that those structures have three things in common: they reflect European history, European politics and European customs. All three assume that a small number must rule over the many, and that individuals must be invested by a special body with authority to rule. Now, Western churches and missions have usually taken their ruling structures to other regions of the world, and they continue to defend those structures as biblical, historical and practical.

In all regions of the world, all three historical, European power structures too easily allow dictatorial and carnal opportunists to arise to leadership over churches. Likewise, all three often prove a hindrance to expansion of Christian faith. Those working within power structures must spend considerable effort, time, and resources on maintaining the structure. In churches, power is exercised in maintenance of positions, salaries, programmes, and edifices, and in countering competitive organisations, doctrines and political currents within and between congregations. Little power is expended in expansion of the movement, in Christianisation of populations, in creation of new congregations or in empowerment of novice shepherds.

In the European power structures, it is hard to become a congregational elder and to remain in authority. Qualifications to become an elder can be quite high, requiring education, social class, language ability, and politically powerful advocates. Those higher in authority than elders can disapprove of them and remove them. Where elders are salaried, their salaries can be denied to them. And where there are few congregations seeking elders, there is little opportunity to get hired. Where civil authorities prove hostile to churches, congregational elders are subject to persecution.

Is there another way?

Yes, there is. The other way requires neither adoption of Western power structures nor dismantling of them where they have been adopted. The other way is to let existing structures purposefully and diligently seek to multiply new congregations through Christianisation of the population, the appointing of many church planters, and a rapid training and empowerment of

novice congregational shepherds. In such movements, most novice shepherds arise from amongst new believers, and are recognised by their manifest ability to gather seekers and new believers and to shepherd them, and remain unsalaried.

Where populations are becoming Christian and many new congregations are being planted, churches must find ways to recognize novice shepherds, appoint them to their tasks, train or coach them to maturity, and approve of some of them as elders. Every new gathering of seekers and new believers must have a shepherd. Novice shepherds can be appointed and trained on the job by church planters. As shepherds lead their new congregations, they can begin appointing and training other novice shepherds, in turn. As novice shepherds grow more mature in character and skill, meeting biblical criteria, the existing power structure can ordain them as elders while they continue in their shepherding of congregations.

Thus, a typical pattern by which elders arise in congregations is the following. Elders of existing congregations appoint church members to plant new churches amongst families and friends who first meet in homes and other small groups. While helping seekers and new believers to obey all the commands of Jesus, the church planters observe that certain individuals are able to gather others together to learn about Jesus and the Bible. The church planters appoint or designate those individuals as group shepherds, but do not yet ordain them as elders. Over a period of weeks or months, some of those shepherds plant other new churches and appoint shepherds in them. The experienced shepherds who come to meet biblical qualifications of elders can be appointed as elders.

This is not the only valid or biblically-defensible pattern, but it has the advantages of being consistent with the Bible, very practical in church multiplication movements, and adoptable within a variety of church political systems. In episcopal systems, higher-ranking elders continually appoint elders in new congregations. In presbyterian systems, colleges of elders continually appoint elders in young churches and form new colleges of elders. In congregational systems, ruling boards can be composed of elders who appoint novice shepherds, train them while they lead new congregations, and ordain some of them as elders. Where churches adopt non-Western structures, the same pattern can prevail.

In conclusion, ecclesial power structures are neither the problem nor the solution to helping elders to arise in Christian churches, but biblically-informed means of continually planting new congregation that enable novice shepherds to emerge.

Power-based structures	Enablement-based structures
Small number with high power.	High number with small power
Hierarchical structure (rulers and followers)	Generational structure (fathers and sons)
Ordination opens access to office	Performance demonstrates call to serve
Formal educational requirements	Non-formal learning requirements
Suitable to static systems (slow growth)	Suitable to expanding systems (fast growth)
Elders must be salaried	Elders may be salaried
Ordination confers privileges	Ordination recognizes abilities.