

# Something to Talk About – A conversation guide for church leaders

By Bob Osborne, EFCA West  
Director of Church Leadership and Organizational Development  
([bob@efcawest.org](mailto:bob@efcawest.org))

September 1, 2015

## Selecting Elders – What Are We Looking For?

*Note: This is one of a series of articles intended to facilitate and guide church leaders' conversations about significant issues that often are not talked about among pastors, boards, and church leadership teams.*

*Prior articles can be found at [www.efcawest.org](http://www.efcawest.org). Click on the Church Leadership tab to get to the archive.*

In many churches, especially those whose “business” calendars are based upon the calendar year, the late summer and early fall months often find church leaders busily seeking to identify persons to serve as elders. I’m told that, oftentimes, the conversation centers on the question, “who would make a good elder.” I propose that there is a far more important question to ask than that, and that this question is something to talk about.

Before going further, I want to be clear that the purpose of this article is not to expound on Scripture regarding words, historical precedents, how long elders should serve, whether the office is elder, bishop, overseer, pastor, or any other such debate. I am assuming that your team has already done this and has come to agreement on those things. If your team has not, I encourage you to do so. For consistency, I am using the word “elder.”

I want to propose that the question we should be asking when looking for potential elders is not, “Who are we looking for,” but “What are we looking for?” There’s a big difference.

I must admit that I’ve fallen into the “who are we looking for” trap. When looking to fill a vacancy or expand, I have set about going through a list of names rather than a list of qualifications and desired capabilities, gifts, and talents. Other times, however, I asked the second question – “What are we looking for” – first, and then set out to find persons who met those criteria. I found the second question to yield a much more satisfying process with notably better results.

What *are* we looking for in an elder?

The best starting place is the listings of traits in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1. I often hear and even find church governance documents that identify these traits as “the qualifications” for service as an elder. I prefer to think of them as *disqualifications* – a potential elder who doesn’t meet these minimum qualifications is disqualified from serving as an elder.

So, what are we looking for in a potential elder? Here are some ideas to stimulate your conversation.

- Start with the traits in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1. But don’t stop there.
- Should a proposed elder already be “proving to be an example to the flock” (I Peter 5:3)? If so, in what areas of spiritual life and overall living?

- Should an elder exhibit traits indicative of the capacity to function as a guardian and shepherd of the flock (Acts 20:28)? What would that look like in your ministry environment?
- I am still intrigued that “wisdom” is not mentioned as a required trait in I Timothy 3 or Titus 1. Is wisdom required? How might we discern that in a potential elder?
- In hiring staff, it is sometimes noted that one should carefully examine a job candidate for three things: Character, Competence, and Chemistry. The issue of chemistry, one’s fit within the team, is a vital hiring consideration – should it also be a consideration for elders? This is not a suggestion that there should be no diversity of opinion among elders or that elders should all be cut from the same cloth. But, should not the diversity among the elders contribute to their effectiveness rather than pull the leadership team apart?
- Are we looking for strong solo leaders or strong teammates who lead? I’ve seen and heard from others of highly skilled, deeply spiritual, committed Christians who are at the top of their vocational food chain who simply cannot (or will not) adapt to their role as one member of a group that exercises leadership as a team rather than as individuals. What are you looking for?
- Should a potential elder already be in alignment with and committed to the church’s existing mission, vision, values, and strategies?
- Should a person’s age be a factor? If so, how old is “elder?” Or, how young is “elder?” I’m intrigued by the guys in their late teens and early twenties wearing white shirts with ties and riding bicycles that are considered “elders.” Makes no sense to me. Perhaps a sergeant or journeyman missionary, but not elder.
- Should social skills be considered? Should a socially awkward person (you can create your own mental image or description) be an elder? What social skills are needed for effective service as an elder?
- Should tenure with this congregation be a factor? If so, how long? How long does it take to get to know the church family well enough to effectively lead it? Yes, I know that we often call pastors who have no prior experience with the congregation. Are we willing to do this with other elders? Why or why not?
- How does the potential elder exercise leadership? Is there evidence of the first being last, the last being first, and the master as servant of others?

The above list is not intended to be exhaustive – it’s just a teaser. There is so much to be considered. Your leadership team will want to develop its own selection criteria.

Our churches need godly, skilled, competent, willingly eager, and effective leaders. One of the most important things that churches do is select their own leaders. We need to be careful, thoughtful, wise, and Spirit-led in making these important decisions.

That’s something to talk about.

*Let us know how your conversation goes. Contact Bob Osborne by e-mail at [bob@efcawest.org](mailto:bob@efcawest.org).*