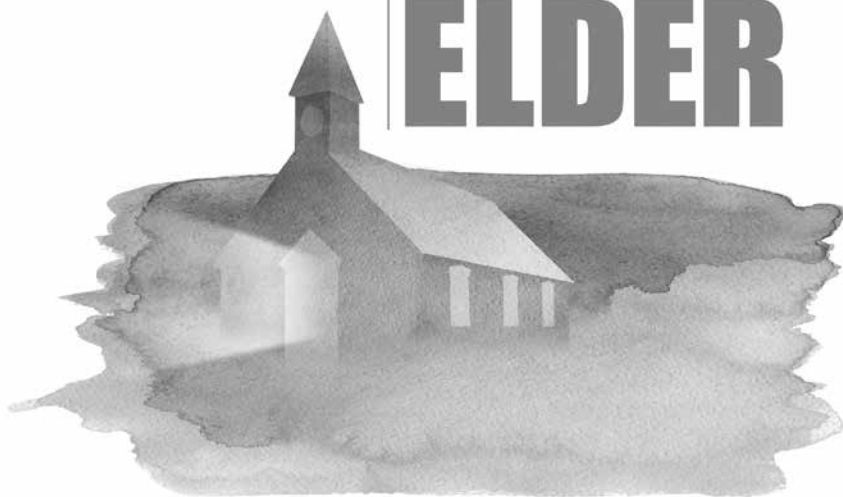


THE ROLE

Applying Best
Practices for
Congregational
Leadership

OF THE LOCAL ELDER



 **Pacific Press®**
Publishing Association

Nampa, Idaho | www.pacificpress.com

INTRODUCTION

Discovering Best Practices for Adventist Leaders

It is Sabbath morning on a weekend when the pastor is ministering in another church in his or her district. The congregation has completed Sabbath School and is now assembled for the worship service. There are far fewer than one hundred people in attendance (as is typical for the majority of Adventist churches in North America). Music has been playing, and people have been responding warmly; they are happy to be in church. But now the congregation quiets as the local elder steps to the pulpit with a Bible in hand. A sense of anticipation fills the room because it is the local elder who is about to preach, and the congregants expect to be given hope for daily living.

The elder opens his or her Bible, takes a deep breath, smiles widely, and then begins the sermon. The Holy Spirit fills the room with warmth and receptivity, allowing the audience to be blessed, and a distinctive openness to ministry is being bestowed on the entire spiritual community, preparing them for mission.

The scene just described is both very typical in North American Adventism and very important to our conversation about the local elder and local leadership in Adventism. The local elder is known and trusted by the members of the congregation. He or she is a long-standing member of the church—someone who understands the needs of this particular spiritual community because they are also the elder's needs. In short, the elder is a volunteer, not an employee of the church. That is why what the elder says during the worship service is expected to be especially important and relevant.

This appreciation for the ministry of the local elder does not lessen the congregation's recognition of and gratitude for the ministry of the pastor.

The pastor is the leader of the local church, and the elder does not in any way supplant that leadership. But the members of the congregation believe the elder knows them in their individual circumstances and cares deeply about what is happening in their lives. Moreover, they are convinced the local elder is focused on how they can become increasingly engaged in their relationship with Jesus and on delivering the distinctive Adventist end-time witness. The truth is, leadership from within is one of the most powerful forms of leadership, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church—wherever this scene is being repeated—is tremendously blessed by its local elders.¹

This book takes a distinctive approach to the elder and leadership. (It is certainly influenced by my own spiritual walk, including some of the unusual pathways I have been on.) But it also places the conversation about the work of the local elder in the broader story of the Adventist end-time mission. As a result, even though the book will address in detail the specific job the elder may be called to perform, it is also about how the elder's leadership is to engage the entire church in delivering a consistent witness to the community through mission clarity, mission alignment, and mission accountability. These three primary elements may be new to you, but they shape how we integrate strategy with mission—and each of them is critical to success.

Mission awareness is emphasized by the degree to which the men and women within the organization (including the members of the local church) know and apply the overall corporate mission. Rehearsing the organization's mission statement until it is memorized is part of this, of course; but awareness of how the mission itself is to be achieved at their specific level is also essential. It involves understanding how the mission encompasses the character of the organization and how deeply it captures its personality. *What are Adventists here to do?*

Mission alignment is best revealed when all parts of the organization work closely together in leveraging their collective assets to accomplish the mission. This collaboration entails a clear line of sight between the organization's overall mission and the mission of each local congregation or organization and is best supported when the top leadership recognizes and rewards those who demonstrate the greatest commitment to advancing the common mission. Success is dependent on specific actions in order to achieve and maintain

alignment. *How can Adventists all work collaboratively?*

Mission accountability is best seen when all parts of the organization not only commit to achieving the mission but are also held accountable for the mutually framed outcomes—including the deeply spiritual ones. These outcomes include the effective utilization of the resources that have been provided and the short-, medium-, and long-term expectations implied by the organization's collective understanding of the mission. This is not merely about counting. Rather, it is shaped both by measurable goals against which progress may be evaluated and clarity on how individual goals combine to provide the context for the largest organizational goals. *How do we know how we are doing, if we do not hold one another accountable?*

The three sides of a more strategic approach to mission are a bit technical, but I hope you will begin to see how these three large ideas about Adventist leadership are important to the work of the local elder. What we do in the local church is part of something both deep and profound that is happening in the church today, as we Adventists attempt to offer God a witness that is excellent in every way, including outcomes shaped by grace. How we lead as local elders, and in whatever other capacity we lead, makes a big difference in the impact we will have—especially in our current setting and with the people we are called to address within and near the church.

What we are being called to do is a stretch—advancing the Adventist mission in North America today is a tough nut to crack. The work of the local elder in this mission fits into a much larger conversation about the contemporary witness of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America and the world. But it is at the local level where the talk stops and action really begins—and where the mission of the church is applied.

Getting to church vitality

Let us begin by acknowledging who our elders are in the church and the circumstances within which they play their role in advancing the Adventist mission. Elders are local leaders, who adapt their efforts to what the local reality is. For example, Adventism in North America is largely a denomination of smaller, district churches that have fewer than one hundred members. These are congregations wherein the leadership that the local elder is capable of

providing is particularly vital and in which amazing, untapped potential exists for mission extension.² This local potential is not always being fully addressed to face the challenge, of course; but that only helps to define the opportunity.

There are some larger churches in North America, of course, especially around our institutions, and we will try to keep them in the discussion as we move along. But the vast majority of pastors spend most of their lives in smaller congregations, and the majority of our local elders minister alongside them in these smaller settings.

I was recently at a conference workers' meeting with both pastors and elders in attendance. My office—the Office of Strategy and Research at the North American Division—was there to help pastors and elders learn better strategies for accomplishing mission. At one point in the meetings, a pastor pulled me aside for a brief conversation. He said to me, “The division is getting it wrong in a lot of what it sends out to the churches.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I’ve been a pastor for thirty years,” the pastor responded, “and I’ve never had one hundred members in any of my churches.” He gestured toward the pastors and elders who were engaged in small-group discussions. “And neither have any of the other guys here at the meeting. You guys at the division seem to be sending out stuff that only works in much larger churches, and you need to be preparing resources that are aimed more specifically at small churches, because that’s the reality we face.”

I told him we would take seriously what he said about the reality so many local pastors face, and I have subsequently thought about it a great deal and have shared his perspective with a number of administrators and resource producers. In addition, I started this book on the elder with the pastors and elders of smaller congregations in mind. Whether or not this pattern of ministry has been yours specifically, it represents a perception of Adventism in North America that we will acknowledge as we approach our discussion of the work of the local elder. By this, I mean that the elder is largely working in an intimate setting, surrounded by men and women he or she already knows. As a result, it is quite possible for a deeper, more personal ministry to be delivered, and that is one of the major perspectives for our conversation.

It is easy for some of us to forget that in the early Christian church—the

setting many of us want to see emulated today—there were no megachurches where people could get lost in the shuffle. There were only small, intimate house churches, where every member was part of a vital faith community. It was Elton Trueblood, the famous Quaker author who wrote, “Perhaps the church, in many areas, must be smaller before it can be substantially stronger.”

Think about that possibility for a moment, and imagine ways in which it might be true for Adventists today, even as we all seek to grow the church. Could it be possible that in some of these smaller settings we can most readily apply the dynamics of ministry success? The rate of growth for the church in North America—while impressive compared with some of the older, more mainstream denominations—is challenging in terms of how we accomplish mission. In an article by Petr Činčala, who is the director of the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University, Adventism is described as growing fairly rapidly as a worldwide movement, but the growth in North America is of a substantially different character. He writes, “Moreover, the growth in North America is predominantly through multiethnic groups, immigrants, and refugees. Recent figures show that that 52% of those baptized into the North American SDA church in 2015 were from ethnic minorities. If the trend continues, the rate of adding Caucasian members to the church will actually decrease.”³

Now, Činčala and I are happy we are growing among these multiethnic and immigrant population groups, but the church must reflect on where some of our greatest opportunities lie and the places where we are investing our resources. While there are 1.2 million Adventists in North America today, there are more than 20 million worldwide.⁴ In short, we are growing far more rapidly outside North America than inside. Moreover, the circumstances we are facing here and in a few other places, such as parts of Europe, where the complications of secular culture shape our witness, require some thoughtful contemplation because they depict a challenging future for the entire church—for us now and for everyone else just a bit further down the road.

Having said all that, this section of our conversation is about a moment of perspective. Even while fully embracing the ministry of the local elder in small churches—and having made a commitment not to forget how important this

is—I am not arguing that we should remain *intentionally small*. Rather, I merely urge leaders in smaller churches to explore the benefits for witness that they may bring to the table, including the opportunities for more personal interaction among members and within the community. Additionally, I encourage pastors of small churches, along with their elders, to excel at capturing the possibilities that small churches provide, and I especially suggest we consider the qualitative side, along with the quantitative, when we address an Adventist vision of mission.⁵

As part of my work at the North American Division (NAD), I have served as one of the Adventist representatives on an ecumenical committee that does research projects each year on religious health in North America. In the group's recently completed annual survey, the primary topic being assessed was church vitality. That is to say, it was focused on what makes a church compelling for its members beyond mere growth in numbers. This is a perspective that may seem a bit odd to some of us, because we Adventists have typically equated mission largely with evangelism and church growth—where the focus is often perceived to be on numbers—rather than other elements of church vitality. But it is an important perspective for us to keep in mind as well when we are assessing mission success. For example, beyond how many new members we have, we need to consider the impact we are having on our communities, based on what they see in the church. How compelling is the story of Adventism that we are telling, in what ways does it witness to the loving character of God, and how we are serving people in need?⁶ Furthermore, how might the local elder contribute to this broader view of overall church vitality and the degree to which it supports what we are preaching?

To put this into some context, there are a number of books available on the Christian market that argue that churches *should* be kept small in order to remain more faithful to their mission. One of the best of these is *The Strategically Small Church* by Brandon J. O'Brien, who was the editor of the now-defunct *Leadership Journal*. He values the small church because it is "intimate, nimble, authentic, effective."⁷ His point is that the local church may be small in number of members, but its impact may still be large and profound because of the *quality* of the witness being delivered.

While there are some notable advantages to being small, emphasizing

smallness for its own sake is not the intention of *this* book. I strongly support church growth, including the evangelistic emphasis in Adventism that has traditionally supported our activity and sense of achievement. But being small is not quite the handicap some would make it, and it presents some interesting opportunities that we should begin to celebrate. If you are the pastor or elder of a small church, rather than see size merely as a limitation, you should see the benefits and take full advantage of them. In support of this idea, I would direct you to an article in the February 2017 issue of *Ministry* magazine, in which David Klinedinst writes: “As I searched the Bible, it appeared to me that there were no paid pastors overseeing a congregation or house church and doing ministry for the people in the early New Testament church. Those who were paid by the tithe were sent out to evangelize and plant churches in unentered lands and cities. . . . The existing churches were left in the hands of capable lay people.”⁸

Klinedinst goes on to depict the same pattern in the early Adventist church and offers some quotes from Ellen White in support of these locally managed congregations. Then he describes a couple of approaches we could take to more fully emulate this apostolic model in today’s setting. And at the end of the article, he asks, “What would happen if more churches in North America followed these models? What would happen if we started gradually transitioning churches to be lay-led by trained, dedicated elders and deacons? Then the ministers could be sent to nearby towns and cities to evangelize and plant churches.”⁹

I am not advocating for entirely lay-led churches, and neither is Klinedinst. It is true that the model Klinedinst is proposing is somewhat different from the one most Adventist conferences are following today, where the intent is to have churches led by pastors, even if the districts are large. But we should ponder the questions Klinedinst asks. What would happen if we started putting a greater emphasis on lay leadership of our churches, featuring the local leadership of the elder? How would it affect life in Adventism? Would we be happier, more engaged, and less fascinated with internal debate—the way it sometimes seems we are today? Or would it lead to catastrophe? Even in Adventism, growth in size is not incompatible with growth in depth of spirituality, but they are merely two sides of the same story about the Adventist

mission. Moreover, leadership, in whatever specific model we embrace, requires collaboration.

The local elder and discipleship

In these pages, we will discuss how the local elder is a partner with the pastor in more strategic efforts that “move the ball down the field” for better ministry and more compelling outcomes. While our conversation in these pages will be largely *about* the local elder, it will at times be framed within the context of the larger North American religious scene. This will include the ways in which Adventism in North America faces some distinctive issues from those that Adventists are currently facing in other parts of the world.¹⁰ We will, at times, also contrast what elders might have done in the past with what they may be called on to do today and in the near future. The conversation will be about how the church itself is changing and about how our approaches to ministry, even at the local level, must transform with it in order to be more effective in reaching contemporary audiences.¹¹

At the core of this book is the idea that the elder has been called by God to engage with both the church membership and the community in ways that resonate with more contemporary audiences, without driving away current members. In order for the elder to do this well, he or she will likely need to employ some new methods and tools.¹² It is my intent in these pages to describe some of them and to hint at others we may need in the future.

Our current dreams of ministry in Adventism are sometimes interpreted through the rather extensive polarization that characterizes broader Christianity today, and it has entered our Adventist churches as well. This polarization causes some of us to see our mission through what some would call *fundamentalist* lenses—including a misguided pursuit of perfectionism. At the same time, others of us would imagine that God does not care about how we live or what we profess. Neither of these extremes is helpful in advancing the contemporary Adventist mission, so I will argue for a radical third lens through which we see God’s dream for His church. This lens involves a rather significant reimagining of Adventism as a wholly redemptive community with a distinctive mission to contemporary audiences.

This third lens is an important part of how we might begin to reach some

of the audiences that are often closed to us. I will also argue in favor of an Adventism that features our “better true stories.”¹³ This includes a witness that significantly enhances our effectiveness with audiences that might otherwise ignore us. In these pages, I will also advocate for *an Adventism that is at its best*. By this, I mean an Adventism full of men and women whose joy and grace lead us to pursue matters with integrity, generosity, and to have a commitment to social justice and give us a compelling end-time witness—one that simply makes more sense to contemporary audiences.¹⁴ Finally, I will contend that the local elder is in many ways the one best positioned to lead out in this more comprehensive witness to contemporary audiences.

A book that is part of a larger story

At the very heart of this introduction is the idea that this particular book on the elder in Adventism has been written as part of a larger story. The book was written in conjunction with an online course for the local elder that is being offered by the NAD through the Adventist Learning Community, along with an expanding number of additional resources available through the NAD Ministerial Department. This is a multipronged effort, including distinctive elements that help in different ways to make the work of the local elder more successful in contributing to congregational success.

By the end of the book, you will hopefully capture a larger vision of what the local elder may be called to do in ministering to his or her congregation and community as part of God’s larger end-time mission. One reality we have to acknowledge is that there are not as many Adventist resources on the elder as we might hope. There are *some*, of course, and the ones that we have are quite good, if a bit limited at times in addressing *context* as fully as needed in North America. There are also a number of conferences experimenting with broader approaches to the work of the elder, so we can expect more resources to become available in the near future. The Ministerial Department at the division is launching a new effort to put in place volunteer lay pastors. This is currently being approached in a very careful manner, due to some of the legal and insurance issues associated with it, but it has great potential for helping address the impending crisis we face as an increasing number of baby-boomer pastors retire.

In looking back at my own pastoral years, I am painfully aware of how little intentionality I gave to addressing the training of my own elders for best practices. I mostly expected my existing elders to mentor my new ones. In doing the research for this book, I have discovered that I was not alone. Learning by doing does not always fully prepare someone for actually excelling in an area of responsibility, and this sometimes even results in a kind of “knowledge drift,” where each generation does slightly less than the previous one.

I would urge you to begin reading with a notebook and a pen or pencil in your hand so that you can log questions for which you do not find easy answers. If the pastor or other elders in your church cannot help resolve these questions, perhaps others in nearby churches can. Then you can make queries of Adventist resources on the internet at some of the previously mentioned sites. Also, the local conference leadership group should have someone who can help explore the matter, whatever it is. And because we are who we are denominationally, there is additional help from the several levels of governance above the conference.

A final word on organization

There are eight chapters in this book. The first six deal with the primary information an elder needs in order to get his or her mind around the history and mission of the elder. These six chapters combine both conceptual and practical information, telling a story that encourages a powerful service in our churches and communities. The nature of this material is such that it intentionally addresses larger issues of mission and should be of interest to pastors, elders, other leaders, and local church members who want to better understand the church in its present context and leadership in today’s church. The last two chapters, however, represent a rather precise discussion of the specific tasks or skills the elder must master. These last two chapters are tied in a direct way to the *Elder’s Handbook* from the General Conference. I have carefully taken into account what is written there and added contextualization for North American pastors and elders.

1. This does not in any way suggest that the pastor does not care for the members or that the pastor is not as committed or sensitive because he or she is an employee of the church. Rather, it is to put a distinctive focus on the ways in which the local elder—when he or she imagines what God can do—becomes a uniquely powerful agent for mission.

2. This tends to be true in North America as well as around the world. In some areas, the congregations are smaller, and in others, the congregations may be larger. But even when they are larger, the typical district is also larger.

3. Petr Činčala, “Building a Vibrant, Healthy, Growing Church” (paper, Adventist Society of Religious Studies, San Antonio, TX, November 18, 2016), 5, <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs/231>.

4. Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, “Table 4: Church Membership by World Divisions,” in *2017 Annual Statistical Report*, rev. February 26, 2018, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Statistics/ASR/ASR2017.pdf>.

5. By this language, I am connecting our specific conversation about the local elder and the larger missional questions facing Adventism with Ellen White’s teaching that our work is not just about baptizing more people, but it is also about telling a larger story of the character of God. Our mission, then, includes both quantitative elements (telling more people) and qualitative ones (telling a more compelling story of a loving Father).

6. While this is a topic that will be addressed later in more detail, I should acknowledge that I am writing from the perspective that one of the major contributions Adventism brings to the evangelical conversation is an emphasis on the character of God as a loving Father. This topic is fully explored by Ellen White throughout her great controversy theme. As a part of that emphasis, we see that actions taking place on planet Earth are only a portion of a larger conversation about who God is and how He desires to relate to us.

7. Brandon J. O’Brien, *The Strategically Small Church: Intimate, Nimble, Authentic, Effective* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2010).

8. David M. Klinedinst, “Back to the Future: Lay-Led Churches and a Return to Our Roots,” *Ministry*, February 2017, 10.

9. Klinedinst, “Back to the Future,” 12.

10. In discussing the book with several of its early advocates, it was affirmed that a broad approach to the conversation would be useful, including discussions about the elder as part of the larger Adventist community. Consequently, from the very early stages, the book was intended to fit the story of the local elder into the larger account of our end-time witness—not ignoring the essential local emphasis but adding how it fits into the larger issues facing Adventism.

11. My intent is not to advance change in and for itself but rather to urge that our resistance to change be tempered by a deep commitment to mission. What is “traditional” is no more or less right than what is “contemporary.” What matters is what works.

12. We will frequently discuss the role of the elder in terms of ministry to contemporary audiences, which includes the diverse mind-sets found in the church and community. By this, I am not suggesting that ministry to more traditional audiences, such as

The Role of the Local Elder

members of other churches who may be persuaded to become Adventists, is not relevant. Rather, I am acknowledging that God requires more from us than merely getting people to agree to a few distinctive doctrines. He is calling us to find ways to minister to those who operate in today's secular settings with a compelling gospel witness that makes the Adventist appeal attractive.

13. This particular language ("telling our better true stories") can be explored more fully in Bernadette Jiwa's game-changing book *Difference* (Australia: Story of Telling Press, 2014). Jiwa, an Australian marketing writer, urges us to understand the importance of reaching contemporary audiences by telling stories that resonate with the men and women in modern culture.

14. While this is most certainly a book on the local elder, it is also about how we can move from a merely parochial view of the church to one where we see ourselves as agents of change in a world that has been shaped by various forces, including traditionalism. The end-time witness of Adventism is to be of such a profound character that the darkness and hopelessness of secular life will be shown in stark contrast with the loving, joyous character that Jesus Himself displayed and calls us to demonstrate. Moreover, the local elder can become a key agent in God's end-time witness, both within and through the local congregation. This does not diminish the role other denominations may play in God's end-time work, but it merely explores the language Adventists have used for themselves in believing that the church, in some distinctive way, represents God's end-time "remnant" people.