

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF CHURCH POLITY AND ITS IMPACT ON
PASTORAL LEADERSHIP AND CONGREGATIONAL HEALTH

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Travis L. Biller

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

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ABSTRACT

It is reported that deacon-led churches produce conflict and high pastoral turnover (Harbuck, 2018; Payne, 1996). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how a church governance structure impacts a pastor's ability to lead, the health of the church, and pastoral retention. The experiences of pastors from deacon-led churches were evaluated for clusters of meaning and compared with the experiences of pastors who serve under an elder-led model of leadership. Nine interviews were conducted—five pastors from deacon-led churches and four from elder-led churches. This study approached the phenomenological design from an interpretive, or hermeneutical approach to understand the experiences of pastors under these models. Data from interviews were analyzed for broad themes to understand the structure and essence of the experiences of pastors living under their respective leadership models. There was a noteworthy difference between their perceptions of how their given leadership model impacts their ability to lead and the health of their church under that model. Specifically, there is more potential for conflict and control issues in deacon-led churches. In addition, elder-led churches appeared to experience better health and unity, experienced less conflict, and had more trust from their congregations. Further, under the deacon-led model, pastors were required to be more intentional in leveraging influence over individual leaders and members with the goal of achieving ministry objectives; whereas elder-led pastors, working as a team, spend more time focused on organizational objectives. In addition, under the deacon-led model pastors lacked the support enjoyed by those under the elder-led model. The goal of this research was to help churches understand how their church polity impacts their pastor and the health of their church.

Keywords: Leadership, church, church health, church polity, pastor, elder, deacon, elder-led, deacon-led; conflict

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to the many faithful pastors who diligently labor for the Kingdom: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58).

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CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

Introduction

Many pastors leave the ministry every year (Bray, 2021; Green, 2016; Turner, 2012; Stewart, 2009). According to Rainer (2019) 70% of traditional Southern Baptist churches are either plateaued or in decline. Many who leave ministry do so because of conflict with either a board or a small group that directs the operations of the church (Hicks, 2010; Greenfield, 2001; The Rock Christian Church, 2005). In Southern Baptist Churches, this usually happens in deacon-led churches where the position of the pastor is subordinate to a board of deacons (Harbuck, 2018; Payne, 1996).

A deacon-led model of church governance occurs when deacons are the leading governing body of the church (Strauch, 1995). This often comes in the form of a board of directors where the deacons assume the role of overseers and administrators. Many deacon ministries operate as “boards” even if they are not formally recognized as such by their churches (Payne, 1996; Strauch, 1995). Two studies contend that many churches in the SBC operate with a deacon board leading the church (Harbuck, 2018; Payne, 1996).

However, it has been argued that the deacon-led model of leadership leads to conflict and church decline, specifically conflict between the deacons and the pastor, which ultimately harms the church (Harbuck, 2018; Payne, 1996; Strauch, 1995). Further, other studies report that the top reason for pastor termination is control issues (Hicks, 2010; Powell, 2008; Turner, 2012). One study revealed that many forced terminations are the result of a conflict that centered around who was going to lead the church (Hicks, 2010). Lifeway Christian Resources’ pastoral ministries department reported 209 forced terminations of pastors in 2009 (Turner, 2012). The issue surrounding their termination was the question of who runs the church, and “nearly twice

as many pastors are dismissed annually related to this issue than any other issue” (Turner, 2012, para. 1). These and related studies are explored in more depth in Chapter 2 but do raise important concerns about deacon-led polity. However, in academic literature there is little emphasis on this aspect of church life. As such, this qualitative study sought to understand the impact that church polity has on a pastor’s ability to lead as well as on the overall health of the church from the perspective of the pastor’s experience.

Background to the Problem

A person walking down the hallway of an average, traditional Southern Baptist church is likely to see a line of portraits hanging on the wall. Each portrait is of a former pastor. For some churches that line of portraits can be long. Some portraits have the dates that each pastor served the church. For many, those dates cover a short span of time, three to six years. While not always the case, a church with such a display may be experiencing conflict and is either not growing or growing slower than the surrounding community.

In contrast, this author once visited a large, healthy, vibrant church with a history going back over a century. The church also had a wall with portraits and the dates of service for each pastor. There were only three portraits. Together, they spanned almost one hundred years of service. The shortest tenure on that wall was thirty-three years. This is an elder-led church. That church has a world-wide reach, has sent out pastors and missionaries, has planted churches, and has seen countless people come to faith in Christ. While having several portraits hanging on a wall is not conclusive evidence of an unhealthy church, it does tell something about that church and its relationship with its pastors. At a bare minimum, churches that see pastors leave every three to five years are generally not as healthy as churches that see pastors stay over a quarter century or longer (Green, 2002).

Most traditional Southern Baptist churches practice congregational church polity governed by a board of deacons. However, it is reported that this type of polity sees a larger turnover of pastors (Harbuck, 2018). And furthermore, it is argued that this form of church polity has created confusion and generated much conflict in churches (Payne, 1996; Strauch, 1995). In one study, over 43 percent of church members surveyed indicated that at some time during their church life they saw major conflict between the pastor and deacons in their church (Payne, 1996). That same study recounts several stories of church splits that resulted from the deacons not agreeing with the direction the pastor was taking the church. In many situations, the result of such conflict is that the pastor leaves the church and sometimes he departs pastoral ministry.

Harbuck (2018) reported similar findings. Each year more than 3,700 churches permanently close their doors. Furthermore, “of the estimated 344,894 churches in existence in the United States, 297,500 of them are in distress” (p. 3). The study concluded that a significant factor in this decline is the establishment of an unbiblical polity within the church that is at odds with the biblical design, and more specifically, a misapplication of the duties and understanding of the office of the deacon (Harbuck, 2018).

This understanding, it is argued, emerged in the mid-19th century when the office of the deacon became “an office of authority, influence, and administration, rather than an office of humble service” (Harbuck, 2018, p. 103). The executive deacon boards that gained control in Baptist churches during that time have continued to conflict with the original, biblical design of the deacon ministry (Foshee, 1966; Strauch, 1995). Today, many churches still have “deacon boards” that function as the accountability board and sounding board for the pastor. Those boards, while they may serve the needs of the membership, also believe their main job is to serve the business and “temporal” aspects of the church (building and grounds, finances, personnel

issues, etc.) while the pastor focuses on the “spiritual” aspect of the church (preaching, visiting the sick, etc.) (Foshee, 1966; Howell, 1946). Over time, this has created the environment where the pastor is expected to report and submit to the deacons, who wield control over the affairs of the pastor and the church (Strauch, 1995).

However, for the corporate body to function effectively, it must first function biblically. While there are many variants of church polity, elder-led leadership appears to be the biblical pattern (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17, 28-32 Titus 1:5; 1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Peter 5:1-4)¹. Each church is to have a plurality of elders and deacons, each serving a different function. Elders are called to lead the church, while deacons are called to help meet the various needs that arise in the congregation (Hebrews 13:7, 17; Acts 6:1-7). As such, “deacons were created to assist the elders. As subordinates, they were to relieve the elders of menial tasks so that the elders could concentrate on prayer and the ministry of the Word of God” (Geisler, 2005, p. 116). This is not to suggest the work of the deacon is not important, but clearly points to a division of labor within the church. So, while deacons and even the congregation participate in various aspects of leadership, the congregation in the New Testament is led by its own set of elders (Geisler, 2005; Strauch, 1995).

However, many churches unintentionally try to use a plurality of leaders by allowing deacons to act as the church’s elders or spiritual leaders or even as the pastor’s advisors (Akin & Pace, 2017). But this arrangement compromises the nature and functions of both offices and encourages dysfunction within the body. As a result, the church must be on guard against using deacons as a board of advisors to the pastor; and nowhere in scripture are they called to lead the church (Akin & Pace, 2017). Instead, scripture reveals that the office of the deacon is a separate

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the Bible are from the English Standard Version (2001).

and subordinate office with distinct functions than that of the elder (Acts 6:3-4). And when serving as intended, both offices complement each other in ministry, enhancing the overall effectiveness of any given congregation (Acts 6:7).

While theological studies abound as to the role of the pastor, many churches struggle to find a balance between the two offices of the church. In many churches deacons often serve as functioning elders (Akin & Pace, 2017). However, instead of complementing the pastor and helping the church, the church usually suffers from conflict and poor pastoral retention (Greenfield, 2001). Scripture teaches that both offices are needed. If one office is functionally missing in the church, the church will suffer as a result. Until churches align their church polity and leadership model with the teaching of scripture, poor church health and conflict are likely to continue.

The importance of this issue for church vitality becomes clear when seen from a broad perspective. Overall, churches are in a steep decline. It is reported by Barna that there is significant decline in church attendance over the last two decades. They write, “in essence, the share of practicing Christians has nearly dropped in half since 2000” (Barna, 2020). Further, it is reported that 70% of churches are declining or plateauing, while only 30% are growing by reaching new people (Rainer, 2019). Large numbers of pastors leave their pastorates every year (Green, 2016). They feel overworked, underappreciated, and believe their churches have unrealistic expectations for their work. In addition, Barna reports that in 2022 42% of ministers were thinking of leaving the ministry (Statistics for Pastors, 2022). For those who do not leave the ministry, the average pastor tenure is three to six years (Blackwell, 2018).

Stewart (2009) claimed that a record number of senior pastors are leaving the ministry, getting fired, or being driven out, endangering the profession of ministry. She reported the following:

- A Duke University study found that 85% of seminary graduates entering the ministry leave within five years and 90% of all pastors will not stay to retirement.
- A study from 1999 revealed that 72,000 pastors and clergy were forced out across America in 1999.
- The Alban Institute stated that within the first 10 years of parish ministry, roughly half will either be fired by their congregations or forced to move.

While numbers can tell a story, the firsthand experiences of people put a face to the numbers. Greenfield (2001) recounted his experience as a seasoned pastor who suffered because of an unbiblical leadership model. He became the eighth pastor to be forced out of a church in a twenty-five-year span. In other words, during that period the church called and forced out eight pastors from their roles. When he spoke with the pastor search committee, they told him they wanted someone older with a lot of experience. Both he and the pulpit committee believed he was qualified. However, three years later at age 62 he was forced to resign. While he believes in congregational polity, he believes the New Testament teaches that elders are to lead a local congregation. According to him, the true function of a deacon-led church, or deacon board, is that a few men (the board) become an oligarchy (the rule of a few). He explained the common relationship such a board has with a pastor:

In a church with an entrenched oligarchy, a minister who tries to lead without their approval will be a short-term-minister. A power struggle will develop because a lay oligarchy will consider its authority being challenged by such a ‘reckless’ minister who ‘doesn’t know his place’ in the church. As one such powerful lay leader said to me, ‘We hire and fire the pastor; we pay him to do what we tell him; the nerve of him to ignore us!’ In such churches, sad as it sounds, the minister is little more than a glorified custodian, a chaplain of sorts to them, a hireling of a small group of movers and shakers in the congregation (Greenfield, 2001, p. 71).

Such stories lie behind the statistics.

Statement of the Problem

While the tension between the pastor and deacons in smaller churches is well-established in practice, it is less recognized in the academic literature (Hicks, 2010; Powell, 2008). However, many state conventions offer ministries for conflict resolution. Also, there are ample books written for the church that seek to explain why conflict exists and how to avoid it, and which seek to guide both pastors and churches through the conflict process. There are also a few journal articles about pastoral retention (Stewart, 2009; Strunk et al, 2017). Studies have also sought to address the issue of the office of the deacon, and offer insight into the problem (Harbuck, 2018; Hicks, 2010; Payne, 1996). However, there are no studies that focus on the practice of congregational polity with a deacon-led church and its impact on the pastor's ability to lead and on the overall church health. Therefore, this study sought to understand the experiences of pastors under that model and to compare those to the experiences of pastors in an elder-led model of leadership. This study sought to discern if there are any differences in how a church's leadership model impacts both a pastor's ability to lead and the health of the church from the perspective of the pastor.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore and compare the lived experiences of pastors who work under a deacon-led and an elder-led model of church governance. Additionally, this study sought to understand how pastors perceive that church governance structure impacts their ability to lead, the health of the church, and pastoral retention.

Research Questions

RQ1. How has the church's model of leadership contributed to a pastor's ability to lead the church?

RQ2. How do pastors perceive the health of the church in a deacon-led or elder-led church?

RQ3. How does the church's model contribute to a pastor's desire to continue in the pastoral ministry?

Assumptions and Delimitations

Research Assumptions

By their nature, qualitative/phenomenological studies seek to derive meaning from the participants being studied (Creswell, 2013). However, the data derived has the potential to be influenced by the researcher's existing assumptions and biases. Creswell and Creswell (2018) encouraged researchers to identify their biases, values, and history with the subject that can unintentionally shape their interpretation of their study. To that end, this researcher holds to the following assumptions:

- Per the Baptist Faith and Message 2000, the SBC pastors who participated in this study believe that the Bible is God's revelation given to humankind without error and contains absolute truth; "and is the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried."
- The church is a God-ordained institution that operates best when functioning within the bounds of revelation.
- Pastors are called by God to be elders, and therefore leaders in a local congregation, with the mandate to lead God's people to spiritual maturity, and to equip the church for effective ministry (Ephesians 4:11-16).
- Deacons are called by God to serve the needs of a local congregation, serving under the leadership of the elders (Acts 6:1-7).
- Change in churches is a slow process that can span decades.
- The experience of a person contains real meaning and can impact a person's sense of value, purpose, and ability to function.
- The answers given by the participants in this study will accurately reflect their lived experience and give valuable insight into the phenomenon of working under their respective leadership models.

Delimitations of the Research Design

It was the goal of this research to conduct 10 interviews, five from each model of leadership, or until saturation occurred. Five pastors who work under a deacon-led model were interviewed. However, only four pastors who work under an elder-led model were available to participate during the research period.

This research was delimited to Southern Baptist churches that have either a deacon-led model of church governance or an elder-led model of church governance. Specifically, this study was delimited to SBC churches with a lead pastor who has been in that position for at least two years and who works with a deacon board to lead the ministries of the church or with an active elder-led form of leadership. All churches were Southern Baptist churches. Participants were lead pastors from churches that had approximately 700 active members or less, had a yearly budget of between \$150,000 to \$1.5 million, and who have been an established church for at least 10 years. In addition, it was required that each participant had a Master of Divinity or equivalent from an accredited seminary.

In addition, this study was limited to the impact that the church governing model has on a pastor's ability to lead and on the overall health of the church from the perspective of the pastor. Since the perception of the pastor was the focal point, this study did not seek the perspectives of other church members or other members who are in official leadership positions within those churches.

Finally, this study did not investigate other sources of leadership conflict in the study population, nor did it control for (i.e., attempt to negate) the impact of such conflict sources in the research design.

Definition of Terms

- *Pastor*: Throughout this study, the words elder and pastor are used synonymously.
- *Elder*: A man called by God to hold a specific leadership role which entails preaching the gospel, teaching the Word of God, and leading a local congregation to follow God's will.
- *Elder-led church*: A governing structure where a plurality of elders works together in leading a church to follow God's will. This is a collective form of church governance that divides the position, power, and duties of the office equally among all the elders (Strauch, 1995).
- *Deacon*: A man or woman called by God to hold a specific role of service in the church. Deacons serve the practical needs of the congregation and serve as the church's ministers of mercy (Strauch, 1995).
- *Deacon-led church*: A governing structure where several deacons, in the form of a board of directors, oversee the administrative and ministerial needs of the church. In this model, pastors are accountable to and fall under the supervision of the board (Strauch, 1995).
- *Congregationalism*: A form of church governance where each local church practices self-governance (Engle & Cowan, 2004).
- *Church*: The local church is the body of Christ, composed of saved people (saints), who by virtue of their faith in Christ have been assembled out of the world as God's family and have dedicated their lives to following Christ as disciples.

Significance of the Study

Former studies reveal that conflict and forced terminations of pastors are common in ministry (Bray, 2021; Hicks, 2010; Powell, 2008; Stewart, 2009; Strunk, et al., 2017). It has been argued that much conflict and forced terminations are a result of practicing a deacon-led model of church governance (Harbuck, 2018; Payne, 1996). As such, gaining an understanding of the impact of a church's leadership model may prevent unnecessary conflict and forced terminations. It may help both pastors and churches alike navigate the leadership challenges they face. Many pastors report feeling unsupported in their ministry role (Green, 2016). Feelings of isolation can lead to frustration, burnout, and loss of purpose, which in turn can lead to misunderstandings and conflict. Gaining an understanding of the leadership model's impact can help pastors better

understand their circumstances, leading to a healthy response. Also, understanding the impact of a church's polity on its pastor may help a congregation better understand their pastor and equip them to better minister to their pastor, which might have the result of reducing frustration and burnout among clergy. Understanding the impact may help congregations evaluate the leadership model employed by their church, thereby improving how they function as a team.

Summary of the Design

Research Population

The SBC is the largest protestant denomination in the United States. They comprise over 50,000 churches (Southern Baptist Convention, 2023). Each church is independent and autonomous. In the SBC there is a wide variety of churches from many diverse cultural backgrounds that span the globe. However, all SBC churches cooperate in working towards fulfilling the Great Commission. Further, while each church is unique, all are baptistic in their theological perspective. In addition, from their website, they state that, "Though as many as two hundred could be counted as mega-churches, the vast majority run less than two hundred in weekly worship" (Southern Baptist Convention, 2023).

Research Samples and Sampling Technique

Interviews were conducted with five pastors from deacon-led churches and four pastors from elder-led churches. The purpose of the interviews was to gain an understanding of the lived experience of pastors who work under those models of church governance. Pastors were asked a series of open-ended questions based on the Research Questions that allowed them to give a personal assessment of their ability to lead, the overall health of their church based on their current model, as well as their overall satisfaction with their position as the pastor under that model. The answers of pastors from deacon-led churches were compared with the answers from

pastors who work in elder-led churches. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for the study.

The theoretical framework guiding this research was shared leadership. Shared leadership includes the idea of a council of equals (Strauch, 1995). It is also called distributed leadership and is a process of mutual influence defined by cooperative decision-making and shared responsibility among team members, whereby team members lead each other towards the accomplishment of goals (Robinson, 2018).

Methodological Design

This qualitative study used a phenomenological research design to ascertain the lived experience of pastors working under the two leadership models. Qualitative research focuses on phenomena that happen or have happened in the “real world” or in natural settings (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). This type of research seeks to understand the lived experience of individuals and discern the essential meaning of that experience (Moustakas, 1994). As such, this research approached the phenomenological design from an interpretive, or hermeneutical, approach to understanding the lived experiences of pastors. Data from interviews were analyzed for broad themes of meaning from which clusters of meaning were discerned. From these themes the structure and essence of the lived experiences of pastors living under their respective leadership models is presented in Chapter Four. Additionally, bracketing was used to limit any bias that the researcher may have had. This technique is used in qualitative research to lessen the possible harm that can result from the researcher’s prejudices, which can skew the findings (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Bracketing happens when the researcher is intentional about separating his/her bias and/or experience from the data collection process. It takes place when the researcher takes notes (memos) during the interview and highlights his/her experience in contrast to what the

interviewee is revealing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Design details are described at length in Chapter Three.

Summary

This chapter has sought to define and give background to the problem, as well as state the purpose of this research, which was to discern if a real difference exists in the experiences of pastors who work under different leadership models. While there is little academic literature on the subject, there are studies contending that a deacon-led model of ministry causes church conflict, pastoral turnover, and poor church health based on that model. In comparing the experiences of pastors who work under deacon-led churches with those under elder-led churches, this study sought to understand the problem from the perspective of the pastors who work under those models.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

It is an unfortunate reality that many churches are facing serious challenges concerning membership decline, church health, and pastoral turnover. Rainer (2014) conducted several studies on church health and concluded that many congregations are not in good health. Nine out of ten churches are either in decline or growing slower than their surrounding community. In addition, many pastors are leaving the ministry because of a lack of support. Senior pastors are leaving the ministry in greater numbers than ever before, getting dismissed, or being forced out, and 50% of ministers drop out of the ministry in their first five years (Stewart, 2009). According to Barna (2021) the number of pastors who are considering leaving the ministry permanently has increased. They report that 38% of those they surveyed indicate they have considered quitting full-time ministry in the last year. The percentages are higher among younger pastors (46%) and the majority are from mainline denominations (51%). Furthermore, they reported that only one in three pastors is considered healthy in terms of wellbeing. In addition, data from October 2021 revealed “that many pastors are not doing well in multiple categories of well-being, including spiritual, physical, emotional, vocational, and financial” (Barna, 2021, para. 5). The rising dropout rates and senior pastor terminations are a serious challenge to pastoral service today. As a result of these challenges, it is argued that the field of pastoral ministry is now in jeopardy (Stewart, 2009).

It appears that something has gone wrong in many churches. From decline to conflict to high pastor turnover, the contemporary landscape paints a dismal picture that does not reflect the power and expansion seen in the book of Acts. This problem has been brewing for a while. According to Barna (1997) the issue was, and perhaps still is, a lack of leadership in the

church—“The church is dying due to a lack of strong leadership. In this time of unprecedented opportunity and plentiful resources, the church is actually losing influence” (p. 18). Despite sound orthodox theology, without the proper leadership the church will fail to achieve the mission entrusted to it by its Lord (Blandino, 2018).

While there may be many reasons for both church decline and pastoral dropouts, this study sought to understand if a relationship exists between the model of church government employed by a church, a pastor’s ability to lead under that model, and church’s health based on that model. In addition, it sought to discern its impact on the desire of a pastor to remain in pastoral ministry based on that model. In other words, does the ecclesiastical model of church governance employed by a church either impair or empower the leadership of its pastor? To that end, this study sought to understand the relationship between a deacon-led model of church governance versus an elder-led model as it relates to those themes.

Theological Framework for the Study

In the following section, a theological framework for the study is discussed. It is commonly accepted in protestant circles, and specifically in the SBC, that scripture is the source of understanding of the gospel. Many protestant churches express their understanding of this through the term “Sola Scriptura,” which means “scripture alone.” Scripture is the only source of information concerning the gospel and the church, as it is the divine record of revelation. However, while most churches in the SBC affirm this truth, there seems to be some incongruity with that doctrine as it relates to most churches’ understanding of church government. While some argue that scripture is not clear about how churches should be governed, scripture seems to reveal that elder-led leadership is God’s design for the local church. Therefore, this section seeks to present biblical arguments for church leadership organization. When the church seeks to

govern itself according to God's plan, the result should be a healthy and productive church that successfully fulfills the Great Commission.

It is recognized, however, that the subject of church polity includes other views such as episcopalianism, which is practiced by various protestant denominations, as well as by the Catholic church. This is a system of church governance that has a hierarchical structure where local churches report to a higher authority vested in bishops, archbishops, and in the case of the Catholic church, popes (Engle & Cowan, 2004). Presbyterianism is another form of church polity, that while recognizing the role of elders, functions within the system of a presbytery, where local churches, while led by elders, are also subject to the authority of the presbytery (Engle & Cowan, 2004). The subject of these systems of church polity, while important, is beyond the scope of this study. For the purposes of this study, elder-led churches are considered within the framework of congregationalism. Congregationalism is distinct for its emphasis on the authority and autonomy of the local church. For Congregationalists, this means that each local church conducts itself under the authority of Christ alone and in accordance with the Word of God. No ecclesiastical authority exists outside of or above the local assembly of believers.

Also, throughout this study, the words "elder" and "pastor" are used synonymously. As such, a pastor is an elder. It is recognized, however, that there are those who see elder and pastor as distinct. Miller (2017), for example, saw the role of the elder as a distinct office (along with the role of the deacon), but believed the role of the pastor is a spiritual gift. Miller argued that while the pastor can hold the office of the elder (and most do), not every pastor does so. For example, he argued that women can be pastors who serve other women in that role, but who do not hold the office of the elder, which is limited to men (Miller, 2017).

Sid Buzzell, professor of Bible exposition and leadership, dean of the school of theology at Colorado Christian University, and the general editor of the NIV Leadership Bible (Hartwig & Bird, 2015), presented three biblical terms used to describe leaders in scripture. They are “overseer” (*episkopos*) and “elder” (*presbuteros*) which are used synonymously, and the third is “deacon,” (*diakonos*), which is a different office than that of an elder. However, another word used to refer to the office of elder is “pastor/shepherd” (*poimen*). This term was used as a reference to the office of the pastor by the apostle Paul: “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors [*poimen*] and teachers” (Eph. 4:11). This is the only time the word is used in scripture to refer to an office. The other times it is used in reference to what elders do. As elders they pastor/shepherd the people of God. In all then, there are three terms used to describe the office of the elder/leader. Each term communicates an essential function of the pastor/leader, but they all refer to the same office, and there is one term to refer to the office of the deacon.

The Doctrine of the Church

Any discussion of church health must include a sound biblical ecclesiology. The doctrine of the church must inform, indeed guide, any ecclesiastical model of church governance. Sound theology is a prerequisite for practical Christian living. Said in another way, good orthodoxy leads to good orthopraxy. The church has been defined as the body of people called by God’s grace through faith in Christ to glorify him together by serving him in his world (Dever, 2012). This simple definition tells not only what the church is (a collection of people who have faith in Christ and who gather for worship), but what the church does (glorify Christ by serving him). This also reveals that God’s ultimate purpose has always been to reveal his glory through a corporate body rather than merely through individuals. In other words, the mission Christ gave

the church was meant to be undertaken by the body of believers. However, in churches today there is little interest in understanding the church, or the essential gospel doctrine of ecclesiology (Dever, 2012).

One of the main challenges for churches is the problem of individualism so rampant in contemporary culture (Dickard, 2022; Jackson, 2020). Under that influence, church is a place people go, not a group that works together to glorify Christ. However, because members have flipped the definition of membership on its head, many churches are weak (Rainer, 2013). This has happened because many in the church have forgotten what it means to be a member of the body of Christ according to the Bible (Rainer, 2013). The solution is for members to understand that, according to scripture, they are to be functioning members, which means they serve Christ by utilizing their spiritual gifts in the context of the corporate body.

Paul refers to the church as the “body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27). He then compares the church to a human body (1 Cor. 12:12-27). He argues that just as the human body has many members (foot, eyes, ears, etc.), but is one body, so too the church has many people who are connected by the Holy Spirit of God, but likewise is one body (team) that works together to accomplish God’s will. Paul’s point is that no one would argue a human body is composed of individual members, each doing their own thing. It is composed of systems that work together as a single organism. For life to be maintained, those systems must be working in conjunction with every other system. In the same way, for there to be life in the church, every member must be working together as a single organism. Thus, the Bible reveals a design for how churches should be organized and run; it works together as a unified body.

Following the blueprint of biblical revelation is necessary for a church to become what God created it to be (Malphurs, 2003). While pastors are needed and are an important biblical

component of the body, a single pastor can no more effectively lead every “system” in the church any more than the heart can keep a body alive by itself. For the church to become effective in ministry, then, each member must see themselves in relationship to the whole. The body, not individuals, fulfills the mission of the church. As such, the local church must begin to see itself as a body that works together.

To be effective, then, the church must understand that its success in ministry is only as strong as its willingness to work together as a team. No member is more important than any other (1 Cor. 12:21); and every member’s success depends on others in the body. It is for that reason that Paul wrote, “... if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it” (1 Cor. 12:26). Paul’s point was to emphasize the interconnectedness of the body—together it stands or falls.

In the original language of the New Testament, the Greek word for “church” is *ekklēsia*. The meaning of the word is “the assembled ones.” It can mean an assembly of citizens, an assembly of people who come to debate a civic topic, or even “those who anywhere ... constitute such a company and are united into one body” (Strong, 1990, G1577). In the New Testament, it is used 82 times “to refer to believers who lived in specific geographical areas” (Getz, 2003, p. 49). In other words, this is the word that described a local body of believers. Many of Paul’s epistles reflect this reality. He wrote to the church in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Galatia, etc. Each epistle was directed to the *ekklēsia* in those geographic areas.

The idea that the church is “the assembled ones” can be seen when the body comes together for worship. They are called out of the world to worship and serve Christ. However, it also refers to the church as a specific community of people. These are those who have been called out of the world and are now described as God’s people in community (Getz, 2003). Three

words describe the people who compose this community. First, they are “brothers” (*adelphoi*). In the original language the word can refer to both men and woman. It carries the idea that this community is a family. It is used over 200 times in the New Testament. The second word is “saints” (*hagios*). The term is used nearly 50 times in the New Testament in reference to those in local congregations. It refers to those who have been saved by faith in Christ. They are the holy ones, made holy by the blood of Christ. The third word is “disciple” (*mathēteuō*). This word means both a learner and a follower. The New Testament specifically refers to people who placed their faith in Jesus and have dedicated themselves to following Christ. Luke’s Gospel identified disciples only in the context of local churches (Getz, 2003).

These words help give definition to the church. For this study, the church is defined as the body of Christ, composed of saved people (saints) who by virtue of their faith in Christ have been assembled out of the world as God’s family and have dedicated their lives to following Christ as disciples.

The Church Working as a Team

When the church was born in the book of Acts, Jesus revealed that it would spread to the entire world (Acts 1:8). As it spread, these local congregations of Christians would be guided by a group of godly leaders (Getz, 2003). As these leaders led the church to fulfill the Great Commission, they would do so by working as team (Hartwig & Bird, 2015). Although the term “leadership team” will not be found in the Bible, there are numerous examples of leadership teams throughout scripture (Hartwig & Bird, 2015).

For example, teamwork is seen in creation. The Trinity worked together in creating the world and giving life to man. The Trinity also worked together in bringing about redemption. The first human team was seen when Adam and Eve worked together as a family. Moses worked

with Aaron in confronting Pharaoh. Later Moses led Israel with a team of elders. Jesus led a team of men he trained to preach the gospel. After the church was born, it was referred to as a body. As such, the church is a single, integrated system that integrates a number of functions, much like a human body (Hartwig & Bird, 2015).

When describing the church as a body, Paul envisioned the church's members as working together as a team (Hartwig & Bird, 2015). If the members of the church are taught to work together as a team (the body of Christ), how much more, then, should the leaders whose example they are instructed to follow do so? (Hartwig & Bird, 2015). In fact, the account of the church in the book of Acts shows that it was a community of believers led by a group of leaders who worked together as a team to achieve a shared goal (Barna, 2001). That team is composed of a plurality of elders who are called by God to lead the church. The common vision they encourage the church to follow is the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20).

Elder-Led Leadership

For the corporate body to function effectively as a team, however, it must function biblically. Just like professional sports teams have specific organizational structures that enable them to win games, so too scripture reveals a specific organizational structure that will enable the corporate body of Christ to work together as God intends (see Figure 1, p. 40). Thus, while many variations of church polity developed over church history, elder-led leadership appears to be the biblical pattern God has revealed to the church (Geisler, 2005; Strauch, 1995). Scripture encourages each church to have a plurality of elders and deacons (Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17, 28-32; Titus 1:5; 1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Acts 6:1-7). It must be noted, however, that the office of the deacon was created to help the elders (Acts 6:1-7). "As subordinates, they were to relieve the elders of menial tasks so that the elders could concentrate on prayer and the ministry of the

Word of God” (Geisler, 2005, p. 116). As such, while deacons and even the congregation all participate in various aspects of leadership as they seek to accomplish the Great Commission together, congregations in the New Testament are governed by their own congregational elders (Geisler, 2005; Strauch, 1995).

Therefore, the elders, as shepherds/leaders, are called to lead the church (Akin & Pace, 2017). They lead through teaching, preaching, discipleship, and prayer. They also are to exercise authority over the flock (Heb. 13:7; 17). This is not an authority to intimidate, but an authority to empower and equip the church for ministry (Ephesians 4:11-16). This authority is exercised by teaching and preaching the Word of God. It includes oversight of church members (via discipleship and even discipline), and oversight of the mission of the church. Therefore, elders work together to shepherd the church (Strauch, 1995). They do this by feeding the sheep the Word of God, protecting the sheep from false teachers, leading the sheep to fulfill God’s will, and caring for the practical needs of the sheep (Acts 20:17-32). Ultimately, shepherds do these things because of their love for the sheep. The best shepherds are those who are intentional about loving the sheep (Strauch, 1995). The best elders are those who genuinely love the people they serve.

Some argue that scripture is silent about how the church is to be organized (Strauch, 1995). But the New Testament clearly outlines its major features, and the authors of the New Testament provide a clear and comprehensive explanation of its main characteristics. Strauch (1995) argued the reason it is no longer emphasized is because the clear teaching of scripture has been replaced by manmade doctrines. To define biblical eldership, then, we must return to Scripture, which is the only God-given, infallible standard for authentic Christianity.

When scripture is studied, a pattern seems to emerge. The concept of elder was first seen in the book of Acts. In Acts (14:23), we read that as Paul and Barnabas were planting churches on their missionary journey: "... they had appointed elders in every church...." Thus, from the very beginning, this was the organizational structure of church government. Strauch (1995) stated, "The phrase 'in every' presents the Greek preposition *kata*. Here it is used in the distributive sense, meaning 'in each individual church.' Literally the passage reads: 'having appointed for them church by church elders'" (p. 135). The term appears again in chapter twenty of the book of Acts. As Paul was leaving the Ephesian church, we read that, "from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church" (Acts 20:17). As he concluded his third missionary journey, he bid the elders of the church at Ephesus to come to him, and as he said his goodbyes, he charged the elders with their duties (Acts 20:28-35). His address to the elders in Ephesus serves almost as a textbook for pastor/elders (Strauch, 1995). He reminded them that they have a divine commission to protect the church against false teachers, to do the hard work of helping the needy, to be spiritually alert, and to defend the gospel as they teach the whole counsel of God's word. In addition, Paul spoke about elders in his letters to the Thessalonian and Philippian churches (1 Thess. 5:12,13; Phil. 1:1). He also instructed Timothy and Titus about elders in the churches (1 Tim. 3:1-7, 3:10. 4:14, 5:17-25; Titus 1:5-9). In addition, Peter addressed the elders of the church (1 Peter 5:1-5) as does James (5:13-15). And in the book of Hebrews the church is called to submit to the leadership of the elders (13:7, 17). It appears that when scripture is consulted on how the church is to be organized, elder-led leadership is God's revealed plan.

As discussed, the biblical terms used to describe an elder/pastor are, "overseer" (*episkopos*), "elder" (*presbuteros*), and "pastor/shepherd" (*poimen*). Each term communicates an

essential function of the pastor/leader, but they all refer to the same office. In total, there are eight words that the New Testament uses to refer to church leaders and what they do (Hartwig & Bird, 2015). The first three refer to those who serve in the official capacity as a leader. The first two, already mentioned, are “overseer” (*episkopos*) and “elder” (*presbyteros*); the third is “deacon,” (*diakonos*), which is a different office than that of an elder. The last five words refer to what they do. They are the word “shepherd” (*poimena*), “to shepherd” (*poimaino*), to lead (*proistamenos*), “to rule” (*hegoumenos*), and “apostles” (*apostolos*; the sent-out ones) (Hartwig & Bird, 2015). An additional word used is “to serve” (*diakonos*).

The words “overseer,” “elder,” and “shepherd” are used interchangeably, and today refer to a pastor. This is seen very clearly in 1 Peter 5:1-3:

The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

Here, Peter uses the words “elder,” “shepherd,” and “overseer” all in the same text and referring to the same office. He refers to himself as a “fellow elder” who is encouraging other elders to “shepherd” God’s people by taking “oversight” (“serving as overseers”) of the church (Engle & Cowan, 2004). The deacon is a separate and subordinate office that is designed to help the pastor serve the church. These words “elder,” “shepherd,” and “overseer” are used in scripture to describe their relationship with the congregation, and consequently includes the idea of oversight of the spiritual welfare of the people as well as the management of the church (Engle & Cowan, 2004). The word “elder” is always in the plural in the New Testament. As such, each local congregation had a plurality of elders that worked together to lead, manage, teach, and equip the church for ministry (Engle & Cowan, 2004).

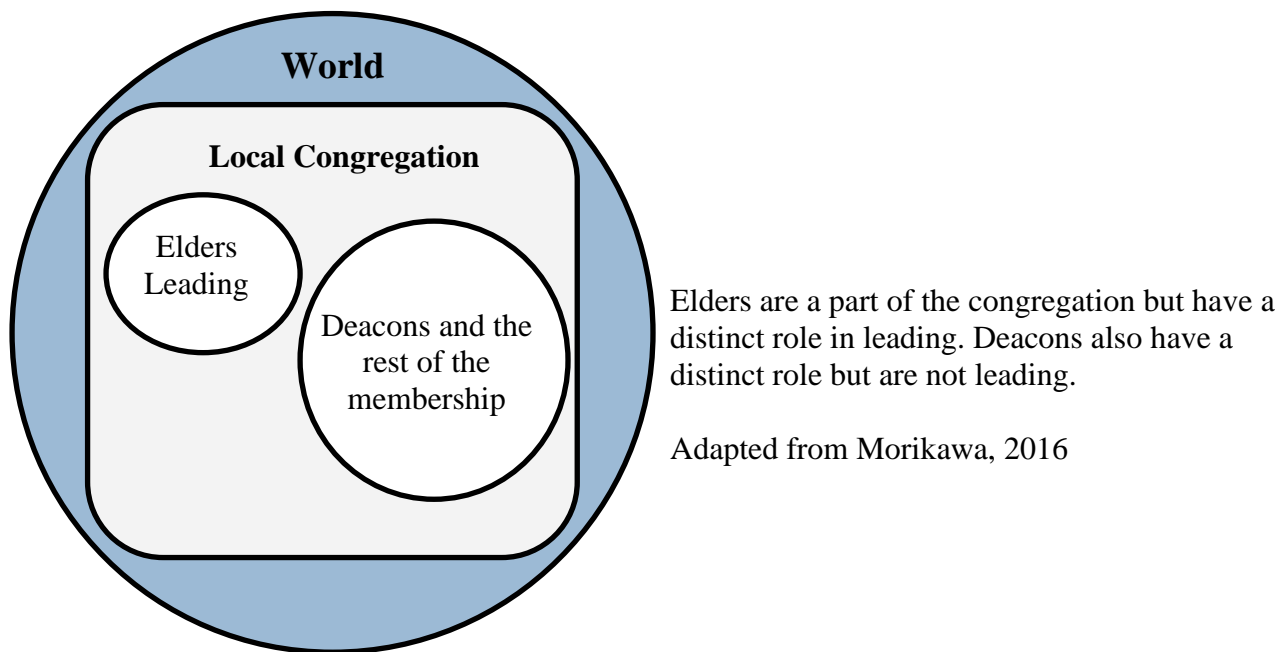
The term most often employed in the New Testament to describe the office of the pastor is the term “elder.” It is used 66 times in the New Testament (Hartwig & Bird, 2015). Elders (in the plural) lead the church. This is seen, for example, when Paul instructed Titus to appoint elders (again, in the plural) in every city where they planted a church (Titus 1:5). There is not a single instance of an individual appointed to lead the church. Paul writes, “let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine” (1 Tim. 5:17). The New Testament offers ample evidence that the pastoral care of the New Testament congregations was the work of a team, not just one individual (Strauch, 1995).

However, there are some who argue that not all churches are to be governed by a plurality of elders but by a single elder. For example, Patterson (2004) argued that a single elder/pastor should be “the decisive spiritual leader of the flock” (p. 134). He argued that the general pattern of scripture is that God calls a single leader from among the people. He cited Moses as an example in the OT, as well as the individual judges during the time of the judges. He also referenced the calling of the prophets who were leaders in their own right. Among the 12 apostles, he argued that Peter rose to be the leader of the group, although the 11 were leaders in their own right. In addition, he argued that the “psychology of leadership” suggests a single person should be in a lead role. He cited many examples from church history where an influential person was apparently the decisive spiritual leader of the church. He also referred to the influence the synagogue had on the early church. While there were multiple elders in a synagogue, there was one person who was the recognized leader known as the *archisunagogos*, which was the president of the synagogue. He also noted that the letters sent to the seven churches of Revelation were all sent to the “angel of the church,” which he argued was the pastor/leader of the congregation. However, he also argued that it is not unscriptural to have a

plurality of elders, especially in a large church, and recognized that there is scriptural precedent for such, with the proviso that one elder should maintain the main leadership role. It appears that James, the brother of Jesus, had such a role in the church in Jerusalem, and Timothy had such a role in Ephesus.

Figure 1

Elder and Deacon Organizational Structure



Deacon-Led Leadership

However, as the elders lead the church, their ministry is to be complimented by the office of the deacon (Akin & Pace, 2017; Strauch, 1995). Unfortunately, for most churches the biblical doctrine of elder-led leadership has been lost and is unknown by most Christians today. The results have been unfavorable for the church. According to Strauch, “some of the worst havoc wrought to the Christian faith has been a direct result of unscriptural forms of church structure” (p. 101). How a church is organized will impact how people think and act within the church, and ultimately how ministry is accomplished (Strauch, 1995).

In many SBC churches the biblical model of elder-led leadership has been replaced by deacon-led leadership; the deacons function as the de facto leaders and in many cases expect the pastor/elder to submit to their leadership. This has resulted in conflict and pastoral turnover (Harbuck, 2018; Payne, 1996). It has been argued that there is much conflict in these churches because the board of deacons often operates as an oligarchy that refuses to have its authority challenged (Greenfield, 2001). Concerning deacon-led churches, Elder (2004) wrote that,

in church after church and situation after situation, the honorable, but humble position of the deacon has degenerated from its intended purpose. This precious and priceless position is often sought today as an office of prestige and power rather than being selected for having exemplified a true servant's heart (p. 43).

The result of this change often leads to conflict that causes damage to the church as well as to the pastor's marriage, his children, his health, his peace of mind, and ultimately to his faith (Greenfield, 2001).

Today, many SBC churches unintentionally attempt to use a plurality of leaders by allowing deacons to act as the church's elders or spiritual leaders or even as the pastor's advisors (Akin & Pace, 2017). However, this compromises the nature and functions of both offices and encourages dysfunction within the body. As a result, the church must be on guard against using deacons as a board of advisors to the pastor. Nowhere in scripture are they called to lead the church (Akin & Pace, 2017). Instead, scripture reveals that the office of the deacon is a separate and subordinate office with different functions than that of the elder (Acts 6:3-4). When serving as intended, both offices complement each other in ministry, enhancing the overall effectiveness of any given congregation (Acts 6:7).

As such, deacons are called to function as servants (Sheffield, 1993). The word "deacon" is a transliteration of the Greek word *diakonos* and means "servant." Where elders focus on leading the overall ministry of the church, deacons serve the various needs of the congregation

within the church. Specifically, they function as servants who identify the needs of the church and work to address those needs (Sheffield, 1993). This is not to suggest that elders do not lead as servants. Indeed, they are called to lead as servants even as Christ led as a servant (Mark 10:42-45; Phil. 2:5-11). However, their act of service does not include leading in the same way as deacons. Where elders lead through the Word of God and prayer (Acts 6:4), deacons are called to “wait on tables” (Sheffield, 1993, p. 15). Under the authority of Scripture and the supervision of the pastors, deacons have responsibility for specific biblically prescribed responsibilities (Elder, 2004). As a result, pastors are free to focus on their main duty of ministering the Word through prayer and spiritual oversight. Thus, where both offices serve the church, the deacon’s key role is to take care of the people as needs arise. Their tasks may change from day to day but ministering and focusing on the people’s needs does not. Deacons are called to do various tasks such as visiting the sick, caring for those in need, encouraging new believers, even teaching the Bible when needed, and performing any number of ministries as both needs and opportunities arise (Elder, 2004).

As seen in scripture, the offices of elders and deacons complement each other. It appears that God has built in a division of labor within the body of Christ. Though elders are called to lead, the service the deacons provide is no less important. Each office simply serves in a different capacity. When each office is operating as God intends, the church functions as a healthy team that accomplishes its God given task (Matt. 28:18-20). This is seen in chapter six of the book of Acts. When a problem became evident between the Greek and Hebrew widows, it had the capacity to derail the effectiveness of the church’s mission. The elders, led by Peter, called on the congregation to appoint men “who were full of faith and the Holy Spirit” to attend to the problem. Men who had already demonstrated they had a servant’s heart were selected to take

care of the needs of both groups. The effect of their service was twofold. First, they brought peace to a contentious problem which helped maintain the unity of the church. Second, their service allowed the elders to continue their ministry of the Word of God and prayer. As the elders disciplined the new believers and preached the gospel, we are told that, “the Word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). By working together, the church accomplished its mission.

However, over the course of church history the office of the deacon began to change (Sheffield, 1993). By the beginning of the 19th century the office of the deacon began to function as a board that both leads and manages the church. During this time churches began to see a different division of labor than described above. In 1846 a book entitled *The Deaconship* was written by R.B.C. Howell. In that book he reinforced the idea that the office of the deacon should function as a board. His concept was that deacons should focus on temporal things while the pastor focuses on spiritual things. As a result, the deacons were given full authority over all church business in many congregations, and over time this became the standard practice (Sheffield, 1993). He wrote,

In the Baptist churches, the Deacons are not ministers who preach, one the one hand, nor mere distributors of alms on the other, but serve in a different capacity. They are a board of directors, and have charge of all the secular affairs in the kingdom of Christ.... The pastor has supervision of all the *spiritualities* of the church, and is, therefore, overseer, or bishop in that department; so the deacons are overseers *of all her temporalities*, of which they of right have the full control (Howell, 1946, p. 11, 12, original emphasis).

In addition, Howell argued that this idea is clearly established in scripture. To that end he argued that to contradict this position is to go against Christ himself. He wrote,

What God appoints is always best for his people. To devise a plan of our own, and to substitute it for his, is to commit the folly of assuming to be more wise and to understand better the wants of his church than Christ himself! (p. 24-25).

Similarly, he argued that to allow the pastor, or anyone else other than the deacons, to oversee the secular affairs of the church will result in the harm of the church.

The temporal affairs of the church, secondly, cannot, as experience fully teaches, now be administered by the pastors, without subjecting them to the same difficulties that beset apostles. Either they will be fatally neglected by them, and great injury ensue; or a very large part of their time will be thereby engrossed, which is not admissible, since the whole is appropriated, by the King in Zion, to the preaching of the word (Howell, 1946, p. 23-24).

As a result of Howell's influence, a division of labor was created that separated the pastor from what he believed to be the secular affairs of the church, putting the deacons, as a board of directors, now in charge of everything not deemed spiritual.

Because of this change, the deacon ministry had a new focus. It focused solely on the business matters of the church, and practically the office began to operate from a business point of view (Sheffield, 1993). Further, because of this change, the deacons were viewed as the decision makers of the church. All major recommendations from church organizations needed to be approved by the deacons. The pastor and staff of the church were directly accountable to the deacons, and all expenditures had to be approved by them (Sheffield, 1993).

Reflecting this change, Foshee (1966) wrote that Howell's book had significant influence among Baptists and shaped their understanding of the office of the deacon. He wrote that his book,

heavily influenced the type of work assigned to deacons. Howell's chief premise was that deacons should focus their attention on administering the temporal affairs of the church. He spoke of the deacon working in his separate department – the secular business of the church – while the pastor tended to the spiritual affairs (p. 25).

In 1920 another deacon manual was written entitled *Honoring the Deaconship* by Prince E. Burroughs; Foshee (1966) wrote that, "the book, now out of print, followed the same philosophy set forth by Howell ... and was studied widely in churches" (p. 26). He concluded by

observing that, “although many churches now have multiple staffs and complex organizational structures, they still assign church business responsibilities to deacons” (p. 26). In addition, during the era when Howell’s book was written, Foshee reveals that most churches did not have a full-time pastor. Most churches had worship services only once or twice a month. Without a full-time pastor, the deacons were often elected to run the affairs of the church. Over time, they assumed the leadership responsibilities of the church. This form of church polity became the norm among Baptist churches (Foshee, 1966).

Another development that took place was that the office the deacon began to serve in a pastoral role. Foshee (1966) wrote, “a more acceptable concept of deacon service is emerging. A growing number of churches are asking their deacons to serve alongside the pastor in the pastoral ministries of the church (p. 27). Foshee cited then professor at Golden Gate Seminary Gains S. Dobbins, who promoted this idea, stating, “In 1929, he wrote *Baptist Churches in Action* (out of print). He called attention to the spiritual qualities the deacon should possess” (p. 27). As result of his influence churches began to restudy the office of the deacon. During the time of Foshee’s writing “this spiritual role has continued to grow” (p. 27).

The result of those two streams of influence was that deacons began to take on a hybrid form of leadership. That influence is still in operation in many churches today. Many deacons still operate as a board (Anthony & Estep, 2005; Dresselhaus, 2012; Herbster & Howerton, 2010; Hobbs, 1962; Norman, 2005; Merkle, 2008; O’Donnell, 1973), assuming the role of an elder. As a result, today many deacons focus on the business aspects of the church but also, as needed, operate in the capacity of elders. It is not unheard of today to hear that deacons have taken on this hybrid form of leadership where they effectively function as elders. From the perspective of Biblical history and a plain reading of New Testament scripture, however, this appears to be an

unbiblical application of the office of the deacon, but one that is still practiced by many churches today.

Calling of Leaders

An unintended consequence of changing the office of the deacon had a significant impact on the office of the elder. In many churches the elder/pastor is no longer seen as the primary leader of the church. Also, the biblical teaching of a plurality of elders leading the church has been replaced by a single elder who works in the capacity of a chaplain (Malphurs, 2003; Powell, 2008). Instead of leading the church, today the pastor's call is often understood as taking care of the personal needs of the congregation (Greenfield, 2001; Malphurs, 2003). There is now an unstated assumption concerning the role of the pastor today. Many SBC churchgoers believe that the primary and most important function of pastoral care includes such practical things as visiting church members in the hospital, visiting at home during difficult times, counseling and encouraging during a crisis, and doing other hands-on activities that are meant to comfort and encourage believers (Malphurs, 2003). However, this understanding of the pastor's role cannot be justified biblically nor exegetically. In contrast to being a chaplain or caregiver that focuses on encouraging people experiencing difficulties, the scriptural mandate is that pastors/elders (in the plural) are called to lead the church. Specifically, they are to "equip the saints for the work of ministry" (Eph. 4:12). The duty of the elders, then, is to lead the congregation to fulfill the Great Commission by vision casting, propagating the mission, and by protecting the church against false teachers (Malphurs, 2003).

This misunderstanding of the pastor's role stems from two sources. One is a misunderstanding about what it means to be a shepherd. The shepherd imagery in scripture does not portray a leader as one who cares for every need of the people. Instead, it presents one who

leads and rules the people (Laniak, 2006; Malphurs, 2003). For example, Psalm 78 presents a brief history of the great things God did for his people. However, it also presents a picture of a faithless people who refused to follow God. It ends by declaring that God,

...chose David his servant and took him from the sheep pens; from tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel his inheritance. And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them (Psalm 78:70-72).

The point of the Psalm is that David was a faithful shepherd because he led the people to follow and obey the Lord. Commenting on the shepherd imagery in these verses, Laniak (2006) wrote that “responsible oversight and compassionate leadership are in view as the final verse couples David’s personal uprightness with understanding (*tebuna*) and guidance (*nhh*)” (p. 108). In addition, speaking about the shepherd imagery in the Psalms he wrote that, “left to themselves, sheep inevitably ‘go astray’ (Ps. 119.176). The metaphor is obvious: human members of the flock of YHWH need the guidance of their shepherd to walk in his ways” (p.111). Thus, the priority of the pastor as shepherd is to lead the congregation to follow God. The central focus of that leadership, as defined by the New Testament, is to make mature disciples out of believers. Pastors, therefore, shepherd (*poimaino*) their sheep when they are leading them to follow and obey the Lord.

The second source of misunderstanding comes from tradition. Different periods of history emphasized the role of the pastor differently. For example, the Puritans emphasized that the pastor was the “physician of the soul” (Packer, 2006). The emphasis today on the pastor as caregiver comes from this source (Malphurs, 2003). Concerning this concept, Packer (2006) wrote, “Just as a physician must know physiology, the Christian minister must know what spiritual health is.” He explained,

A physician's business is to check, restore, and maintain the health of those who commit themselves to his care. In the same way, the minister should get to know the people in his church and encourage them to consult him as their soul-doctor. If there is any kind of spiritual problem, uncertainty, bewilderment, or distress, they are to go to the minister and tell him, and the minister needs to know enough to give them health—giving advice. That's the Puritan ideal (Packer, 2006, para. 1).

This concept of being a soul doctor was meant to encourage believers to live humble and holy lives. The pastor was seen as one who could faithfully guide believers to that end. To the Puritans, believers were on a journey to heaven and the pastors were entrusted to guide them on that journey. While the journey happened in the context of the church, much of the emphasis of soul care revolved around the individual and their walk with Christ. The pastor was to direct their spiritual health through learning the "pure knowledge of the will of God" (Packer, 2006, para. 2). Puritans held that an educated conscience is a prerequisite for spiritual well-being. This entailed being aware of God's moral standards, so that one's conscience would encourage one while acting morally and hold one accountable for one's actions when acting immorally.

While there is much to be admired from this emphasis, an unintended consequence of this idea is that believers become dependent on their pastors. Pastors are seen as the experts—the physicians who provide care for one's problems instead of being those who lead one to spiritual maturity (Eph. 4:13-15) where one learns to walk with and obey Christ on their own (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Rev. 5:9-10). The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers belies the teaching that the pastor is the expert that other believers must depend upon indefinitely (Fesko, n.d.). This idea also leads to an imbalanced Christian life where believers see the Christian life revolving around moral concerns. This has the subtle effect of shifting the focus of the Christian life inward. However, while that is certainly a vital component of the Christian life, when not coupled with an emphasis on the Great Commission and the believer's role in it, the Christian life becomes imbalanced, and the very purpose for which Christ created the church is compromised (Malphurs, 2003).

Hence, while tradition can aid in understanding what pastors have done over the years, leaders must draw their understanding of the pastor's role from scripture (Strauch, 1995). If tradition conflicts with the Bible, leaders must adhere to the latter rather than the former (Mark 7:8). When scripture is consulted a different picture emerges. Instead of seeing a single pastor who acts as a caregiver to meet the various needs of church members, one sees a plurality of leaders who work together, equipping and maturing the disciples to do the work of ministry. Ephesians 4:11-16 provides a concise job description for leaders in the church. The text begins with a list of leadership roles that all work together for the same goal, equipping the saints for ministry and growing them into spiritual maturity.

For this task, the Lord calls men to fulfill specific leadership roles. He calls some to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors (*poimēn*), and teachers. Note that the word for "pastor" can be translated "shepherd." Their role was to guard the flock from false teaching and to lead those whom the Lord put in their charge (Klein, 2006). Hence, pastor/teacher is a single office where the leaders in this role shepherd God's people by "teaching them to obey" all that Christ has commanded (Matt. 28:20). However, all offices work to the same end. Paul emphasizes these church leaders because he recognized their importance in fostering church unity by teaching the Word and guiding God's people in the right direction (Klein, 2006). According to Jesus's command in Matthew 28:18-20, the right direction is leading believers to be obedient disciples, who in turn, take the gospel to the nations and then raise up disciples themselves as they go.

It seems that much of the conflict that SBC churches experience can be traced to the change in how the church understands the calling of both the office of the deacon and the office of the elder. Many church members expect their pastors to be caregivers who meet their needs while the deacons are expected to lead the church—usually in line with the desires of the

members (Burton & Oaks, 2005). Meanwhile, pastors expect the church to allow them to lead the church to fulfill the Great Commission. When those two visions collide, conflict ensues.

However, when scripture is studied, it is seen that elders are called to lead the church to fulfill the Great Commission and equip the saints as they serve Christ to the same end. Deacons are called to serve the needs of the church, thereby ensuring the church, as the body of Christ, succeeds in caring out the Great Commission (Acts 6:7). In limiting the office of the elder to a chaplain that cares for people, the mission is ultimately compromised (Malphurs, 2003).

Another unintended consequence of changing the office is that a church now opens the door of leadership to those whom God has not called to lead. A biblical system of church governance is crucial because it directly influences who is eligible to lead or rule the church (Merkle, 2008). In traditional SBC culture, deacon-led churches have developed a committee system where both members and leaders of various church committees make important decisions for the church. However, these members and their leaders are not held accountable for the qualifications set forth for leaders (1 Tim 3; Titus 1). Under these circumstances the church could be led by people who are not biblically qualified to lead. Often this happens when a church prioritizes a candidate's professional achievements over his personal character, spiritual maturity, and family life (Merkle, 2008). Other factors, such as how leaders are picked (majority vote, for example), are affected by changing the office as well. Therefore, when people who do not meet the biblical standards for leadership are allowed places of influence, the church suffers and, again, the mission of the church is compromised (Merkle, 2008).

Summary

This section of the literature review has sought to provide a theological framework and justification for the present study. It has discussed the nature of the church as being comprised of

those who are called out through salvation to serve Christ as a team. The church is a unified body that is designed to work together to fulfill the Great Commission. As the church has been given the gospel to proclaim, it has also been given a specific organizational structure in which to operate. Scripture reveals that church leadership consists of two offices, the office of the deacon and the office of the elder. Elders are called by God to lead the church. They lead by teaching scripture, engaging in prayer, and equipping the body for the work of ministry. Ultimately, their goal is to lead the congregation to faithfully follow God's will. Deacons are called to wait on tables by serving the various needs of the congregation. Both offices are designed to complement each other. However, the office of the deacon is meant to be in a subordinate position to that of the elders. When each office functions as revealed in scripture, the church effectively accomplishes its mission. However, when those offices become removed from their scriptural mandate, conflict follows, and the mission of the church is compromised. This often happens when the office of the deacon is elevated to the position of de facto leadership. When deacons lead as board members to whom the congregation and pastor are accountable, the role of the elder is reduced to caring for the needs of the congregation, resulting in frustration, conflict, and burnout of the pastor; in addition, it can lead to mission failure of the church.

Theoretical Framework

The previous section has sought to present a theological framework for this study. This section presents a theoretical framework. If elders are called to lead, then an understanding of leadership and, specifically, the leadership required in a church setting is necessary. However, not all leadership theories are appropriate for a church setting. Any theoretical framework for leadership in the church must be evaluated against biblical revelation. As such, this section

considers the relationship between leadership and theology. For leadership to be distinctly Christian, it must be grounded in effective leadership theory and a sound biblical theology.

Leadership Theory

If there is a consensus in leadership studies, it is that there is no consensus on a single definition of leadership (Blackaby, 2001; Bennis, 1959; Grint, 2010; Howell, 2003). The subject is broad and elicits more questions than it gives answers (Dyer, 2015). Despite that reality, however, there is a consensus on the reality of a thing called leadership. While not easily defined, it can be readily recognized. People see leaders in action and know intuitively that something called leadership is taking place. Some leaders are praised for their efforts, others become infamous villains. Some exert an influence well beyond their lifetime. Others lead a small group and impact only a few people. Still others fail to impact people directly but change the way an industry develops technology. Despite such disparities, leadership studies seek to classify the various characteristics of leadership. While different taxonomies have been given, there is no clear-cut theory or list of behaviors that ensures leadership effectiveness (Yukl et al., 2002). As a result, when studying leadership, one is confronted with a variety of theories, characteristics, traits, and behaviors that give rise to what is recognized as leadership.

However, for Christians it is necessary to distinguish between leadership, generally defined, and Christian leadership as revealed in scripture. The question confronting the Christian leader is this: can one pick and choose from those leadership theories that appear to be efficacious, or is there a leadership design that God has revealed to his people through his Word? If one were to change the question and ask, “can leaders choose from any organizational model that seems to work well to run the church or should they seek to understand God’s design for his church by examining what scripture reveals?”, the answer is readily obvious. While there is no

one agreed-upon way to organize and run a church, most evangelicals would recognize that the primary source of knowledge about the subject is found in scripture. Theologians refer to this as the doctrine of ecclesiology. As discussed above, a sober study of scripture reveals that elder-led leadership is God's plan for leadership in the church. As such, the doctrine of ecclesiology should be the starting place for understanding Christian leadership.

However, defining leadership for the Christian context can be a difficult task—"though popular press promotions of Christian leadership abound, unfortunately peer-reviewed articles providing academically researched materials are sparse" (Huizing, 2011, p. 2). Huizing explained only 23 pertinent articles were found when the phrases "leadership theology," "church leadership," and similar terms were used in an online search of the ATLA and ProQuest Religion databases. Articles that focused more on developing a theology of leadership than just observing leadership in diverse church situations were deemed pertinent for the search. Four main themes emerged from an analysis of these writings, and these themes are directing the creation of a Christian theology of leadership (Huizing, 2011). First, compared to any current Christian theology of leadership, research on general leadership theory has advanced significantly. Consequently, many articles wrestled with the relationship between organizational leadership theory and a theology of leadership. Second, the articles served as a foundation for the components of Christian leadership that need to be addressed while staying true to scriptural revelation. Third, the significance of context in the development of a theology of leadership is one aspect that merits acknowledgment as a distinct issue. The final theme is the influence of ecclesiology on both the formation of a theology of leadership as well as on the practice of leadership (Huizing, 2011).

Another difficulty in defining leadership for the Christian context is the many definitions of leadership found in general leadership studies. Northouse (2019) observed that, “there are as many different definitions of leadership as there are people who have tried to define it” (p. 2). Indeed, scholars have discovered over 850 definitions of leadership (Blackaby, 2001). As a result, we don't seem to be any closer to an agreement on the fundamental definition of leadership despite nearly three thousand years of contemplation and more than a century of “academic” inquiry (Grint, 2001). Despite those obstacles, there is some clarity. For example, some propose that leadership is about having followers (Grint, 2001). Others propose that leadership is a process by which one person persuades a group of people to pursue a common objective (Northouse, 2019). Others believe that leadership is about how leaders influence others (Maxwell, 1998). In that regard Yukl (2013) argued that “most definitions of leadership reflect the assumption that it involves a process whereby intentional influence is exerted over people to guide, structure, and facilitate activities and relationships in a group organization” (p. 2). Others still believe that leadership is about the relationships leaders foster with others and the change they facilitate through those relationships (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

That brief survey leaves the impression that leadership, at a bare minimum, involves three things: a leader, people who are influenced to follow the leader, and something to be accomplished. While most will agree that those components represent a bare minimum of what leadership is, still more is needed. Some argue that leadership is about the leader (Grint, 2010). Others make the case that leadership is a process. Some make leadership about what those in authority do. Hence leadership is based on a position that seeks results—“Leadership does seem to be defined differently However, the dissensus seems to hang around four areas of dispute, leadership defined as *position* or *person* or *results* or *process*” (Grint, 2010, p. 3). It seems that as

this onion is peeled, more questions arise about leadership than answers are given. A few to consider, according to Grint (2010): Are leaders born or bred? Who are the leaders? Who do leaders lead? What about the followers? Can we do without leaders?

All good questions. As one enters this arena of leadership studies, it becomes apparent that instead of discovering a clear understanding of the subject, one's mind becomes cluttered with a number of theories and explanations that all seem to run in different directions. Grint (2010) observed that in October of 2003

there were 14,139 books relating to 'leadership' on Amazon.co.uk for sale. Just over six years later, that number had almost quadrupled to 53,121 – and clear evidence that within a short space of time there will be more books about leadership than people to read them (p. 1).

When this author put the subject into the Amazon search engine, it stopped counting at over sixty-thousand books. Tweak the subject just slightly, and many more appear.

While those books and the different definitions of leadership are valuable, the Christian seeking to understand the subject is left with a question: can Christian leaders sift through the mountain of information, find sources that give good ideas, and use them simply because they are available? In Google scholar one can find studies where authors argue why various secular theories of leadership either are Christian in nature or can be easily used in a Christian context. While those studies may be valid, in using them the Christian leader may be sacrificing something important as to what it means to be a "Christian leader."

For example, when considering the definitions above, it is just as important to recognize what is there as well as recognize what is missing. While it is true that Christian leaders exert influence to get others to do something, they never exert that influence outside of the will of God. Therefore, it is important to recognize that Christian leadership is always conducted within the context of the kingdom of God. When scanning the above definitions of leadership, it is

necessary to recognize that there is, at a bare minimum, no recognition of God. Kingdom work is never just about getting people to accomplish something. While they may accomplish a ministry, they are doing something more: they are fulfilling the will of God.

To be Christian then, leaders must seek to lead people to accomplish God's will (Romans 12:1-2). Effective Christian leadership is only possible when understood in the context of God's calling on our lives (Blackaby, 2001). Hence, when it comes to understanding leadership in the kingdom of God, many Christian leaders wonder whether the same factors that make people successful in business or athletics also apply to the church (Blackaby, 2001). Indeed, as previously discussed, a change occurred in the office of the deacon when the focus for that office became the "temporal" affairs of the church. It was believed that applying the business acumen of the day to the office of the deacon would benefit the church (Harbuck, 2018). However, it can be argued that the change in the focus of the office created a false distinction between the "secular" affairs of the church and its "spiritual" pursuits. But can the church make such a distinction without doing harm to the integrity of what it means to be a part of the kingdom of God? For the sake of argument, consider the distinction between secular leadership and spiritual leadership. In the Old Testament the people clamored for a king (1 Sam. 8:1-22). They wanted to be like the surrounding nations. That happened because they separated spiritual truth from what appeared to be secular pursuits. In other words, they forgot they were God's people and therefore everything they did had spiritual significance.

What went wrong? The problem was the Israelite's assumption that spiritual concerns, such as righteous living and obedience to God, belonged in the religious realm while the practical issue of doing battle with enemies, strengthening the economy, and unifying the country were secular matters. They forgot that God himself had won their many victories, brought them prosperity, and created their nation. ... When the Israelites separated spiritual concerns from political and economic issues, their nation was brought to its knees (Blackaby, 2001, p. 13).

Christian leadership, therefore, is not just about applying a theory of leadership to a specific situation or leadership context. Rather, it is about recognizing the primacy of God in every area of life. Everything from finances, to building and grounds, and personnel issues have as much spiritual significance as Bible studies, preaching, and witnessing. Why? Because Christian leaders must begin with the affirmation that “Jesus is Lord” (Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3). He is Lord over the finances of the church, over its direction, its building projects, as well as his people—whether they are at church, or at work, and even while at play. Thus “The Kingdom of God is, in fact, the rule of God in every area of life . . .” (Blackaby, 2001, p. 13). No part of church life can be excluded from this reality. This is where Christian leadership begins, and this is what distinguishes it from its secular counterparts.

Leadership Theories and the Christian Worldview

Nevertheless, Christian leaders do well to learn from secular leadership studies. In that regard, Christian leaders would be wise to acknowledge that broad leadership theories contain principles that are applicable in a Christian setting, are valid, and frequently helpful (Huizing, 2011). However, caution is in order. Secular theories often focus on the “what” question, seeking to ascertain outcomes, where Christian leaders are called to focus on the “why” question, seeking to understand their motivation for leading and/or serving. Hence, there is a danger in starting with the wrong question. General leadership studies often begin by first establishing desired outcomes which are measured in sales numbers, acquisitions, stock prices, and other metrics of measurable growth. Christian leadership, on the other hand, has an entirely different focus. Instead of focusing on measurable outcomes, Christian leaders are called to focus on such things as spiritual growth and transformation. While numbers can be important, they do not always translate into kingdom values. Therefore, the different questions (what versus why) lead to

different understandings of what it means to be successful. Christian leaders are thus cautioned in this regard. The church's preoccupation with success as defined by numbers and stats may betray its fundamental beliefs by drawing on broad leadership ideas rather than exegeting a biblical doctrine of leadership.

For example, Greenleaf's Servant leadership theory is often presented as a "Christian" leadership approach. Flanike (2006) presented the theory as being fully compatible with Christian leadership. He wrote that "it can be shown that his servant-leadership principles are indeed based on biblical concepts" (p. 1). He followed Greenleaf's characteristics of a servant leader as someone who is a servant first, someone who guides others, is goal-oriented, who listens and reflects on what others say, who is fair and flexible, is intuitive and self-aware, who uses persuasion instead of coercion, and who takes one step at a time. After stating Greenleaf's principles, he then proceeded to look for examples in scripture that support those characteristics. After finding supporting texts, he affirmed the theory's biblical relevance by stating that, "there is much support and evidence for the premise that Greenleaf's servant-leadership principles are closely associated with and derived from biblical concepts" (p. 7).

However, in the introduction to his book, Greenleaf (1977) informed his readers that the inspiration of his book came from Herman Hess's *Journey to the East*. While he presents highly valuable principles for leadership, not once does he refer to scripture. For that matter, there is no mention of Christ or God anywhere in his famous text. He wrote, "my view of religion is relatively non-theological.... Religion is seen in the root meaning of that term-*religio*, 'to rebind.' The thing to be done with religious concern is to rebind humankind to the cosmos, to heal the pervasive alienation" (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 231). From his own words it appears that Greenleaf was not thinking about presenting a theology of leadership based on an exegesis of

scripture. Furthermore, the theory was not presented to move people to recognize the primacy of God in every area of life. While there may be parallels to biblical truth, it is not derived from biblical revelation, and as such it is not presented as a Christian leadership theory that aids Christian leaders to move people onto God's agenda, nor was it intended to be presented that way.

Therefore, despite its positive implications for leadership, it cannot be called a Christian leadership theory (Kimotho, 2019). The virtues of hope, faith, civility, trust, and piety that servant leadership promote are related to leadership generally and are not necessarily exclusive to any one particular faith. Hence, much of what Greenleaf advocates for can fall under the broad umbrella of spirituality that is applicable to many different faiths but is not unique to Christianity. In addition, servant leadership theory

seems to be based on circular reasoning: since Christian leadership according to the common argument must of necessity be servant-like, and since Christian leadership is based on what Christ was like, Christ must have been above all else a servant (Kimotho, 2019, p. 76).

While it is true that Christ presented himself as a servant, this circular reasoning short-circuits an honest assessment of the theory in light of scripture.

To accept at face value that Greenleaf's theory is Christian is to miss the larger purpose for which Christ commissioned his first leaders. They were called to proclaim the gospel so people could learn that they are sinners in need of a Savior, and ultimately be transformed by a personal relationship with Christ so they can be saved from God's judgment (Mark 6:11). In that regard, they were commanded to make disciples of people so that through those disciples the gospel could be preached to the entire world. In contrast, Greenleaf's purpose was to empower people. According to his leadership theory servant leaders are committed to the growth of people with the goal of nurturing their personal, professional, and spiritual growth (Kimotho, 2019).

Greenleaf's goal for leaders, then, was to enable people to achieve self-fulfillment and self-actualization (Kimotho, 2019). While those may be noteworthy leadership goals, they cannot be classified as distinctly Christian. Indeed, Greenleaf's leadership model comes very close to advocating for the Pelagian heresy that denies original sin and establishes that people can be righteous through their own efforts, granted that they can be led to achieve self-actualization (Kimotho, 2019).

The historical period in which Greenleaf developed his theory is also important to note (Kimotho, 2019). He wrote during a time when there was much turmoil due to the Vietnam war. The cultural values, moral ethos, and concept of authority were all being called into question, and "it was during this time that Greenleaf began to call into question the current state of leadership in educational institutions and business organizations" (Kimotho, 2019, p. 72). However, it was also a time when McGregor's Theory Y began to influence people's understanding of leadership. McGregor successfully brought into question the principles of Theory X that were common in that period of history. Greenleaf's emphasis on empowering people is very similar to McGregor's concept of helping people achieve their (Maslow's) higher needs with the aim of achieving self-actualization. While this similarity might be superficial, it highlights the social revolution taking place at the time, affecting how leaders understood leadership. Instead of being grounded on biblical revelation, it is possible that Greenleaf's theory is a product of social transformation that was unique to the times he wrote about. Whether or not that is the case, the point is that for all the merits of Greenleaf's theory—and there are many—it is not a theory that was derived from the study of scripture. As such, it cannot be called a Christian leadership theory.

Therefore, while there are many leadership theories that can have parallels to biblical truth, caution is needed in uncritically incorporating these theories into a theology of leadership (Burns et al., 2014; Huizing, 2001). An exegesis of scripture might lead to a reevaluation or even rejection of popular general leadership theories being used as a foundation for Christian leadership. Indeed, the word of God must be the foundation. Hence, following God's revelation to serve in the kingdom of God is necessary for the central task of Christianity, which is to make disciples of Jesus (Huizing, 2011).

Leadership and the Theologian

For a theory to be distinctly Christian, it must be thoroughly biblical. In that regard, the study of leadership, if it is to be Christian leadership, must engage in the task of theology (Bell, 2014; Howell, 2003). Unfortunately, there has been a historical divide in leadership studies between what is considered "theoretical" leadership and what is considered Christian leadership. Bekker (2009) wrote that "it is surprising, that with the relative increase in scholarly focus on the phenomena of leadership, to see how leadership scholars in modernity have largely ignored the topic of religious leadership" (p. 142). However, with the advent of the 21st century, he discussed a renewed interest in the subject and chronicled the recent scope of research methodology. He wrote that recent religious leadership studies have been characterized by a focus on biblical characters; historical, sociological, and contextual descriptions; studies of historical Christian figures; ethical explorations; cross-faith comparative analysis; formational process descriptions; comparisons with leadership and management theories; exegetical studies (based on looking for character traits of biblical figures, i.e. Paul was worthy of imitation, boldness amid opposition, having a pure motive, among other things); and, finally, attempts at a proto-theory (Bekker, 2009). However, he also observed that no one has attempted to synthesize the many approaches

into a cohesive whole. As such, while Christian leadership has begun to emerge over the last few decades, the theoretical literature is disconnected. When reviewing the emerging theoretical approaches he cited, it appeared that the research topics did not include a systematic theology of leadership grounded in a hermeneutical method. He concluded that while

the turn of the century has brought a new era of academic exploration to the quest to define Christian leadership. Research has been varied in scope, methodology, and focus. Little work has been done to synthesize all these approaches and to provide a “mega-theory” of the concept. This might be due to the fact that so much of the exegetical, theological, philosophical, and historical context of Christian forms and approaches of leadership have not been explored yet (Bekker, 2009, p. 148).

However, it seems that if there is to be a “mega-theory” of Christian leadership, it should find its source in the hermeneutical approach commonly found with the study of systematic theology.

The scope of this section does not allow for a full-fledged discussion of the subject. However, learning to think theologically about leadership is necessary. A first principle of Christian leadership theory should begin with the idea that it must conform to God’s design—“If anything can revolutionize today’s Christian leaders, it is when Christian’s understand God’s design for spiritual leaders” (Blackaby, 2001, p. 3). Unfortunately, many Christian leadership studies, while providing valuable insights, have not sought to understand that design as a mega-theory from which all theoretical Christian leadership can converge.

However, this is the task of theology. It seeks to understand God’s design for things, or to understand what God has spoken about a given subject. To develop theoretical Christian leadership theory, it seems that a theological foundation is needed first. Theology’s fundamental framework is straightforward. The scriptures should be used as the foundation for its everyday teaching. Therefore, one can refer to the Bible’s “system of truth” (Van Til, 1967, p. 3).

Theology seeks to build a system of thought derived from revelation. The role of the theologian thus becomes one of creating a network of theological positions (Thornbury, 2007). This

happens when a theologian seeks to understand and interpret the biblical record. Indeed, “the starting point in leadership development is theology, and the starting point of theology is the inspired text” (Bell, 2014, p. 378). The purpose of theology, then, is to investigate the significance and veracity of the Christian witness to the faith. Its approach is, in its most fundamental sense, a hermeneutical approach that necessitates a critical interpretation of the apostolic witness’s testimony to the Christian faith as it is recorded in scripture and tradition (Ogden, n.d.).

The study of Christian leadership must be grounded in this process (Bell, 2014; Howell, 2003). It is recognized that theological doctrines are not presented in the Bible in a systematic way. That is the task of the theologian as he/she engages in the hermeneutical method. In the same way that God’s design for salvation is revealed in scripture, God has revealed a design for leadership that can be discerned through the theological task (Bell, 2014).

Millard Erickson offers an organized approach that successfully aids the theologian in recognizing God’s design as revealed in scripture. It is an approach “in which one moves from exegesis to biblical theology to systematic theology” (Thornbury, 2007, p. 63). According to Erickson (1998) that process involves several important steps, which include:

- 1). Collection of biblical material. This entails gathering all the pertinent verses from the Bible that relate to the doctrine under investigation.
- 2). Unification of biblical materials. This entails formulating some unifying claims regarding the theological theme under investigation.
- 3). Analysis of the meaning of biblical teachings. After the doctrinal information has been combined into a coherent whole, it is vital to ask the question, “What does this mean?”
- 4). Examination of historical elements. This task encourages an investigation into historical theology to discern what the church has taught about this doctrine throughout history.

- 5). Consultation of other historical perspectives. This step is aimed at discovering the possibility of unconsciously reading our own cultural experience into the scriptures.
- 6). Identification of the essence of the doctrine. This means one must make a distinction between the doctrine's constant, unchanging content and the cultural context in which it is articulated.
- 7). Illumination from extrabiblical sources. This entails seeking to understand other insights on the doctrine that can be gained through general revelation or other disciplines.
- 8). Contemporary expressions of the doctrine. This entails giving the timeless truth proper form, or, to put it another way, one should look for a model that would make the idea understandable in a modern setting.
- 9). Development of a central interpretive motif. This requires the formation of a theme through which, and in language through which, the entire work may be comprehended.
- 10). Stratification of the topics. The theological method's last step is to rank the subjects according to their relative importance.

This task is a process that, although cumbersome, is necessary if God's design for leadership is to be understood. However, it is easy to short-circuit this process by limiting the study of leadership to a few notable biblical leaders. Developing a theological system is more than extrapolating biblical principles by studying isolated examples of the personal lives of biblical leaders and then expecting Christian leaders to be able to apply those principles to their respective roles (Burns et al., 2014). A much more thorough biblical foundation for a theology of leadership must be developed (Burns et al, 2014).

Towards a Framework of Biblical Leadership

In what follows, four theological categories of biblical leadership are explored. In addition, a theoretical framework is considered. Space does not permit a full-orbed theology. Only those basic elements that are foundational for a theology of Christian leadership are explored. However, a couple of principles are in order when beginning this process. A full-orbed theology of leadership does not seek to present a blueprint for how leaders should act, nor should

it seek to define what success looks like in any context. In addition, it should not seek to present a single model of leadership (Burns et al, 2014). It is evident in scripture that God used all kinds of people from many different backgrounds to accomplish his will, and therein lies the point. A theology of leadership should aid leaders in understanding how to be on God's agenda (Blackaby, 2001). As such, a theology of leadership should seek to provide a general framework in which Christian leadership can take place. Four categories are considered: the context of Christian leadership, the goal of Christian leadership, the necessity of the Holy Spirit in Christian leadership, and the influence of Christian leaders. Finally, a framework for Christian leadership is explored.

The Context of Christian Leadership

When speaking about context, the point is to recognize that Christian leadership happens in a specific environment. Environment here refers to the general direction in which leadership is applied. To be Christian, leadership always moves in the direction of God. This can happen in a formal church setting with paid clergy, as well as in a doctor's office where a Christian physician recognizes his obligation to glorify God through his work. Pastors and missionaries are not the only ones who can exercise leadership. Making a difference for the kingdom of God is the responsibility of every Christian (Blackaby, 2001). Therefore, the context of Christian leadership entails that God's people are led to follow God's will and purpose, regardless of where they work or live (Blackaby, 2001).

However, God's people are not left to wonder what his purpose is. Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, presents the story of God's work of redemption in the world. While God's purpose may be realized in a donut shop as well as a church, his purpose of redemption informs his people of his desire. The plan of redemption is contained in the still narrower context of what

theologians refer to as God's kingdom work. God does not redeem people simply to await the day they enter heaven. He redeems them so they can be actively engaged in building his kingdom in this world, which will be consummated at the end of the age. When God called Abraham, it was for the purpose of creating a people who were called to make God known and glorify him in the world (Genesis. 12:3; Mal. 1:11). This was amplified on Pentecost when God created the church through the Holy Spirit. Where God's kingdom was, for the most part, limited to the children of Israel in the Old Testament, in the New Testament his kingdom was to include every nation, tribe, and tongue (Matt. 28:16-20; Acts 1:8; Rev. 7:9).

Therefore, the specific context of Christian leadership is in the environment of the kingdom of God (Howell, 2003). Biblical leadership involves a divine calling for all Christians in their respective contexts to advance the kingdom of God (Burns et al, 2014; Howell, 2003). To that end, Howell (2003) offers a definition of leadership with that as a foundation: "Biblical leadership is taking the initiative to influence people to grow in holiness and to passionately promote the extension of God's kingdom in the world" (p. 3).

A kingdom, then, implies a king. When God sent his son as the Messiah, he was establishing Christ as the king who rules the kingdom of God (McKnight, 2011). This has always been God's plan beginning with his call to Abraham. The culmination of God's work is seen in the gospel, and the gospel is the resolution to Israel's story (McKnight, 2011). Hence, the gospel is not just about a person making a decision for Christ as savior, but about that person living under the authority of the King in his kingdom (McKnight, 2011).

For leadership to be Christian leadership, then, the context of God's kingdom should inform the wider scope of why one engages in leadership. If leadership is defined as influence, as

many advocate for, then Christian leadership should seek to influence others for the sake of the kingdom of God.

The Goal of Christian Leadership

Since Jesus is a King, Christian leadership entails leading other believers to submit to Jesus's authority and follow Christ in kingdom work (Matt. 28:18-20). However, living under the authority of the King entails one becoming a disciple. When Jesus gave the Great Commission, he said,

All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Matt. 28:18-20).

Discipleship is the essence of the Great Commission. The emphasis in this command is not on "going." The word "go" is a participle and can be translated, "As you are going..."

Grammatically the emphasis is on making disciples (McIntosh, 2003).

As believers go into the world, they are called to make disciples of all nations. This command was not limited to the first followers of Christ, and it is not limited to "church" leaders. This is a command given to all those who place their faith in Christ. As such, all believers are called to become disciples who make God's kingdom their priority, no matter their vocation. Those disciples are called to grow to maturity in their walk with Christ so they can become disciple-makers themselves. Therefore, the essence of the Great Commission is about disciples who replicate themselves in the world. Disciples make disciples who are focused on building the kingdom of God.

Hull (2016) emphasized the importance of this when he wrote, "people become Christians when they decide to follow Christ" (p. 27). The gospel compels people, not just to believe, but to actively follow Christ (Hull, 2016). Followership then becomes the essence of

discipleship, and it is disciples who do kingdom work. The book of Acts, chapter 11, informs that “the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch” (v. 26.). This verse reveals that those who were recognized as being Christian were active followers of Christ. The name was meant to be pejorative and given to the disciples by those who despised them. So, the disciples became recognized as Christians (followers of Christ) because of the very public demonstration of their obedience to and followership of Christ as they did kingdom work.

It must be emphasized that the priority of discipleship is not limited to a church context. While disciples will be a part of a church, the task of discipleship is not limited to church work. This has implications for leadership. As disciples go into all the world as doctors, lawyers, mechanics, teachers, etc. their identity is not defined by their vocation, but by their relationship with Christ. Because of that relationship, their vocation will be informed by their commitment to be disciples. A CEO who is a disciple of Christ will most likely lead her organization differently than one who is not a disciple of Christ. And while the CEO focuses her attention on her business, because she is a disciple, kingdom values will guide and inform how she does business, how she relates to her employees, how she develops policies, etc.

The idea that disciples go into the world to influence it for the kingdom is illustrated well by the following story:

A traveler came upon three men working in a large rock quarry The traveler observed these men breathing hard, wet with sweat as they swung their sledge hammers The traveler asked these three men what they were doing. The first man quickly and harshly barked that he was breaking his back. The second man matter-of-factly quipped that he was making a living. The third man, however, paused, pondered, and with a glint in his eye answered, ‘Me? I’m building a glorious cathedral.’ (Ventrella, 2007, p. xiii).

Disciples bring the kingdom of God into their spheres of influence. While they do their work, they do so for the glory of God.

However, both the command to make disciples and the call of leaders to train disciples have been replaced (McKnight, 2011). Today, the church has substituted the call to follow Christ as a disciple with the invitation to believe in Jesus as savior, with no accompanying obligation to follow. In doing so the church has created a salvation culture. The gospel, for the majority of American Christians today, is about having their sins forgiven so that they can go to heaven when they die. Because of that view, the church today is more soterian than evangelical. As a result, the church mistakenly associates salvation with the word “gospel.” We are actually “salvationists.” We evangelicals automatically think “personal salvation” when we hear the word gospel. However, this is a departure from the biblical call to be a follower of Christ who lives under the authority of Christ. Churches, and therefore leaders, are called to create a gospel culture that leads, teaches, and equips people to actively submit to Christ by following him. A salvation culture, then, is not a biblical gospel culture but a distortion of it:

The gospel of Jesus and that of the apostles, both of which created a gospel culture and not simply a salvation culture, was a gospel that carried within it the power, the capacity, and the requirement to summon people ... to be the disciplined. In other words, it swallowed up a salvation culture into a gospel culture (McKnight, 2011, p. 33).

This gospel culture “summons” people to be disciples because it emphasizes the reality that Jesus is a King who is ushering in a new kingdom. The call to salvation, therefore, is a call to be a part of the kingdom of God. A disciple, therefore, is someone who recognizes the authority of Christ to rule. Therefore, those who believe in Jesus are called to commit to discipleship because they recognize that as the rightful ruler, Jesus has a right to command his people to follow him (Eph. 1:20-23). The church, then, is a community ruled by a king, and that king is Jesus (McKnight, 2011).

As a result of adopting a salvation culture as opposed to a gospel culture, leaders have seen their mandate change from making disciples who follow Christ to leading people to make

decisions for Christ (McKnight, 2011). This has created a culture where leaders are expected to lead others to make decisions for Christ and then care for their needs when they come into the church (Nieuwhof, 2015). Therefore, in many churches, Christian leadership is not understood in kingdom terms as training disciples to become committed followers of Christ, but about making sure the needs of people are met once they become Christians and church members. This has led many churches to believe this is the primary role of the pastor/elder. In short, they see the pastor's role as evangelist and caregiver.

However, for leadership to be distinctly Christian, then the goal of Christian leadership should inform what a leader's focus is. They are called to raise disciples who do kingdom Work.

The Necessity of the Holy Spirit in Christian leadership

However, kingdom work, if it is to be effective, must be done under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. In that regard, the presence of the Holy Spirit is a necessary condition for God's people to achieve spiritual ends (Blackaby, 2001). A consistent theme throughout scripture is God's leadership through the agency of his Spirit. It is best exemplified in the words of Zechariah the Prophet when he told Zerubbabel, "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, Says the LORD of hosts" (Zech. 4:6). God never leaves his people to accomplish his will in their own strength nor by their own resources. Even a cursory reading of scripture reveals that most, if not all, of the leaders God called were reluctant leaders precisely because they recognized some deficiency on their own part. Moses is a great example. When God called Moses to lead his people out of Egypt, Moses responded by saying,

O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither before nor since You have spoken to Your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue. So the LORD said to him, 'Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes the mute, the deaf, the seeing, or the blind? Have not I, the LORD? Now therefore, go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall say' (*New King James Version*, 1996, Exodus 4:11-12).

For Moses to accomplish God's will, he learned that his ability to lead was according to what God provided for him through spiritual enabling and accomplished through him as Moses submitted to the Lord's leadership.

This is a consistent theme in both the Old and New Testaments. Paul too learned that if he was to accomplish God's will it was only to the degree that he submitted to the Holy Spirit. In the book of Romans he wrote, "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (Rom. 8:14). When Peter preached his first sermon on Pentecost it was, again, under the agency of the Holy Spirit. Before that event, the disciples, and those who constituted the first church, were behind locked doors. They had much to fear. The ruling authorities had crucified Christ and had no love for his followers. However, Jesus promised the gifting of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8), and immediately after receiving the Holy Spirit, they were filled with boldness, unlocked the door, and went into a hostile community to preach the gospel. The result was that "the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).

This aspect of Christian leadership is perhaps the most important component that is necessary for leadership to be truly Christian. Furthermore, dependence on the Holy Spirit as an attribute of leadership is what separates it from its secular counterparts. There is no secular equivalent. Self-made spiritual leaders do not exist. A true leader can only have a spiritual impact on others when the Spirit moves through him (Sanders, 2007). As such, there are vast differences between a "natural" leader and "spiritual" one. The natural leader is self-confident, knows men, makes his own decisions, is ambitious, creates methods, enjoys command, seeks personal reward, and is independent. The spiritual leader, on the other hand, is confident in God, also knows God, seeks God's will, is humble, follows God's example, delights in obedience to God, loves God and others, and ultimately depends upon God (Sanders, 2007).

The two qualities could not be further apart from one another, and this underscores the reality that in certain cases Christian leadership may have no more in common with secular leadership besides that word “leadership” is applied to both. While it is the case that Christian leadership can find useful ideas and theories in secular leadership, it is unlikely that secular leadership will find the “spiritual” qualities useful in a secular context. This simply highlights the reality that Christian leadership is distinctly different from general leadership theories.

For Christian leaders, it is therefore necessary to define leadership from a theological perspective. The differences between secular leadership theory and a Christian theology of leadership are simply too vast to ignore. At a bare minimum, for leadership to be truly Christian, the three Christian categories discussed above are necessary to distinguish it from its secular counterparts. The kingdom of God must be taken into consideration, discipleship must find a place, and the leadership of the Holy Spirit should take center stage.

The Influence of Christian Leaders

While elders are both called and charged to lead in building the kingdom of God, their leadership is one of influence (Blackaby, 2001). Christian leaders must aspire to influence other believers to do kingdom work (Blackaby, 2001; Sanders, 2007). How they influence others is through prayer, hard work, personal sacrifice, good communication, and by being a servant to those they lead. Through their influence leaders must ensure they maintain a good attitude to maintain a healthy morale among those they lead (Blackaby, 2001). As such, spiritual leaders must recognize the value of a positive outlook as a leadership tool and retain their optimism not because it is an essential leadership behavior but rather because they are in touch with God (Blackaby, 2001). Elder/pastors are not just leaders, then, but spiritual leaders who are charged with leading God’s people to know and follow him.

To succeed in influencing others, the pastor/elder has three primary (comprehensive) roles to fulfill (Manala, 2010). These include the pastor as leader, manager, and servant leader. All three work together to accomplish God's will for the community of faith. As the leader, the pastor seeks to influence others so that believers will learn to trust, follow, and depend on the head of the church so they can effectively do the Lord's will themselves (Manala, 2010). This is accomplished through effective persuasion, vision casting, good communication, developing people, and decision-making. As a manager the pastor understands he is a steward of the things of God, or specifically of God's house (*oikonomos*). A steward manages the household according to the owner's desires. As such, stewardship is entrusted to him. In the role of a steward, the pastor wants to be faithful with the things God has entrusted to his care (Manala, 2010). The pastor as manager seeks to be a good steward through efficient planning, organizing, evaluating, and facilitating time and resources towards the achievement of kingdom goals as he collaborates with others in the church (Manala, 2010). Finally, the pastor leads as a servant leader. This means that the pastor serves others, helping them to grow and teaching them to follow Christ (Manala, 2010). Thus, true servant leadership encourages the leader to focus on the spiritual growth of the church's members and equips them to do the work of ministry. As pastors engage in this triad of leadership, they enable the church to succeed in congregational goals, foster unity, diffuse strife, and equip members for ministry.

A Framework for Christian Leadership

For the elders to lead effectively, however, they must lead as a team. As discussed in section one (the theological framework) the word "elders" is always in the plural, and they lead together as a team. Because of scripture's emphasis on teams, the office of the elder engages in shared leadership (Strauch, 1995). Shared leadership includes the idea of a council of equals

(Strauch, 1995). The role of the elder is one of collective leadership in which each elder equally shares the position, power, and duty of the office with other elders. Shared leadership, also called distributed leadership, is a process of mutual influence that is defined by cooperative decision-making and shared responsibility among team members, whereby team members lead each other towards the accomplishment of goals (Robinson, 2018).

This is in keeping with the nature of teams necessary for the church to function as the body of Christ. Teamwork, through shared leadership, happens when decisions are made laterally among equals as opposed to the traditional vertical decision-making that occurs in the organizations that use a hierarchical authority structure based on rank or position (Northouse, 2019). Using this leadership style, each elder on the team is given the opportunity to have an impact on other team members, which motivates them to work together to reach organizational goals and objectives (Robinson, 2018). Teams that employ shared leadership have more cohesion, trust, and consensus than teams that follow other leadership theories, which is an extra advantage of this leadership style (Northouse, 2019).

This form of leadership is seen throughout scripture (Robinson, 2018). It can be seen in creation when “God created in the community of the Godhead” (p. 58). In Genesis God is called *Elohim*, which is a plural noun—“Elohim is used in reference to who was doing the creating” (p. 58). Hence, the Godhead worked together in creation. After creating Adam and Eve, “God shared his leadership” with the first couple (p. 58) by giving them dominion over creation, allowing Adam to name the animals, and allowing them both to share in the caretaking of the garden. Shared leadership is further seen in the first-born males, who “were recognized as the civil and spiritual leader in their family” (p. 59). It was also seen as Moses shared his leadership with members of the tribes (the 70 elders, the leaders of thousands, hundreds, fifties, etc.)

(Exodus 18:13-27; Numbers 11:16-17), and it was seen in the leadership of Jesus as he called 12 men to emulate his leadership (Mark 1:16-20; Matthew 29:16-20). He trained them and they in turn trained others (disciples) who would spread the gospel to every tribe and nation.

In that regard, a disciple is someone who shares in the leadership of Christ. Jesus told the apostles, “Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you” (Luke 10:19). Shared leadership is seen throughout revelation and appears to be God’s design for leadership in the church. As such, “Jesus did not emulate the centralization of power practiced by the Pharisees and Sadducees, but rather practiced shared leadership and the distribution of leadership responsibilities” (Robinson, 2018, p. 60).

When leaders are faithful to their calling, they raise up disciples (the members of the church) who now share in the authority of Christ themselves through obedience to the Great Commission (Matt. 16:18-19; 28:16). When a mature disciple emerges from the church, equipped to do the work of ministry, they are now prepared to proclaim the gospel with authority, and exercise the authority of Christ by leading others into the kingdom of God for a life of service and obedience.

In this regard, every Christian is a leader (Maxwell, 1998; Pettigrew, 2021). Through the Great Commission, Christ delegates his power to those who follow him. The delegation of his power, to be used for God’s purposes, exemplifies the central tenet of Christian leadership, which aims to develop leaders through the process of making disciples (Pettigrew, 2011). As disciples emerge for service to Christ, they share not only in the mandate to go into all the world to make disciples, but also in the original mandate God gave Adam to subdue creation and have dominion over it (Gen. 1:28). God seeks to subdue the world by leading the nations to obey the

gospel (Rom. 1:5). Leadership, therefore, expressed through the command to make disciples, “is an exercise of being given authority” (Pettigrew, 2021) to bring the nations to Christ. Everyone who picks up the mantle of discipleship shares in this authority.

Therefore, when leaders exercise this form of shared leadership, they train disciples who can then train other disciples themselves. The result is that because leadership does not rest in the hands of only a few people, everyone is now trained to proclaim the gospel, and many people continually enter the kingdom (Acts 2:47, 5:14). Another result of this leadership strategy is that instead of creating an organization called the church, God creates a movement through the called-out ones (*ekklēsia*) that spreads through the whole world. An organization with a chain of command located in a building can be stopped. However, trying to prevent a global movement of people is like trying to stop the wind.

This is seen in the book of Acts when the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem instigated persecution against the church. Instead of stopping it, they drove it further into the world. Luke reports that,

At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. ... Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word (Acts 8:1, 4).

When the church suffered persecution, the leaders remained behind, but everyone they trained as disciples (the church members) “went everywhere preaching the word.” This happened because the apostles exercised shared leadership (Acts 2:42). In essence they empowered those they disciplined by allowing them to share in the authority of Christ, and their leadership was expressed through the process of discipleship (Eph 4:11-16). When the opportunity arose to focus on member needs (Acts 6:1-7), they delegated that task to men who were able care for the problem

(the deacons). Their obedience to God's design for leadership enabled a movement that has continued for 2000 years.

Shared leadership, then, is the glue that unites the church to work together in the Great Commission. It unleashes the church to cooperate with Christ in proclaiming his authority through the gospel worldwide. First, it unites the elders of the church to be intentional about training and equipping the saints for ministry. Finally, it empowers the disciples to be a part of Christ's work in the world.

Ultimately, shared leadership finds its source in the Trinity. As God moves through the world through the Holy Spirit, he invites his people to be a part of his work of drawing all people to himself (John 12:32). As he works through them, he gives his life away through the gospel (McIntosh, 2003). As an expression of Christ's living body, the local church is to be a source of life for both spiritual birth and spiritual growth. In other words, when God is present in the church, the church will experience fruitfulness. To the degree that the church does not recognize the Lord's leadership, the church will begin to decline and fail to be fruitful (Revelation 3:14-22). But he is a life-giving God who seeks to give his life away through the church (John 15:1-8). For churches to become life-giving again, among other things, they must recover the biblical mandate for leadership and membership in the local church.

As churches recover this mandate, they should be successful in reversing the decline many churches are currently experiencing. As already noted, "...congregations across America are weak because many of us church members have lost the biblical understanding of what it means to be a part of the body of Christ" (Rainer, 2013, p. 5). The "body of Christ" is composed of people who are interconnected and function as a team. To enable the body to function as a team, the church must reject one-person leadership. Furthermore, the pastor is not called to be a

caregiver to the congregation but is called to work with other pastors (elders) who make it their priority to train the saints for ministry, leading them to spiritual maturity so they can be fully functioning disciples who follow Christ in building his kingdom. This happens when leaders exercise shared leadership. Shared leadership allows every leader to be a part of influencing the body to grow and develop spiritual maturity. Additionally, shared leadership allows every disciple to share in the authority of Christ. As disciples mature, they are then able to lead and disciple others. This process of shared leadership empowers the body to proclaim the gospel worldwide. The result is that instead of having an organization with hierarchical leadership, the body becomes a part of a worldwide movement. Exponential growth, as seen in the book of Acts, is the fruit of shared leadership.

Summary

This section has sought to present a theoretical framework for this study. While leadership is needed in the church, most general leadership theory is not appropriate for the church setting, as it does not seek to lead people to be on God's agenda (Blackaby, 2001). As such, general leadership theory can be a useful supplement for biblical leadership; but leadership needs to be viewed in the context of biblical revelation to be considered Christian leadership. In that regard, Christian leadership must engage in the task of theology. The picture of leadership derived from scripture is very different from those theories derived from the world (despite their utility). As such, this section presented four categories of biblical leadership that this author believes are foundational for a leadership theory to be considered Christian. The context of the kingdom of God was considered, the goal of making disciples was presented, the necessity of the Holy Spirit was explored, and the influence of the pastor/elder was considered. Finally, the

framework of shared leadership was presented as being the appropriate model in which Christian leadership can take place.

General Leadership Theory that Supplements Biblical Leadership

This section presents a framework of leadership consistent with the mission Christ gave the church, grounded on a biblical theology of leadership and supported by transformational leadership theory, authentic leadership theory, and servant leadership theory. The goal of this leadership framework is to utilize general leadership theory as a supplement that can aid in developing believers in Christ to become capable and effective disciples.

Jesus is the ultimate model for what a biblical leader should strive for. This section considers four aspects of leadership modeled by Christ, followed by how general leadership theory can aid in the process of making disciples that look like him (Rom. 8:29, 1 John 3:2).

Commitment to People

The most basic component necessary for effective leadership to take place is making a commitment to people. While biblical leaders are called to first serve Christ, the effect of that service is seen in the impact on those whom they lead. Christ came to do the will of the Father. (John 5:19). It was the Father's will for Jesus to serve people. He said, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). While he accomplished the Father's will, the full impact of his ministry was seen in the lives of his followers. No one who responded to Christ walked away the same person (John 9:29, 39). Pastors are called to disciple people with the goal of leading them to become effective followers of Christ themselves (Matt. 29:18-20, Eph. 4:11-16). Their influence in this task is directly related to their ability to create healthy relationships in the discipleship process. However, this can only happen when a commitment to helping people become faithful disciples is first made.

Committing to people has two effects. First, it ensures the leader stays focused on the mission (which is to raise up disciples). In ministry it is easy to become distracted by religious routines and the various ministries being performed. Over time a leader can forget that people are the mission. Second, it ensures that any programs or ministries developed are there to serve the people. When those things are no longer effective in serving the people, they are either changed or discarded.

Become a Servant

While making a commitment to people is the first step, further influence is made when that commitment is coupled with a willingness to become a servant to others. Jesus said he came to serve. Writing to the Philippian church Paul wrote, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (2:5). To be effective, biblical leaders must embrace this call. This is no small task. Jesus served his church through suffering and sacrifice.

The depth of this call can easily be lost on leaders. Jesus did not simply serve others, but he emptied himself of his rights as God to accomplish this task. Theologians refer to this as his kenosis. This comes from the Greek word *kenóō* and is found in Philippians 2:7, where Paul wrote, that “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but *emptied himself* (*ekenōsen heauton*), by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (vs. 6-7). Kent (1981) observed that,

the word ‘taking’ does not imply an exchange, but rather an addition. The ‘form of God’ could not be relinquished, for God cannot cease to be God; but our Lord could and did take on the very form of a lowly servant when he entered human life by the incarnation ... [Thus] Christ did not empty himself of the form of God (i.e. his deity), but of the manner of existence as equal to God (p. 123-124).

In other words, Jesus became a servant by relinquishing his rights as God. While still in possession of all that his deity entailed, he set aside his rights for the purpose of giving his life away to others. This is the mind biblical leaders are called to develop.

Seek to Develop Others

As Jesus served others, his goal was to transform them from citizens of the world into citizens of the kingdom of God. Jesus did this by bringing his followers into his circle and empowering them to be a part of his mission. He said to them, “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15). This empowerment came through teaching them and modeling for them what kingdom living looked like. He trained them in the doctrine and methods of the kingdom. Jesus did this by teaching them, demonstrating for them how to reach others, and then sending them out to do what he was doing (Luke 9:1-6; 10:1-12). When they returned, he provided feedback on their accomplishments (Luke 10:17-20). As a result, the disciples were in a constant state of growth and development. Finally, he gave them the authority to go in his name. He said, “as the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21). This ensured they took possession of the mission Jesus was seeking to accomplish. As such, it was no longer his mission, but their mission. They were now partners with Jesus in building the kingdom of God.

Lead as a Shepherd

The most significant theme of Jesus’s leadership revolved around his self-understanding as a shepherd. He said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). Shepherds were more than employees. They did not punch the clock. They were fully invested in the lives of their sheep. It was a 24/7 lifestyle that defined everything they

did. Also, it was a lifestyle that was comprehensive in scope (Laniak, 2006). It was a constantly changing role that included such responsibilities as “protector, provider, and guide” (p. 247). Furthermore, good shepherding is expressed when leaders make decisions that benefit the flock, even at great personal cost (John 10:11). As a shepherd Jesus came to lead God’s people to faithfully follow the Lord (Mark 1:17; Luke 6:46). This role calls for the benevolent use of authority and care. Some situations require militant protection and discipline, others beckon for gentle nurture (Laniak, 2006). To be effective as a shepherd, the leader must be fully committed to those they serve. Jesus demonstrated his commitment through his death on the cross for sinners. Biblical leaders lead best when they learn to shepherd their people as demonstrated by Jesus.

Theoretical Foundations of Leadership that Support This Process

The ministry of Jesus demonstrated that while he had profound influence, his leadership happened in the context of relationships. The most basic component necessary to effective leadership is making a commitment to build relationships. Kouzes and Posner (2017) defined leadership as a relationship. Some authors, like Maxwell (1998) defined leadership as influence. He wrote, “leadership is influence—nothing more, nothing less” (p. 17). While it is true that leadership in its many forms seeks to influence others by various means, Kouzes and Posner provide an important principle: influence happens in the context of relationships. How those relationships are managed will determine the level of influence one has. This is in keeping with Northouse’s definition of leadership: “leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2019, p. 5).

While there are many effective leadership theories, three theories that are consistent with this approach are considered. They are transformational leadership theory, authentic leadership theory, and servant leadership.

Transformational Leadership

According to Northouse (2019) “transformational leadership is a process that changes and transforms people” (p. 163). Some have argued that transformational leadership’s heavy emphasis on the leader-follower dynamic may limit its ability to explain transformational leadership's effects on organizational success (Northouse, 2019). While this may be a weakness for corporations, it is vitally important for discipleship within the church. While Christ is the central focus of the Christian faith, that focus is seen in the personal relationships of those who are being transformed by the discipleship process.

Another important component of transformational leadership as it relates to the discipleship process is its focus on how one’s development will benefit an organization. According to Northouse (2019) people who demonstrate transformational leadership frequently possess a strong sense of internal values and principles and are skilled at persuading others to act in ways that advance the common good as opposed to their own self-interests. An example of this is seen in McGregor’s Theory Y. McGregor (2006) proposed that leaders who seek to develop their followers will create an atmosphere where workers will want to grow and contribute to the organization in positive ways. As leaders help believers mature in Christ, the believer’s focus should shift from self-interest to seeking the will of God expressed through the church.

A potential drawback to this theory is that the relationship can create a sense of dependency. The goal of the discipleship process is to develop a believer to become a mature

follower of Christ who can perform ministry without being dependent upon another person. For example, one behavioral factor of this theory, called idealized influence, describes leaders who become such strong role models that followers want to be like them (Northouse, 2019). In contrast, biblical leaders have as their goal to lead followers to become like Christ (Rom. 8:28, 1 John 3:2). To achieve this, leaders must be careful to remove themselves as the ideal of what a disciple looks like. While they may have qualities worth emulating, Christ must always remain the focus (John 3:30).

Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership is another theory that can supplement a biblical model of leadership. Northouse (2019) stated, “Authentic leadership is about the authenticity of leaders and their leadership” (p. 197). While transformational leadership focuses on the development of people, authentic leadership focuses on leaders themselves. Specifically, it seeks to encourage a type of leadership that followers can trust. There are two approaches to this leadership theory—a practical approach and a theoretical approach. While a theoretical approach has value, the practical approach most closely resembles a biblical model.

The practical approach focuses on the characteristics of authentic leaders and was developed by Bill George. Northouse (2019) stated the following:

Specifically, authentic leaders demonstrate five basic characteristics: (1) They have a strong sense of purpose, (2) they have strong values about the right thing to do, (3) they establish trusting relationships with others, (4) they demonstrate self-discipline and act on their values, and (5) they are sensitive and empathetic to the plight of others (p. 199).

All five characteristics encourage a leader to lead with passion while also encouraging a certain amount of vulnerability (Warren, 2019). Followers are more likely to be honest about their own frailties when they perceive their leader as a complete person—flaws and all. This has the effect of helping followers understand that kingdom work is an ongoing process. One does not have to

reach a level of perfection before they can contribute. Scripture teaches, “that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6). The emphasis is on future completion. Until then, all believers are a work in progress. Leaders who emphasize this create a climate of humility where grace, acceptance, and continued growth can occur.

A potential drawback to authentic leadership is that leaders can be too transparent. A balance is needed. Whiting (2017) made a distinction between Emotional Authenticity and Strategic Authenticity. Emotional authenticity refers to the value of letting one’s feelings be known. Strategic authenticity refers to being true to one’s goals for an organization. She wrote,

I know I feel that when I am in a relationship with someone, I have an obligation to be as genuine and transparent with them as possible. I expect the same in return. But there are times when strategic authenticity must take center stage. Sharing confidential information can be detrimental to the community. Talking too soon about a new church initiative can lessen the impact of the grand announcement. Voicing all my insecurities to those I minister to, for instance, can affect how they trust me as their leader, thus contradicting my long-term strategy of leading them well (Whiting, 2017).

For authentic ministry to be effective, then, leaders must exercise discernment on what will benefit followers versus what can hurt both followers and the church.

Servant Leadership

A final theory of leadership that can aid the biblical model of leadership is servant leadership. This theory posits that leaders put followers first. According to Northouse (2019) “servant leadership emphasizes that leaders be attentive to the concerns of their followers, empathize with them, and nurture them ... and help them develop their full personal capacities” (p. 227). This strategy is different from transformational leadership in that the former places more emphasis on the organization and builds follower commitment to organizational goals, while the latter places more emphasis on the followers and views organizational goal achievement as a secondary goal (Stone et al., 2004). Thus, the mission of the servant leader is to

develop people for the sake of people. In doing so, “they place the good of followers over their own self-interests” as they seek the full development of their followers (Northouse, 2019, p. 228).

The strength of this theory is that it encourages leaders to step outside of themselves and focus on the other person. This is a unique characteristic as it “makes altruism the central component of the leadership process” (Northouse, 2019, p. 241). In this regard Finzel (2015) explained that servant leadership is about carrying others on your heart rather than your back.

To accomplish this, 10 characteristics are central to the development of servant leadership. They are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Greenleaf, 2008). When combined, these qualities enable leaders to be true servants while they work to develop others. This contrasts with other leadership philosophies where the leader may try to dominate or control the follower while working to develop them (Northouse, 2019).

This approach is perhaps the closest a general leadership model gets to the leadership practices of Jesus. According to Finzel (2015), Jesus is the greatest hero when it comes to servant leadership. While Jesus was a strong leader, he was first a servant leader. He demonstrated this reality when he first took the place of a slave to wash the feet of the disciples (John 13:3-5). However, his ultimate expression of being a servant came when he willingly went to the cross to die for the sins of the world. As such, Finzel argued that this approach to leadership encourages the leader to take the initiative in that service. After washing their feet, Jesus told his disciples, “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you” (John 13:14-15).

A potential weakness of this theory is its emphasis on the follower. While serving the follower for the purpose of their development is a biblical mandate, so is accomplishing the Great Commission. As such, a leader needs to balance the mission of the church with the mission to develop the follower to accomplish the Great Commission. Northouse (2019) observed that servant leadership “conflicts with individual autonomy and other principles of leadership such as directing, concern for production, goal setting, and creating a vision” (p. 242). To be effective, then, biblical leaders will need to balance the overall vision of the Great Commission with individual discipleship.

Summary

If it is true that without good leadership the things the church seeks to accomplish cannot get done, then it is necessary to have a leadership framework consistent with the goals Christ has given the church and consistent with the context in which it works. This section has looked at a biblical model of leadership based on the example and ministry of Christ. It has also explored how transformational leadership, authentic leadership, and servant leadership theories can be used as a supplement to aid in developing followers of Christ to become capable and effective disciples.

Related Literature

The previous sections sought to lay a theological and theoretical framework for this study. This section focuses on related literature. Theological considerations should shape the focus of Christian leadership in the church. However, in most churches a hybrid leadership structure is used where pastors are expected to submit to a non-biblical leadership structure, which usually consists of a board of deacons. And while there are theological studies which describe the role of the pastor/elder, many churches struggle to find a balance between the two

offices. For many churches, especially smaller churches, deacons, per Akin and Pace's (2017) observation, seek to work as functioning elders. However, instead of complementing the pastor and benefiting the church, the church usually suffers from conflict and poor pastoral retention.

Conflict and Pastoral Termination

It is claimed that the current practice of deacons functioning as elders in SBC churches has created confusion and generated conflict (Harbuck, 2018; Payne, 1996). Stories of conflict in SBC churches are not uncommon and have a long history. Indeed, at the Southern Baptist Convention of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania in 1983 it was recognized that there was a national crisis within the convention concerning forced terminations of pastors (Hicks, 2010). This led to the adoption of the following resolution:

Resolution No. 9—On the Forced Termination of Ministers

WHEREAS, Each year a growing number of ministers experience a forced termination of their services, creating severe economic, emotional, and spiritual problems for the minister and his family; and

WHEREAS, These forced terminations always cause disruptive conflict in the local church; and WHEREAS, The love of God compels us to be redemptive in these circumstances; and

WHEREAS, Numerous state conventions have expressed great concerns for this growing problem and are taking positive steps to raise the Christian ethical conscience of Southern Baptists in this critical matter; and

WHEREAS, Many state conventions are ministering to the needs of both ministers and churches by establishing church/minister relations departments, or similar means, to provide spiritual, emotional, and physical support and/or redemptive counseling to both ministers and churches.

Therefore, be it *Resolved*, That we, the messengers of the Southern Baptist Convention meeting June 14-16, 1983, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, commend the Sunday School Board, state conventions, and associations for their redemptive efforts related to this crisis, and encourage them to continue positive corrective measures related to this sensitive problem through the provision of preventative and redemptive support to ministers and churches (SBC Annuals, 1983, p. 67).

While this has been a nationally recognized problem in the SBC going back to at least 1983, in academic literature there has been little work done to understand the source of the problem. However, one study alleged that from those surveyed, 43% of church members indicated that at some time during their church life they witnessed major conflict between the pastor and deacons in their church (Payne, 1996). That same study recounted several stories of church splits that resulted from the deacons not agreeing with the direction the pastor was taking the church. A 2016 study that surveyed deacons then serving in a church found that 62% of the participants believed their role as a deacon was primarily that of overseer for the church, and 25% percent believed their role included supervising the pastor; 60% indicated that they set the budget for the church, and 62% said that the pastor needed their approval for a major financial expenditure; 72% indicated that the mission and vision of the church are set by the deacons (Harbuck, 2018). If a pastor who believes he is called to lead comes to a church where deacons hold such views, it is only a matter of time before conflict ensues. Indeed, a 2009 study conducted by Lifeway Christian Resources' pastoral ministries department reported that control issues were the number one reason for forced terminations among pastors (Turner, 2012). That study found that in 2009, 209 pastors had been forced from their role as pastor due to control issues. According to Turner (2012), "Nearly twice as many pastors are dismissed annually related to this issue than any other issue" (para. 2). Furthermore,

Reports from twenty-two state Baptist conventions compiled by the Alabama Baptist Convention over a two-year period (2009-2011) indicate that 2 percent of pastors, and 4 percent of staff ministers, will be terminated. While those percentages may seem small, multiplied by the total number of churches that cooperate with the Southern Baptist Convention, they translate into more than eight hundred ministers who are asked to leave their positions each year ... While the report is not a strict scientific study, its findings are consistent with years of research and provide a look at a continuing trend of terminated pastors and church staff members across the Convention ... Termination studies have been compiled since 1996. Sixteen years later the top reasons for dismissal have remained relatively the same. (Turner, 2012, para. 3, 4, 6).

This author came to his second church after just such a situation. The pulpit committee attempted to paint the picture that they had started a church plant. But when all the facts emerged, they had paid the pastor, and church members who supported him, \$200,000 dollars to leave. They did begin a new church, but it was a de facto church split, not a church plant. The reason for the conflict was because the pastor was trying to make changes in the church. Within a year of becoming their pastor, a group of deacons convened a special meeting with this author to tell him in no uncertain terms that they were the leaders of the church.

While such stories are common, it appears that from an academic point of view they go under the radar. However, such situations result from the deacons assuming the authority of elders, while not themselves recognizing the God given authority of the pastor. In many situations, the pastor does not just leave the church, but leaves the ministry altogether. If a more biblical strategy for leading were adopted, the number of pastoral terminations might decrease (Payne, 1996). For this to happen, churches might consider how a non-biblical model of church polity is affecting the church.

On a broader scale, a 2006-2007 Duke University National Congregations Study that included 5,333 congregations across the United States reported the following,

- 24% of ministers experienced a conflict in the last two years that was serious enough to call a special meeting.
- 25% experienced a conflict in the last two years that resulted in people leaving their congregations.
- 9% experienced a conflict that led leaders to leave the congregation.
- 7% were classified as ‘persistently conflicted’.
- 35% of congregations reporting conflict indicated that it was about clergy.

- 12% stated that their conflicts were about church leadership, which may or may not refer to clergy.
- 8% indicated that their conflicts were about money.
- 48% of congregations surveyed selected the catch-all ‘other’ category to describe the nature of their conflicts.
- One interesting finding about the congregations classified as ‘persistently conflicted’ is that they accounted for 35 to 40% of all church conflict reported over a four-year period.
- When this data is compared with the data gathered in the first wave survey (1998), the findings indicate that prevalence of church conflict is constant (not increasing) (Hicks, 2010).

While this study includes a cross section of American religious life, it provides a snapshot of what is happening in churches.

Another national study from 2010 reports similar findings. At that time, it was estimated that each year more than 3,700 churches permanently close their doors (Harbuck, 2018). Furthermore, “of the estimated 344,894 churches in existence in the United States, 297,500 of them are in distress” (Harbuck, 2018, p. 3). This means that 87% of those churches surveyed are in decline. According to Rainer (2019) 70% of SBC churches are in decline. Harbuck (2018) believes that a significant factor in the decline of SBC churches is the establishment of an unbiblical polity within the church that is at odds with the biblical design, and more specifically, a misapplication of the duties and understanding of the office of the deacon.

This concept, as previously discussed, came into being in the middle of the 19th century, when the position of deacon changed from one of humble service to one of power, influence, and administration. The executive deacon boards that gained control in Baptist churches and elsewhere in the contemporary day have continued to conflict with the original, biblical design of the deacon ministry (Harbuck, 2018; Strauch, 1995). As a result, many churches continue to have “deacon boards” that function as the accountability boards and sounding boards for the

pastor/elder. Instead of serving the needs of the membership as their primary ministry, many modern deacons understand their ministry as serving the business and “temporal” aspects of the church (building and grounds, finances, personnel issues, etc.) while the pastor is encouraged to focus on the “spiritual” aspect of the church (preaching, visiting the sick, etc.). This has created the environment where the pastor is expected to report and submit to the deacons, who wield control over the affairs of the pastor and the church (Harbuck, 2018, Strauch, 1995).

Greenfield (2001) recounted his experience as a seasoned pastor who suffered because of an unbiblical leadership model. He wrote that he became the eighth pastor to be forced out of a church in a twenty-five-year span. In other words, in that period the church called and forced out eight pastors from their roles. When he spoke with the pastor search committee, they told him they wanted someone older with a lot of experience. Both he and the pulpit committee believed he was qualified. However, three years later at age 62 he was forced to resign. While he believes in congregational polity, he believes the New Testament teaches that elders are to lead a local congregation. According to him the true function of a deacon-led church, or deacon board, is that a few men (the board) become an oligarchy (the rule of a few). He explains the common relationship such a board has with a pastor:

In a church with an entrenched oligarchy, a minister who tries to lead without their approval will be a short-term-minister. A power struggle will develop because a lay oligarchy will consider its authority being challenged by such a ‘reckless’ minister who ‘doesn’t know his place’ in the church. As one such powerful lay leader said to me, ‘We hire and fire the pastor; we pay him to do what we tell him; the nerve of him to ignore us!’ In such churches, sad as it sounds, the minister is little more than a glorified custodian, a chaplain of sorts to them, a hireling of a small group of movers and shakers in the congregation (Greenfield, 2001, p. 71).

While Greenfield’s story is anecdotal, Stewart (2009) wrote that, “Senior Pastors are dropping out of ministry, being fired or forced out of ministry in record numbers, thus placing ministry as a profession in great jeopardy” (p. 112). She reported the following:

- A Duke University study found that eighty-five percent of seminary graduates entering the ministry leave within five years and 90% of all pastors will not stay to retirement.
- A study from 1999 revealed that 72,000 pastors and clergy were forced out across America in 1999.
- The Alban Institute stated that within the first ten years of parish ministry, roughly half will either be fired by their congregations or forced to move.

A more recent study reports that 18,000-20,000 pastors leave the ministry every year (Bray, 2021). In addition, 1,500 pastors are either walking away or being terminated every month. According to Pastor Care Inc., of those 1500, 1300 are in fact terminated by the local church. Blosch (2006) wrote that “one estimate indicated that a pastor is force-terminated approximately once every six minutes” (p. 16). Another study of Southern Baptist pastors who had been terminated found that 85% had been terminated after a confrontation by a small group in the church rather than by a vote of the entire church (Blosch, 2006).

However, not all conflict is the result of unbiblical church polity. Some of the reasons for conflict include unstated and unmet expectations, personality conflicts, poor people skills, mismatched leadership styles, poor communication, differences in goals and visions for the church, and even pastoral incompetence (Bray, 2021). Another study cited poor people skills on the part of the pastor, too strong of a leadership style from the pastor, the church was already conflicted when the pastor arrived, and too weak of leadership style from the pastor (Turner 2021). However, despite the various reasons for conflict, control issues consistently appear as the number one reason for pastoral termination (Hicks, 2010; Powell, 2008; Turner, 2012). Powell (2008) wrote that “across denominational lines the main problem that causes forced terminations is control issues” (p 18).

Sheffield (2014), who served as a pastoral ministry specialist for Lifeway until 2007, wrote that it is not unheard of for pastors to hear comments such as, “Pastor, this is our church

and not yours and it is about time you realized this.” Such attitudes result in conflict. He continued, “As pastors we can get caught up in a tug of war over power and control issues with specific individuals or groups in the church.... Depending on the circumstances and the people involved, you can find yourself facing forced termination” (para. 1).

However, Hamm and Eagle (2021) contend that many of the numbers presented for forced termination are “absurdly high” (p. 3). They directly contradict Stewart (2009), writing, “Alarmist reports detailing a crisis in pastors who are leaving congregational ministry abound. Some have reported 5-year attrition rates of up to 85% ...; others have estimated that every 6 minutes a pastor is fired....” (p. 3). While they argue that these numbers are alarmist and even “boarder on the absurd,” they readily acknowledge that “in terms of reasons for [pastors] leaving [the ministry] among Protestants, the most common factor named is conflict with the congregational or denominational system” (p. 3). However, in reference to numbers, Powell (2008) argued that many of the forced terminations are a result of the board of deacons telling the pastor it is time for him to find a new church. In other words, he can find a new ministry and resign; or, if he refuses, he can be fired. Most opt for the former option. The result is that many forced terminations are not reported as such and are seen as voluntary moves.

According to a study by Charles Chandler who is the executive director for the Ministering to the Ministers foundation, there are three patterns in the stories of pastors who are forced to resign (Pinion, 2006). First, each pastor had been “blindsided” by a small group of people within the church. They were a self-appointed group that were not representing the church but tried to convince that pastor that they did. Second, after being blindsided, the group “dumped guilt on the minister. They said the resignation and related conversation must be kept very quiet” (p. 99). The reason for this was their fear that such news would cause a church split.

If the church found out and a split occurred, the fault, according to the group, would be that of the pastor. Third, while the pastor was still reeling from the group's presentation, and not in an appropriate condition to make a wise decision, the group pressed for an immediate decision by the pastor. In most instances, a small severance was offered to the pastor, with the condition that his resignation was offered during the confrontation, and he agreed to keep the meeting quiet (Pinion, 2006). If a decision was not made immediately, they threatened to have the pastor fired.

Church Health and decline in Contemporary Churches

Such conflict will inevitably have a negative impact on church health. A 2019 study by Exponential and Lifeway Research reported the following concerning church health:

- 70% of churches are subtracting/declining or plateauing. Only 30% are adding/growing based on Exponential's categorization of churches This data is largely consistent with other research we have done. The period covered is three years.
- There are relatively few reproducing churches. The research categorized only 7% of the churches as reproducing (via church plants). The numbers of churches considered multiplying (Level 5: multiple generations of church plants) was 0% in the sample, indicating a negligible number in the total U. S. church population.
- Most Protestant churches had less than 10 people commit to Jesus Christ as Savior in the past 12 months. That's fewer than one person per month. That's not good. That's not good at all.
- Smaller churches are at severe risk. Among those churches with an average worship attendance under 50, only 20% are growing. That is the lowest of any of the categories of churches and is an indicator that these churches are at the greatest risk of dying.
- Larger churches have a much lower risk of dying. Among the churches with an average worship attendance of 250 and more, 42% are growing. That is, by far, the largest number of growing churches in any category (Rainer, 2019).

One of the greatest needs churches have today is to turn around their decline. However, experts on church revitalization assert churches that reverse their downward trend typically do so in the sixth or seventh year of the pastor's service (Blackwell, 2018). For many churches this poses a problem. Most pastors leave a church at the most essential moment for renewal, despite

the fact that the average pastoral tenure has increased from 3.6 to 6 years since 1996 (Blackwell, 2018). So, despite the reason for conflict between a pastor and the church, short pastor tenures contribute to poor church health.

Concerning the state of contemporary churches, Wilson (2016) wrote that, “something significant is changing in local church life.... I believe we are entering a time of winnowing for congregations. What we expect to unfold is that unhealthy churches and faith communities will find their very survival at risk” (p. 333). As the culture turns away from its Christian roots, there is more competition among churches for a smaller demographic from which to reach people who are interested in the things of God. Barna reports that in a study conducted in 2000, 45% of people surveyed identified as Christians. Nineteen years later, the number has significantly dropped. Today, just one in four Americans (25%) is a practicing Christian. The total number of practicing Christians has nearly dropped in half since 2000 (Barna, 2020). This is creating a crisis in American Protestant churches (Olson, 2008). Most Americans rarely attend church on Sundays. What is worse is that the church is failing to keep up with population growth. If current trends hold, the proportion of Americans who attend church will be cut in half by 2050 from its 1990 level.

Conflict is a major factor in contributing to the contemporary problems that affect church health today. Wilson (2016) stated, “For the twenty-first century American Church, conflict is a major factor in the struggles and low energy that prevail in many locations” (p. 336). Wilson reported that in his ministry (Center for Healthy Churches) which coaches churches with the aim of helping both congregations and their pastors, his experience reveals that many churches lack the basic skills needed to redemptively manage conflict. Churches routinely ignore biblical commands and examples, resulting in permanent damage to individuals and to the gospel

witness. There are four general predictors of church health that cut across theological, societal, and denominational boundaries. They are clarity of mission and vision, transformational conflict, authentic community, and transparent communication. Churches that seek to be intentional in those four areas can turn themselves back from conflict and decline to experience a vibrant church life again.

In his study Rainer (2014) reported that “10,000 churches in America are showing signs of decline toward death” (p. 7). He explained that a slow decline is preceded by a lack of missional prayer and focus. Over time the ministries of the church not only lack vision, but slowly develop an inward focus. They are unable to focus because they cling to the past with desperation. When any internal or external force attempts to change the past, they retaliate with anger and a firm determination that change will not happen on their watch (Rainer, 2014). In addition, such churches refuse to look like their communities. As the communities change around them, they cling with tenacity to the “good old days.”

This author once interviewed with a pulpit committee in a major metropolitan area. The church had a three-story education building, a sanctuary that could hold 1,200 people, a \$750,000-dollar organ, and was in a thriving and growing multiethnic community. When asked if they would hire staff members that looked like the community, they responded by saying they could be a “regional” church. They have since closed their doors. Such churches become fortresses seeking to keep change out of the churches (Rainer, 2014). There are other reasons why churches suffer decline and die, but the main reason can be summed up with a simple equation: “others first = life. Me first = death” (Rainer, 2014, p. 28). Dying churches are concerned with self-preservation and a certain way of doing church (Rainer, 2014).

Individualism and Inward focus in the Church

In a recent podcast, Rainer (2022) revealed what he calls early warning signs of a church drifting towards death. A major sign is when people, especially leaders in the church, talk more about themselves than Jesus. As a result, the focus is no longer on the mission of the church, but on the personality of either the leader or other members of the church. Another sign is when a small percentage of the operating budget is dedicated to outwardly focused ministry and mission. There are other warning signs, but the point remains. Churches begin to experience decline and poor health when the focus is turned inward.

One reason (mentioned above) that churches begin to focus inwardly is because they focus on the past and tradition more than the mission Christ gave his church. Rock (2005) gave the following testimony concerning this problem. It is worth quoting at length:

My first experience as a duly installed parish pastor was thrilling. There are those special moments in ministry when time seems to stand still for the celebration of that unique bonding between pastor and people. The music was magnificent; relatives, guests, mentors, and colleagues smiled with pride and delight as I processed with the choir and judicatory representatives. For a little while, that gathered congregation of immigrant stock, farmers and settlers, commuters and local small business people was transformed into a band of faithful pilgrims, who had served their community since 1811.

Yet, after two years in this congregation, I had become depressed. I began sending out resumes to explore a number of college and university student personnel positions. I hoped to escape from a leadership position in which I felt like a “kept” man. The expectations for pastoral leadership were quite clear: to keep the traditions of many generations; to be available for pastoral duties; not to “rock the boat” in the direction of a radical gospel of servanthood in a place that fought the onslaught of urbanization. Preservation, not transformation, was the guiding perspective of most of the gentry of that land (p. 109).

Despite his feelings, over time the church did begin to build ministries that positively affected the community, but he observed that those ministries were more pastor-centered than member centered. He stated, “The congregation seemed to want my preaching, teaching, and pastoral care efforts to be focused on the maintenance of the families and properties of the congregation” (p.

110). At times, churches can look as though they are flourishing, but the focus is not on reaching the world with the gospel and discipling new believers, but on providing programs for its members.

Much of the conflict that affects churches stems from society's emphasis on the individual (Dickard, 2022; Jackson, 2020). In popular culture, people are consumers. They shop for the things they want. Most decisions are focused on the wants and/or needs of the individual. People bring this understanding into the church. At its core, the problem of individualism is expressed in the pursuit of personal preferences (Jackson, 2020). There is a difference, however, between the ideas of individuality and individualism. Individuality contains the biblical idea that each person is unique and created in the image of God. As a result, each person matters. Individualism, on the other hand, carries the idea that each person is an island, and the chief virtues are the desires of the individual. Individualism emphasizes the sovereignty of each person, which is a direct contradiction to the first commandment (Exodus 20:2-3). Jackson (2020) reported, "Personal sovereignty says that the individual is in charge and no authority, including God, is supreme to the individual" (p. 10). As such, "the spirit of the age is fashioned by the letter *I*" (Dickard, 2022, p. 2)

Individualism can be expressed in many ways in the church. For example, the story is shared of a church that received a healthy donation from a member. The leadership decided to use the money to purchase badly needed carpet in the sanctuary. After the carpet was installed, conflict ensued because members had different views on what the style and color of the carpet should be. They were angry because their preferences were not consulted. As a result of that conflict, many people left the church, and in time the pastor left as well (Jackson, 2020).

The emphasis on individualism can even be found in the vision and direction local churches give their members for ministry. One church has a vision statement that reads “A common thread that unites our body is that we all are seeking a greater knowledge of the truth of God, and an ever closer, personal walk with Jesus Christ” (Jackson, 2020, p. 4). Such a vision statement is clearly focused on the individual’s walk with Christ. And while each individual and their walk with Christ is important, this emphasis on the individual is to the neglect of the church as the body of Christ which is called to reach the nations with the gospel. People who come to church as individuals seek to have certain needs met, whereas members who come to be a part of the body of Christ seek to fulfill God’s will as a church. Furthermore, that church’s philosophy of ministry is stated as:

We accept each individual where they are on their spiritual journey, while providing a safe, nurturing environment for each person to learn, grow, and be changed by the Holy Spirit into the amazing individual God intended each of us to be: an individual that reflects the image of Jesus Christ! (p. 4-5).

Such a philosophy of ministry clearly emphasizes the individual over the body. This is in keeping with the foundational values of modernity, where the individual is often portrayed as the center of existence (Jackson, 2020). However, “Individualism is the antithesis of unity, it calls for the individual to be glorified as a separate unit, instead of being seen as a part of a group” (p. 8). When believers adopt the values of modernity, and choose self over the body of Christ, conflict is inevitable.

This author has written elsewhere that one of the problems affecting the modern church is the idea that the individual is paramount in society: “In today’s world the idea of individual autonomy is one of the leading virtues of society” (Biller, 2017, p. 25). It is not uncommon for your average American to understand that the only real authority in a person’s life is the individual. While Americans readily recognize the need for the rule of law, each person is

conditioned by the culture to decide for themselves what is right or wrong, true or false, and good or evil. In contemporary society, the individual, not God, decides the parameters of these things. As the church's influence has diminished over the course of a generation, the contemporary culture has seen a surge in emphasizing individualism, and this has influenced the church's understanding of Christianity.

As a result, one of the greatest fundamental dangers facing the church today is this emphasis on the individual (Dickard, 2022). The church is at a crossroads. Each member must choose between their individual needs, reflecting the mindset of the age, or choose a cross-centered life that puts the needs of the church before self. The gospel says, "Take up your cross and follow me. Individualism says, 'Take up your cause and follow self.' The way of the cross calls for the denial of self. The way of individualism claws for the expression of self" (Dickard, 2022, p. 1).

Because of the emphasis on self in the culture at large, the church can easily fall prey to its influence. But the church that allows the spirit of the age to shape its spiritual contours looks nothing like the church as seen in scripture. The church shaped by culture focuses on what is in it for the individual. The church shaped by the self-denying gospel seeks to accomplish God's mission in the world—which is to seek and save the lost, and then raise up disciples who can continue the mission. Dickard (2022) states, "When individualism becomes the vision of the church, service is out, and 'serve me' is in. No longer is the goal to serve God through the church. The aim is for the church to serve *me* through God" (p. 8). Many people come to the church with this understanding. As a result, they believe they are entitled to have their needs and desires met through the church. Much of the conflict within churches can be traced to this malady, and much of the conflict that pastors experience is caused by this as well. As people

come into the church to be served, they expect the pastor to meet their needs. When that does not happen, they believe the pastor has failed to do his job.

Rainer's (2014) survey of churches that died revealed their focus of ministry was internal. His study showed that many of the participants shifted the emphasis from others to themselves. A church is destined for decline and death when it proceeds in that direction. In the study, there was no indication in the churches surveyed that those members had "... a self-sacrificial attitude. Instead, the attitude was self-serving, self-giving, and self-entitled. It was about me, myself, and I" (p. 50). In addition, as these churches began to look inward, pastor retention suffered. In these churches, pastors stayed no longer than two to three years. This pattern intensified in the two decades leading to the death of the church. Rainer (2014) reported that in these churches a predictable pattern emerged:

The church would call a new pastor with the hope that the pastor could lead the church back to health. The pastor comes to the church and leads a few changes. The members don't like the changes and resist. The pastor becomes discouraged and leaves. In some cases, the pastor was fired. Repeat cycle (p.56).

Why do these churches keep repeating the same dysfunctional cycle? In some cases, it is simply denial. In other cases, members of such churches practice avoidance, hoping that ignoring the problem will make it go away (Rainer, 2014).

Another explanation for this dysfunctional cycle was offered by the North Carolina Baptist Convention Pastoral Ministries Team. In their conference entitled *Surviving Conflict in Ministry*, Burton and Oaks (2005) presented the Karpman Drama Triangle as an explanation. They argued that when church members decide they do not like changes the pastor is making, they often complain to the deacons who then feel obligated to confront the pastor about the changes. The effect of the confrontation generates conflict, which usually results in the departure of the pastor. According to Karpman (Schwarz, et al., 2005) who developed the Karpman Drama

Triangle, the scenario has three roles: the victim, the rescuer, and the persecutor. These roles are interchangeable. An individual can move from one role to another depending on the circumstances. The triangle begins with a victim. The victim is the person who feels helpless and powerless to do something about what they perceive to be a problem. In this case, the victim is the church member who does not like the changes the pastor is making. In response, the victim goes to the rescuer seeking help. They enlist the rescuer to save the church. This is usually a deacon who now feels obligated and empowered to be the victim's rescuer. He believes he has a moral imperative to address the problem. The deacon then, in turn, becomes the persecutor who seeks to rescue the victim from the problem. According to this model, the persecutor becomes angry, critical, accusative, and authoritarian towards the person causing the perceived problem. When the pastor is confronted, he may see himself as a victim, who then assumes the role of a persecutor to defend himself. This generates a cycle of dysfunction and conflict that only escalates over time. Instead of becoming a rescuer, deacons can practice the art of peacemaking by refusing to take ownership of the victim's complaints, and instead bring that person to the pastor to facilitate a redemptive conversation that seeks both reconciliation and submission to the Lord Jesus Christ by all parties (Burton & Oaks, 2005).

Conflict and Pastoral Burnout

Whatever the reason, the result of conflict contributes to pastoral burnout and pastoral turnover. Many congregations do not prepare themselves to address conflict redemptively, which could mitigate pastoral burnout (Noble & Noble, 2008). Unfortunately, "when it strikes, they are confused and often respond slowly and ineffectively, bringing unnecessary anguish and suffering to their staff and members..." (p. 171). It is reported that in the early 2000s:

- More than 19,000 congregations experience major conflict every year.

- 25% of the churches in one survey reported conflict in the previous five years that was serious enough to have a lasting impact on congregational life.
- Only 2% of church conflict involves doctrinal issues.
- 98% of church conflict involves interpersonal issues.
- Control issues ranked as the most common cause of conflict (85%).
- About 40% of church members who leave their churches do so because of conflict.
- Very small numbers (16%) of churches report positive outcomes from conflict.
- The average pastoral career lasts only 14 years—less than half of what it was not long ago.
- 1,500 pastors leave their assignments every month in the United States because of conflict, burnout, or moral failure.
- 45% of the pastors terminated in one denomination left the ministry altogether.
- 34% of all pastors presently serve congregations that forced their previous pastor to resign (Noble & Noble, 2008, p. 171).

Things have not improved over the last decade. According to Barna (2021) the number of pastors who are considering leaving the ministry has increased dramatically. They reported that 38% of those they surveyed indicate they have considered quitting full-time ministry in the last year. The percentages are higher among younger pastors (46%) and the majority are from mainline denominations (51%). Further, they reported that only one in three pastors is considered healthy in terms of wellbeing. In addition, “October 2021 data show that many pastors are not faring well in multiple categories of well-being, including spiritual, physical, emotional, vocational and financial” (Barna, 2021, para. 5). This problem was becoming evident before the COVID pandemic. And for American church leaders, this situation is only getting worse.

The long-term effect of conflict on pastors is burnout. Bebee (2007) wrote that:

Studies with clergy indicate that burnout is a complicated construct resulting from the multitude of interpersonal interactions and conflict resulting from role expectations and

overload that occur within the typical performance of the ministerial office Jinkins (2002) found that although role overload was the greatest source of stress, “pastors consistently reported that interpersonal conflicts . . . were among the more difficult aspects of pastoral leadership” (p. 13). Clergy, then, can often find themselves in a double bind: a heartfelt desire to engage others at a deeply personal and spiritual level and yet often finding these same individuals to be the cause of vocational burnout because of parishioners’ expectations to fulfill a multitude of emotional demands (Beebe, 2007, p. 258).

Burnout generally affects many people in helping professions, including pastors (Burnette, 2016). But the pastoral ministry is one of the helping professions that is particularly vulnerable (Exantus, 2011). As such, “Stress and burnout is one of the leading causes for ministers to leave the ministry” (Fuller, 2022, p. 4). Burnout is often the result of emotional exhaustion. It is comparable to a lack of motivation in that it makes someone give up on what they were once fervently dedicated to. It is a reaction to long-term stress from work and is characterized by a state of suffering rather than just exhaustion, tension, or disillusionment (Exantus, 2011). Burnout symptoms include exhaustion, stress, anxiety, worry, insecurity, and even guilt (Exantus, 2011).

Unlike many normal 9-5 jobs, those in the helping professions tend to be enmeshed with their work. Because pastors see their vocation as a calling from God, they have a difficult time in self-role differentiation (Burnette, 2016). In other words, they are always working in some form, and therefore have a hard time separating their personal life from work. One study revealed that pastors experience psychological drain because they often cannot “distinguish between goal setting with reference to their congregational ministries and goal setting in their own personal and professional lives” (Burnette, 2016, p. 25). As a result, some pastors over-identify with the successes, setbacks, and conflict that are prevalent in their position and congregation (Burnette, 2016). Because of that, many pastors see their job as more of a lifestyle than a job.

In addition, there has never been a time in church history where pastors have had to deal with as much work, people problems, and stress as they do today (Exantus, 2011). Many pastors report working between 55 and 75 hours a week (Fuller, 2022). Some factors that contribute to burnout are: the disparity between idealistic expectations and reality; the lack of clear boundaries—tasks never done, “I have to do everything” mentality; Peter Principle—feeling inadequate in leading volunteers; conflict in being a leader—trying to please everyone; trying to be a “servant” to everyone; time management problems; multiplicity of roles; and inability to produce “win-win” conflict resolutions (Fuller, 2022). Furthermore, burnout is a problem caused by excessive time demands, unreasonable expectations, isolation, and loneliness which results in pastors’ personal lives being “severely imbalanced, and their spiritual lives ironically dry....” (Exantus, 2011, p. 23).

The nature of the job seems to leave many pastors feeling isolated. Ministry stress and burnout are also correlated with social isolation and a lack of social support (Burnett, 2016). Many pastors report having no close personal friends in their own congregation. While they provide support to others, they receive very little in return. As a result, many pastors do not have the emotional support they need. However, an important type of social support is emotional support (Burnett, 2016). A pastor who may feel alone as the leader, and due to his position of authority, may find emotional support to be very beneficial. Pastors who did receive the necessary support from members of their congregation suffered less from burnout and pastoral turnover (Burnett, 2016). The reality is that,

Most pastors work long hours, are on-call, often sacrifice time with family to tend congregational crises, carry long-term debt from the cost of seminary and receive below-average compensation in return for performing a difficult job. Trained in theology, they are expected to master leadership, politics, finance, management, psychology, and conflict management (Exantus, 2011, p. 49).

In contrast to other occupations where the leader helps others, such as that of a doctor, psychologist, and so forth, most pastors do not receive assistance in return. Consequently, burnout is a serious issue for pastors.

Summary

This section has explored related literature in the areas of church conflict and pastoral termination, church health and decline in contemporary churches, the problem of individualism in the modern church, and conflict and pastoral burnout. There is a consistent theme that reveals many churches are not in good health (Rainer, 2014). The portrait seen from this section reveals that churches have been in a state of conflict and decline for a long time. A major source of conflict is the rampant individualism that leads church members to see the church as a place where their various needs are met. Pastors are expected to serve their members' expectations. As pastors attempt to serve their congregations, they often experience burnout, frustration, and conflict which result in their premature departure.

Rationale for the Study and Gap in the Literature

The available literature reveals that churches are in decline and experiencing conflict. Further, it is claimed a deacon-led church polity contributes to premature departures by pastors because of conflict with deacons and contributes to the decline many churches are experiencing—both numerically and in terms of spiritual health. It was the purpose of this study to learn if church polity has a real impact on pastors. Whether church polity is the culprit, the available literature suggests that pastors are struggling in today's churches. Consider these stats compiled by Fuller Institute, George Barna and Pastoral Care Inc., published by the Shepherd's Watchman:

- 1,500 clergy leaving pastoral ministry each month. - The Barna Research Group

- 61% of congregations have forced a pastor to leave. - Christianity Today
- 83% of clergy spouses want their spouse to leave pastoral ministry. - Hartford Institute for Religious Research
- 90% of clergy in all denominations will not stay in ministry long enough to reach the age of retirement. - U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics
- 50% of pastors indicated that they would leave the ministry if they had another way of making a living. - Hartford Institute for Religious Research
- 90% of pastors report working between 55 to 75 hours per week.
- 80% believe pastoral ministry has negatively affected their families. Many pastor's children do not attend church now because of what the church has done to their parents.
- 33% state that being in the ministry is an outright hazard to their family.
- 75% report a significant stress-related crisis at least once in their ministry.
- 70% say they have a lower self-image now than when they first started.
- 70% do not have someone they consider a close friend.
- 40% report serious conflict with a parishioner at least once a month.
- 50% have considered leaving the ministry in the last month.
- 50% of the ministers starting out will not last 5 years.
- #1 reason pastors leave the ministry - Church members are not willing to go the same direction and goal of the pastor. Pastor's believe God wants them to go in one direction, but the people are not willing to follow or change (Isbell, 2019).

These statistics reveal that something has gone wrong in many contemporary churches.

However, in the book of Acts, under the power of the Holy Spirit the church not only can thrive but can be a force of power revealing the goodness and love of God to a lost world. The church will experience health and growth when its practices (orthopraxy) are aligned with the teachings of scripture (orthodoxy). Churches are not only called to believe correct things about the gospel but are called to reveal the gospel in the way they operate as a church (Dever, 2012). A biblical

church polity happens when both offices of the church recognize their respective roles. Elders are called by God to lead the church to be on God's agenda (Blackaby, 2001). Deacons are called to be servants, meeting the needs of the body, following the leadership of the elders. While there is a lot of anecdotal evidence to suggest that deacon-led church polity leads to decline in church health as well as premature departure by the church's pastor, this author has found no studies that seek to understand how church polity directly affects a pastor's ability to lead, the health of the church, and the pastor's desire to continue in ministry based on their polity. This study sought to explore that area of church life and attempted to understand the lived experience of pastors who labor under an elder-led model of leadership and a deacon-led model to discern the effects on both their calling and the church they serve.

Profile of the Current Study

This review examined the theological and theoretical literature related to how church polity impacts a pastor's ability to lead and the health of a church. The rationale for using a phenomenological qualitative design was to ascertain from pastor's experiences how the polity a church practices impacts a pastor's ability to lead as well as to understand its impact on the health of the church. While there are a lot of statistics about church health and decline, and some studies on the impact of a deacon-led model of church governance, there do not appear to be any studies that approach the subject from the perspective of pastors. A major concept that undergirds this research is that scripture reveals a design for how churches are to govern themselves. Elders are called to lead, and deacons are called to serve the needs of the church. Both offices are fundamentally important to the overall health of the church. Leadership happens best in a church when the scriptural design is followed. To the degree that it is not followed it appears that the church has a greater risk for conflict (Harbuck, 2018; Payne, 1996; Strauch,

1995). This topic is important because of the potential impact an incorrect application of leadership has on a pastor and the church he serves. Pastors who are called to lead can find their efforts frustrated when an incorrect application of the office of the deacon prevents them from doing so. The report of conflict between pastors and deacons is an unfortunate outcome that hurts the witness of the church as well as its ability to effectively carry out the Great Commission. In addition, pastors who are called to lead by a congregation should feel supported in their leadership role. This study sought to fill a gap in the literature by examining the subject from the perspective of pastors themselves. It sought to understand the perceived impact on a pastor's ability to lead, the overall health of the church, and the pastor's desire to continue in ministry based on that model.

A theoretical framework guiding this research was shared leadership. Shared leadership includes the idea of a council of equals (Strauch, 1995). Shared leadership, also called distributed leadership, is a process of mutual influence that is defined by cooperative decision-making and shared responsibility among team members, whereby team members lead each other towards the accomplishment of goals (Robinson, 2018). This is in keeping with the nature of teams necessary for the church to function as the body of Christ. Teamwork, through shared leadership, happens when decisions are made laterally, among equals as opposed to the traditional vertical decision-making that occurs in the organizations that use a hierarchical authority structure based on rank or position (Northouse, 2019).

The methodology for this study is considered in Chapter Three.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to examine the impact church polity has on a pastor's ability to lead a church, the health of the church, and the pastors desire to continue in ministry based on that model. Phenomenological research seeks to understand the lived experience of individuals and discern the essential meaning of that experience (Moustakas, 1994). This chapter defines the problem and explains the methodology that was used to conduct the research. In addition, it discusses the data collection methods and data analysis methods that were used in the study. The primary data collection method was conducted through interviews with the subjects of the study. This study recognized that the researcher was an instrument in the process of collecting data as interviews were conducted (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). How the interviews were conducted as well as how they were transcribed and coded is discussed below. Each interview was analyzed for emergent patterns of meaning. Finally, this chapter discusses ethical considerations for the participants and the validity and trustworthiness of the research process to ensure transferability of the findings.

Research Design Synopsis

Research Problem

This study sought to ascertain the lived experience of pastors who work under both an elder-led model of church polity and a deacon-led model. As noted above many pastors leave the pastorate every year (Green, 2019; Stewart, 2009). Among those who leave ministry, many leave due to conflict with a board that directs the operations of the church (Grossman, 2016; The Rock Christian Church, 2005). In Southern Baptist Churches, this happens most often in deacon-led churches where a board of deacons requires the pastor to work in subordination to them (Hicks,

2010). Some writers have claimed that under a deacon-led model of leadership pastors have a turnover rate of every three to five years (Green, 2016; Stewart, 2009).

As such, this study sought to understand the lived experience of the pastor under both models; it also sought to discern if the model practiced by a church does in fact influence the pastor's ability to lead, the health of the church, and desire of the pastor/elder to continue in his calling, again based on that model.

Research Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore and compare the lived experiences of pastors who work under a deacon-led and an elder-led model of church governance. This study also sought to understand how pastors perceive that church governance structure impacts their ability to lead, the health of the church, and their desire to continue in their present calling.

This study examined the lived experiences of nine pastors: five who work under a deacon-led model of leadership, and four who work under an elder-led model of leadership. The research examined the impact their respective church polity has on their ability to lead the church, the health of the church, and their desire to continue in pastoral ministry.

Research Questions

RQ1. How has the church's model of leadership contributed to a pastor's ability to lead the church?

RQ2. How do pastors perceive the health of the church in a deacon-led or elder-led church?

RQ3. How does the church's model contribute to a pastor's desire to continue in the pastoral ministry?

Research Design and Methodology

This study used a qualitative, phenomenological research method to ascertain the lived experiences of the pastors working under both models of leadership. Qualitative research focuses on phenomena that happen or have happened in the “real world” or in natural settings (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). The particular focus of a phenomenological study is people and the environments in which they live and/or work. As such, a qualitative study seeks to understand human experience, events, and other factors that cannot be quantified with numbers and statistics. It assumes that real knowledge can be learned from the experiences of individuals as they interact with their environments (Moustakas, 1994).

Qualitative research uses different forms of observation in the collection of data. Phenomena such as human behavior in a particular environment are observed. Interactions between people, and even the perceptions of people concerning their environment, are observed (California State University Long Beach, n.d.). The goal is to get a deep understanding of the phenomenon in question. As such, there can be several purposes of the qualitative study. These include outcomes such as generating a description of a people and/or situations, verifying assumptions or claims of real-world situations, developing a theory related to a phenomenon, identifying a problem that exists, and evaluating particular policies, practices, or innovations (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Qualitative studies focus on collecting and analyzing the complexity of those events to uncover their underlying meaning (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019).

Further, qualitative research is used to identify variables that are difficult to measure, such as the voices of specific groups of people (Creswell, 2013). In that regard, qualitative research has been described as a form of exploration (Creswell, 2013). Instead of beginning with predetermined information from other sources, the researcher allows the experiences of others to

shape the contours of understanding (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research places the observer in the world because of this. A collection of interpretive, practical methods that bring the world into focus ultimately defines this form of research (Creswell, 2013). The tools used to make the world visible are such things as the field notes of observations made by researchers, interviews of people, conversations, photos, recordings of people, and even memos purposed for individual use. This type of qualitative research involves a naturalistic, interpretive view of reality. This means that qualitative researchers look at phenomena in their natural surroundings while attempting to understand or make sense of them in terms of the meanings that different people assign to different phenomena (Creswell, 2013).

Further still, the purpose of the phenomenological method “is to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation” (Lester, 1999, p. 1). As such, a phenomenological study is the study of how things appear from the perspective of an individual or group of people. Their experience of that environment produces not only a conscious awareness of the environment, but the experience produces meaning for the individual or group. As one’s experience comes under investigation, the researcher seeks to describe the experience of the participants and then see if patterns of meaning emerge that can reveal the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

The advantage of using this method for this study is that it allowed the pastors being interviewed freedom to reveal how a church’s polity impacts their ability to do the job God called them to do. It provided them with the opportunity to describe the effects on the church and its health, their personal life, their family, their enthusiasm to do the work, and their desire to continue in their calling. As such, it provided the researcher an answer to the question of what it is like to experience life as a pastor under a deacon-led model of leadership and an elder-led

model of leadership. The answers the participants provided are not answers that can be quantified with numbers or statistics but are answers that provide real knowledge that gives meaning to the subject. The data collected from the interview process was analyzed to discover the meaning the participants made of working under their respective settings. The results were used to further develop the “essence” of their experience that is transferable to those who work in the same environments.

Setting

The setting for this research included pastors who are affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). The SBC is the largest protestant denomination in the United States. It is comprised of over fifty thousand churches (Southern Baptist Convention, 2023). Each church is independent and autonomous. In the SBC there is a wide variety of churches from many different cultural backgrounds that span the globe. However, all SBC churches cooperate in working towards fulfilling the Great Commission. While each church is unique, all are baptistic in their theological perspective. In addition, from their website, they state that “Though as many as two hundred could be counted as mega-churches, the vast majority run less than two hundred in weekly worship” (Southern Baptist Convention, 2023).

The organization of the SBC is as follows: the national convention comprises all churches that participate in supporting missions through Cooperative Program and other SBC mission entities. These churches also are a part of state SBC entities. Each state has its own convention that focuses on the mission in their respective states. Within each state, there are various associations where local churches work together to accomplish missions in their regions and cities.

For the purposes of this study, requests for interviews were initially solicited through the state conventions of North Carolina, Tennessee, and South Carolina. When the state conventions declined to help, local associations from those states were contacted. Two associations agreed to help. Those who participated in the study came through one association in North Carolina and then by networking through those who participated. The final selection of participants came through the states of Florida, Tennessee, North Carolina, Indiana, and Kansas.

Participants

For this study, purposive convenience sampling was used. As the name implies, purposive sampling involves selecting participants or other units of study for a specific purpose (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). Additionally, it involved picking the subjects or items that will provide the greatest information about the subject under inquiry (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). A purposive convenience sampling was obtained by recruiting pastors, first through state associations and then networking with pastors who participated. The rationale for using this sampling method was that it provided a framework for pastors who work under both models of leadership. In addition, it provided data that is transferable to others who work under the same conditions (Nikolopoulou, 2022).

Pastors who participated in the interviews were current senior pastors who served for at least two years in the same SBC-affiliated church that has been in existence for at least 10 years, had seven-hundred active members or less, and had a yearly budget of between at least \$150,000 and \$1.5 million. In addition, it was required that participants had a Master of Divinity or equivalent from an accredited seminary.

Pastors who participated received an email that verified their appointment. The email contained the research questions for them to review, as well as an informed consent form to sign

and email back. It contained a general outline of how the interview would be conducted to manage expectations. Interviews were conducted via zoom.

The goal of the research was to interview 10 pastors, five from each model of leadership, with the objective of reaching saturation. Saturation is a principle that emerged in Grounded Theory and encourages the researcher to stop collecting data when the themes that are emerging are saturated, meaning no new insights are being provided by conducting more interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As interviews were conducted, once it was determined that no new data and/or insights were forthcoming, the sample size was to be considered sufficient. However, the research did not fully utilize the principle of saturation as only four pastors from elder-led churches responded (Durdella, 2019). In addition, the data from participants in deacon-led churches did not reach saturation either. Some reasons for this and their implications are offered in Chapters Four and Five.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher has a significant part in determining the ongoing direction of the research as well as its interpretation, as the researcher is an instrument in the process of collecting data. It is recognized, then, that in all stages of a qualitative research study, the researcher is the instrument for analysis (Tufford & Newman, 2012). As a result, in qualitative research the researcher usually has substantial interaction with subjects (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), leading them to make significant decisions and judgments (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016) about the strategies of the research not only through the data collection process but also in the analysis phase. Because the data in qualitative research is subjective in nature, the researcher must be careful to not let personal bias and experience influence both the data collection process and the interpretation of the data.

To prevent this, qualitative researchers practice bracketing. This technique is used in qualitative research to lessen the possible harm that can result from the researcher's biases and prejudices, which can skew the findings (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Bracketing happens when the researcher is intentional about separating his/her bias and/or experience from the data collection process. It takes place when the researcher takes notes (memos) during the interview and highlights his/her experience in contrast to what the interviewee is revealing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, qualitative researchers must keep their discussions of personal experiences to a minimum to avoid undermining the significance of a study's methodology and content (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Considering this, the researcher in this study employed bracketing in the data collection process to mitigate any bias he brings to the subject. Memos were utilized during the entirety of the interview process.

Ethical Considerations

Since qualitative phenomenological research involves interviewing people to discern their lived experiences, ethical considerations were observed. It is crucial for researchers to safeguard research participants, build trust with them, promote research integrity, prevent misconduct and improper behavior that could reflect negatively on their organizations and institutions, and manage new, difficult situations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To accomplish this, it is necessary for researchers to uphold ethical standards, such as the right to privacy, protection from harm, voluntary and informed consent, and honesty with professional peers (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016).

To ensure the highest standards of ethics were observed, participants signed an informed consent form revealing the nature of the study and all associated risks. Participants were also given the option to withdraw from the study in case they no longer felt comfortable. In addition,

both the names of the participants and the churches they serve were changed to protect the identity of the participants. They were also given a copy of the transcripts as well as the audio recording of the interview to review for errors. Finally, all data collected in the interview process will be kept secure on a password-protected computer in the office of the researcher. All the guidelines of the Institutional Review Board were followed.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data. The first stage of data collection was to identify appropriate candidates to interview. The second stage included interviewing each candidate.

Collection Methods

To find the appropriate candidates, the researcher worked through several state associations and then networked through pastors who participated in the study. The researcher sought permission from state conventions and local associations to use their email database of churches to recruit potential participants. Emails were sent via the state associations outlining the details of the study. Nine candidates that met the criteria outlined above and who responded to the initial email received a letter outlining the interview process. It contained the interview questions as well as the informed consent form for them to sign and return to the researcher. In addition, the researcher contacted each potential candidate to schedule the interview. A total of nine candidates were recruited, five who work under a deacon-led model of church governance and four who work under an elder-led model of church governance.

The second stage of the data collection process was to conduct each interview. Interviews in qualitative studies include face-to-face interviews with participants that utilize unstructured and open-ended questions that are few in number for the purpose of allowing the participants to

openly and honestly share their views of their experience of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For this study, each interview was conducted on Zoom. Otter.ai was used to transcribe each interview. The researcher compared the AI generated transcript with the audio version and made corrections where needed. Participant names and the names of their churches were changed to codes to protect their identities. Furthermore, the original transcripts were stored on a password-protected computer owned by the researcher.

Instruments and Protocols

The primary data collection method for this study was the interviewing of each participant. It is through the interview process that the essence and meaning of a phenomenon can be learned (Moustakes, 1994). The basic question the researcher was seeking to understand was: What is it like to experience the phenomenon? (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Additionally, phenomenological research starts from a position free of assumptions and expectations and aims to describe the experience rather than explain it (Lester, 1999). It is for that reason that “the phenomenological interview involves an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions” (Moustakes, 1994, p. 114). As such, the questions asked provided the participants flexibility in deciding what direction to take each answer. Asking open-ended questions provided the researcher with the flexibility to explore themes as they emerged in the discussion. The research questions are in Appendix B.

Procedures

This qualitative research utilized the phenomenological method to ascertain the lived experience of pastors who work under both a deacon-led and elder-led model of church governance. To gain an understanding of the lived experience of pastors under those models, participants in the study were asked to participate in face-to-face interviews. Interviews lasted

from one hour to two-and-half hours. Since open-ended questions were used, participants were free to share their thoughts and experiences as they felt led. In most cases participants opened up new fields of discussion which yielded further insights beyond the scope of the original questions. In addition, all necessary resources were submitted for approval to the Institutional Review Board. This included the participant consent form and the recruitment letter to be sent to participants. Each interview was recorded with the consent of each participant. Data were stored on a password-protected computer to respect the confidentiality of each participant and to preserve the integrity of the study.

Data Analysis

After collecting the data, the next phase of the research was to analyze it to see if patterns of meaning emerged that reveal the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). To accomplish this, interview transcript data were organized, structured, and interpreted for each participant to discern their lived experience (Dye, 2021). The goal was to systematically reduce a significant volume of material into a clear, succinct summary of the main findings (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017).

Analysis Methods

The first step in analyzing was to organize the data into emerging themes from between interviews using horizontalizing (Moustakas, 1994). This is the recognition that every statement concerning the phenomenon has equal value. These statements created a “horizon” where a new essence of the experience was seen. As new horizons were discovered, they were delimited and from them separate themes emerged, from which the researcher created individual textural and structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Coding was used to group the material into smaller, more specific categories of information (Creswell, 2013), including identifying and organizing

the various themes and noting the relationship between them. As these categories were formed, it became necessary to reduce them into a manageable number that could be used to report the research.

As themes were identified, they were interpreted to make sense of the data and identify the lessons learned (Creswell, 2013). This included “abstracting out beyond the codes and themes to the larger meaning of the data” (p. 187). The final step was representing the data in visual form. This was achieved through a chart where relationships among the data can be seen. The visual representation of the data helps form a connection between the inductive raw data, the themes developed from the data, and the meaning those themes create.

Below is a summary outline of the process that was used:

- Bracketing to identify personal biases, so the focus was on the study participants.
- Developing a list of significant statements discovered in the data (horizontalization of the data/coding), with each statement treated as having equal worth, to develop a list of non-repetitive, overlapping statements.
- Individual textural and structural descriptions were written specific to the study participant’s experience working under a specific leadership model, along with setting and context, and from these descriptions, individual themes were identified.
- Composite themes of the phenomenon were developed to reveal the essence of the experience and represent the culminating aspect of the phenomenological study.

Trustworthiness

The study methodology was deliberately designed to ensure findings were credible, plausible, and well-substantiated, incorporating precautions to increase study reliability and validity (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Research is considered trustworthy when it is credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferable (Springer, n.d.; The Farnsworth Group, n.d.). The following precautions were used:

Credibility

“Credibility is a measure of the truth value of qualitative research, or whether the study’s findings are correct and accurate” (The Farnsworth Group, n.d.). The following five strategies were used to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of this study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019):

- **Reflexivity/Bracketing:** As described above, reflexivity (also referred to as bracketing) is where the researcher looks for any biases within themselves that can affect their ability to collect and interpret data. Memos were used to accomplish this.
- **Triangulation:** This was achieved by interviewing multiple pastors using a consistent set of questions
- **Separate data from reflections:** Notes and memos were used to clearly distinguish between data and its interpretation and keep the two categories separated.
- **Seeking exceptions:** The researcher was intentional about analyzing the data for contrary themes.
- **Time on site:** The researcher spent a minimum of one hour for the shortest interview and two-in-a-half hours for the longest interview. The average interview time was an hour and a half.

Dependability

Dependability, including study consistency and reliability, was achieved by keeping track of the procedures employed for data collection, analysis, and interpretation, as well as providing sufficient contextual information about each component so that the study can be replicated by other researchers (The Farnsworth Group, n.d.). This was accomplished by auditing and logging detailed data as it was collected (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019), with the intent of making this research repeatable in a future related study.

Confirmability

Member checking was used to ensure the study was not based on the assumptions and biases of the researcher (Springer, n.d.) but objectively reflected information collected from participants (The Farnsworth Group, n.d.). To verify that the conclusions of the study were based

on the participants' narratives and words, participants were asked to review the transcripts of their interviews to check for accuracy (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019).

Transferability

Transferability happens to the extent that the findings can be applied (generalized) to similar settings where the same phenomenon is experienced by others (Springer, n.d.). Also, it is the “criteria for judging whether the results from a study are plausible and believable from the participants' perspectives...” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 239). Transferability was achieved by providing “thick descriptions” of the participant's experience. This involved describing “a situation in sufficiently rich, ‘thick’ detail that readers can draw their own conclusions from the data presented” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 94). The intention was to provide readers with enough information to comprehend the significant and nuanced cultural meanings underlying the visible circumstance in addition to just describing the phenomenon (Drew, 2019).

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided the research process that was observed in this study. The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore and compare the lived experiences of pastors who work under a deacon-led and an elder-led model of church governance. Furthermore, this study sought to understand how pastors perceive that church governance structure impacts their ability to lead, the health of the church, and pastoral retention. This chapter outlined the methodology, the research design, the participants, the ethical considerations, and the data collection method as well as data-analysis methods that seek to understand the phenomena. Finally, this chapter explored the methods needed to collect and analyze the data accurately, ensuring the trustworthiness of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore and compare the lived experiences of pastors who work under a deacon-led and an elder-led model of church governance. It sought to understand from the pastor's perspective how a specific church model impacts the pastor's ability to lead, the health of the church, and the desire of a pastor to continue ministry under that model. As discussed in Chapter One, it is reported that specifically in deacon-led churches, conflict is a common occurrence between the pastor and deacons. As such, this research sought to understand not only the impact of the church polity on pastors and church health, but also whether a difference exists between elder-led churches and deacon-led churches. To accomplish that, interviews were conducted with pastors from deacon-led churches and elder-led churches. This chapter presents the compilation protocol and measures, demographic and sample data, data analysis and findings, and the evaluation of the research design.

Compilation Protocol and Measures

The sample population for this study was senior pastors affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. Interviews were conducted with each pastor that allowed them to share their lived experience working under either a deacon-led model of leadership or an elder-led model of leadership. Pastors who participated in interviews were from Florida, Tennessee, North Carolina, Indiana, and Kansas. Interviews lasted from one hour to two-and-a-half hours. Each interview was conducted on Zoom and recorded with Otter.ai. Semi-structured phenomenological interview questions were developed that guided each interview. Since the questions utilized open-ended questions, answers to each question varied as to the experience of each pastor.

Questions were developed by considering different aspects of leadership as well as by considering the data of experience as discussed in Chapter Two. Themes woven into the

questions were perceived leadership role, leadership approach, teamwork, unity of effort, effectiveness of model, church health, conflict, burnout, and personal work satisfaction. Some of the questions overlapped but allowed each interviewee the freedom to share his story working under each leadership model.

Demographic and Sample Data

Interviews were conducted from September 14, 2023, through October 5, 2023. To recruit pastors, three state conventions were called. The researcher requested to use their email database of pastors for the state. Each state convention declined to help, citing policies against sending emails that are not for convention purposes. Next, SBC associations were called and emailed. Twenty-six associations were emailed and called. Out of those two responded positively. Two others said they would send out the recruitment letter, but then declined to do so later. One leader declined to help stating that the subject was too controversial. Another associational leader responded to the email with the following: “Not sure your choices are complete. Many Southern Baptist Churches are pastor led, deacon served, congregation approved. No church should be Deacon led.” He did not respond to follow-up emails. From the two associational emails that went to churches, one pastor responded, and the other pastors who participated were networked through pastors who participated in the study. In addition, Lifeway Research was contacted as well as Nine-Marks ministry with the goal of seeking their aid in recruitment. Neither organization responded to the request.

Those who were eligible for this study included pastors who have been in their position for at least two years and who work with a deacon board to lead the ministries of the church or work with an active elder-led form of leadership. All participants pastor Southern Baptist churches that have a membership of 700 active members or less, have a yearly budget of

between \$150,000 to \$1.5 million, and who have been an established church for at least ten years. In addition, it was required that participants have a Master of Divinity or equivalent from an accredited seminary. The researcher did not know any of the participants before the interviews were conducted. While five pastors who work with deacons were interviewed, only four pastors who work with other elders were interviewed. The following table lists the participant's data:

Table 1

Demographics of Participants and the Churches They Lead

Participants	Years at Current church	Total Years pastoring	Current church Attendance	Current Church Budget
D1	27 years	27 years	100	\$398,224
D2	10 years	16 years	150	\$431,600
D3	20 years	44 years	195	\$890,000
D4	2 years	9 years	135	\$365,000
D5	4 years	17 years	100	\$220,000
E1	12 years	12 years	60	\$218,000
E2	11 years	29 years	75	\$150,000
E3	13 years	18 years	150	\$300,000
E4	32 years	42 years	550	\$1,200,000
E5	--	--	--	--

Data Analysis and Findings

This qualitative research sought to understand the lived experience of pastors. As such, the method of data analysis included horizontalizing, or coding each interview. This entailed developing a list of significant statements that were discovered in the data and treating each statement as having equal significance and worth. Next, the researcher wrote a verbatim description of what the participants in the study experienced (textural description). In other words, he wrote what happened and was specific about their experience. From these descriptions, individual themes were identified. As themes were identified, core themes of the pastor's

experience began to emerge. Finally, a construction of composite structural descriptions was made from all the interviews. The composite structural descriptions revealed the essence of the experience of the pastors working under their respective leadership models. Below are the composite structural descriptions for deacon-led churches and then following, elder-led churches. The conclusions drawn from the data are discussed in Chapter Five.

RQ1 for Deacon-led churches

The first research question focused on the impact the leadership model has on a pastor's ability to lead: RQ1. *How has the church's model of leadership contributed to a pastor's ability to lead the church?* The interview questions can be found in Appendix B.

With pastors who work with deacons to lead the church, there was a wide range of experiences, but common themes emerged. Below are summary textural descriptions of each experience for RQ1 followed by the composite themes that emerged.

Summary Textural Descriptions

D1 – This pastor was very clear that the model has curtailed his ability to lead, and he felt like a subordinate to the deacons. As such, he did not feel like a part of the team, nor did he feel like he had a voice on the team. In addition, he did not speak during church votes, and said that he felt less than a member of the church. The deacons work well together but are led by a single person who gives direction to the rest of the deacons. In the past, when there was not a strong personality to lead the deacons, there was conflict. Despite that, he had a good relationship with the deacons. He does not currently experience conflict, but the primary reason is because he has chosen to limit his leadership to preaching and visitation. He has experienced conflict in the past, primarily with deacons who claimed he did not support their decisions when they lost a deacon vote. As far as preaching and visitation are concerned, he has complete freedom in those two

areas. As such, he believes his main role, as perceived by the congregation, is to help them in their walk with Christ and visit the shut-ins and those in the hospital. As such, there are clear distinctions of where he does and does not lead. He said larger decisions that pertain to the overall ministry of the church are made by the deacons. Yet he said that when decisions made by the deacons do not work out, they expect him to claim responsibility for the failure. In that regard, he said, “I get none of the say and all of the responsibility.” When asked if he was satisfied with this model he said, “Emphatically, no!” He claimed that this model has caused him emotional harm. He has experienced depression, loneliness, feelings of failure, and frustration from this model. Overall, he said he feels trapped.

D2 – This pastor does not believe the model curtails his ability to lead the church, nor does he feel like a subordinate who needs permission to lead. Although he does not make the final decisions, he provides overall direction to the deacons as well as the various committees of the church. Final decisions, however, are made by the deacons. He sees his primary leadership role as an influencer. He says he has an influence that is grounded in trust. He influences other leaders through what he calls “gospel-centered conversations.” He does not “come on heavy and lean on people,” i.e., force them into a decision, but seeks to speak to the issues by “articulating a biblical position” and providing valid reasons “that resonate with the values of the church.” If the church, deacons, or committees do not follow it is because he either did not communicate properly or it was not the right time for the church. As such, he believes he has freedom to lead. He also has a good working relationship with the deacons and other committee leaders. He seeks to spend time with leaders, “nurturing” their relationship as he “brings clarity” to the various issues of the church. He spends time focusing on personal relationships because that translates into a good working relationship. As such, he believes the model of the church is less important

than the trust gained through good relationships and the overall ministry to the body over the years. Overall, he does feel like a team player, and that between the deacons and committees they all work together as a team. When they address the congregation, they do so with a unified voice “saying this is what we believe is the best direction ... for the church.” However, he did emphasize that the current role of the deacons is more a hybrid model where the deacons are acting like elders. Specifically, he said, “...the roles of the elder and the deacon are sort of smashed together.” As such, the distinctions between the offices are somewhat blurred. Deacons are making leadership decisions; with the caveat they are doing so under the influence of the pastor. When asked about conflict, he said he has experienced conflict under this model. The conflict resulted because the paid secretary was the wife of a deacon. She attempted to exert her husband’s influence over the pastor. Other deacons and their wives intervened with the result that the secretary quit her job. He believes, however, that the model itself contributed to the conflict. The deacons should not have hired family members for the church. When asked if he was satisfied working under this model, he said,

Not my favorite. I prefer elder-led. I can live with it.... I think that the New Testament makes a division of offices between elders and deacons. The qualifications are different, and the roles are different. Also, I believe the elder-led model provides better means of dealing with problems. Further, as someone who has served in both, it appears that both leaders and church members are happier in elder-led. At least that has been my experience.

D3 – This pastor believes the current model he works with enables him to be an effective leader. As such, he does not believe the model curtails his ability to lead. He describes his role as the spiritual leader who “collects God’s vision, it’s not mine, and gives it to the church.” Further, he sees his leadership approach as an encourager. As an encourager, he seeks to empower other leaders. Further, he considers himself to be a servant leader who loves people and who seeks to lead the people to follow God’s will. His focus is on building relationships. He said,

“relationships are everything.” The lay leaders and deacons have a high level of trust with him, and he with them. He also seeks to lead by example, which has built trust with his people. He does not ask his people to do something or to give to something he does not do or give to. As a leader, he initiates most things, but is intentional about empowering other leaders, giving them accountability, and celebrating them. He said that “real delegation is not getting people to do what you want. It’s getting people or helping people to embrace a vision that you have, then trusting them to lead it with reasonable accountability.” As such, he has freedom to lead, but is open to how other leaders and the congregation responds. If something that he initiates does not happen, it could be that it was the wrong time, he was wrong, “or the people missed a blessing. And that’s okay.” He was clear to state that his church is congregational with deacons working as ministering servants. They have “few administrative responsibilities,” just enough to get ministry teams going. However, they all work very well together as a team. Their team is built on mutual trust. No one grandstands. If there is a problem or disagreement, the deacons will come talk to him privately. He believes the deacons have a good biblical understanding of what their role is. This is due to him being very intentional about teaching them their role is to be servants. He emphasizes three areas of responsibility for the role and office of the deacon: to care for those in need, particularly widows; to be peacemakers, personally and for the life of the church; and to serve as helpers and counselors, like a sounding board for the pastor and staff. He began teaching the role of the deacons while still in his first church. This has not always been accepted. In previous churches he has experienced conflict with this model. In one church he was “absolutely miserable” because of the deacons. They told him that they “were going to make him the pastor they wanted him to be.” In his prior church, before coming to his current church, he had conflict with the deacons and left because of that conflict. Out of the five churches he has pastored, two

had great deacons. The other three were “divisive, super controlling,” and difficult places to serve. However, in his current church he has great relationships and “could not imagine working under a different model.” Also, he said that in SBC life, concerning the role of the deacon, churches have a hybrid model where deacons are part servants and part overseers/administrators. He acknowledges that is partially true in his current church. “The church counsel, committee chairs, and ministry team chairs have taken on more of the administrative responsibility of an elder and they’ve handled that really, very appropriately. But they very much acknowledge me as their pastor and leader” he stated. When asked if he was satisfied, he said, “100% satisfied!”

During the conversation, it came up that the idea of elder-led churches is considered by some in the SBC to be controversial. In addressing why, he said,

Oh, and it’s a sacred cow. But it’s a two-edged sacred cow, I think. It is a sacred cow in the fact that it is a control issue for a lot of churches. It is how we keep our church, our church. And while God’s leader, the under Shepherd comes in, we only want him to have so much influence. This is our way to maintain and not let him take over. On the other hand, there is some movement amongst clergy to circumvent the church to have more control. Some of it is sincere, Bible-based. Some is agenda.

In that regard he is suspicious of what he called “uniform authority” that he believes comes with elder leadership but believes this is a problem that can also happen with deacons.

D4 – The current model of working with deacons does allow him to lead effectively. Currently, while he is the only pastor, the deacons at the church also function as semi-elders. He described his church’s model as a hybrid model where deacons provide both leadership and serve as deacons. In the future he wants to lead the church to become elder-led, and he is currently teaching and training leaders to that end. He foresees a time when they will officially have a plurality of elders and deacons in the church. However, at the current time he sees himself as the leader of the church and believes his leadership has been accepted. He attributes this to being intentional about building trust with the other leaders. Currently, the deacons serve as

accountability for him. He is able “to bounce” ideas off them and share the vision for the church so they can give him feedback. Before he came, the deacon’s role with the former pastor was what he called a “yes, no” committee. Currently, the deacons give him feedback concerning his ideas and they have good discussions about ministry plans and about the direction of the church. They see it as part of their role to support the pastor and the vision he is setting for the church. While the pastor believes his leadership is accepted by the deacons and the church, the deacons vote on the issues he brings forward. He did point out that the reason the deacons had a more formal leadership role within the church in the past is because the former pastor did not offer solid leadership by way of direction and vision. The deacons stepped up to lead by necessity, but since he has been there, they have allowed him to lead. He said that in addition to being intentional about building trust, he is also intentional about training leaders for their roles. He wants leaders to understand the biblical roles of leadership. In that regard, he sees himself as an equipper. He also seeks to lead from the front but seeks collaboration with other leaders. Once people are in leadership roles, he encourages them and celebrates their success. He trusts them to accomplish their tasks and does not micromanage them. He believes that currently they have good teamwork and believes that the current model contributes to that. However, he also stressed that this is the result of intentional training as well as the trust that he has been able to build with the deacons and other leaders. Also, he pointed out that he is very intentional about not surrounding himself with “yes men.” He wants people with good critical thinking skills in leadership with him. He believes having people play the “devil’s advocate” is helpful. He is confident, but knows he needs accountability and feedback as well. He is currently satisfied working under this model. However, he wants to become elder-led, deacon-served, and church ruled. But currently, the model is accomplishing the job.

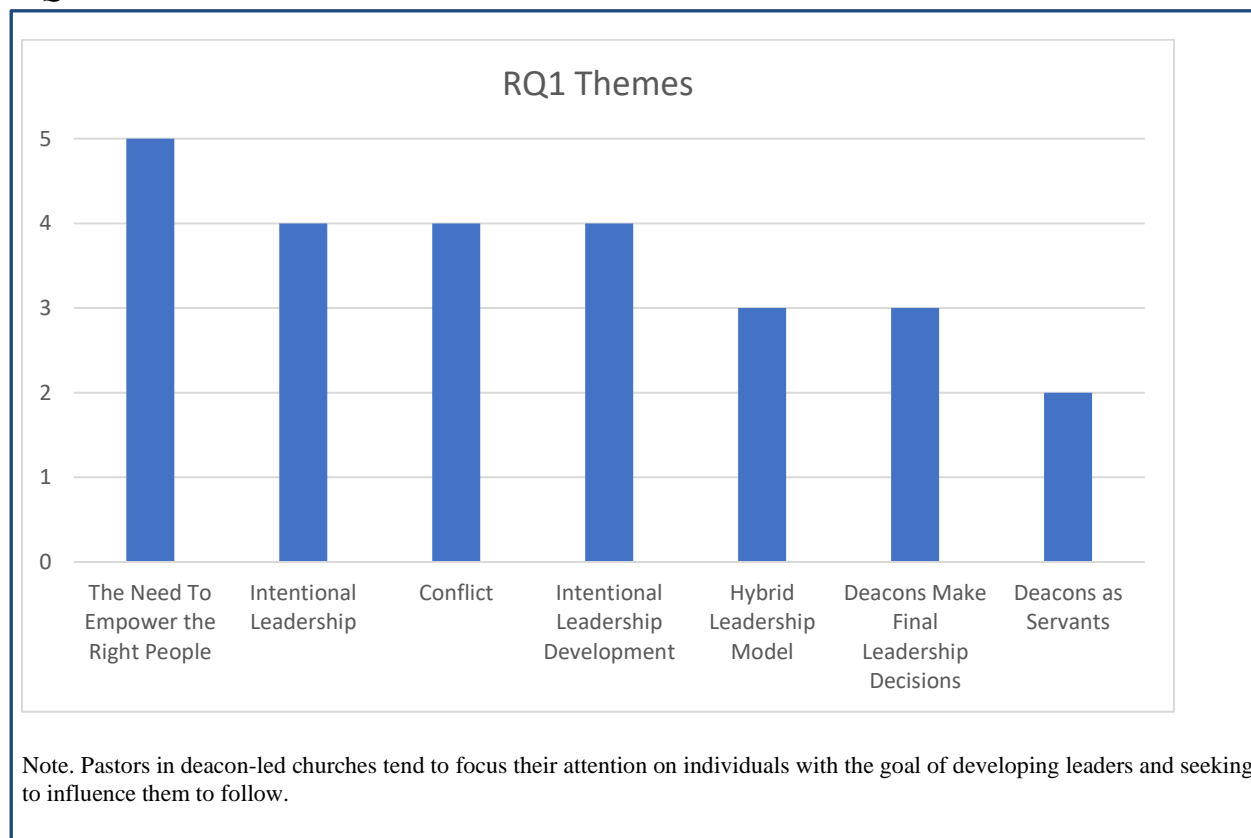
D5 – This pastor made it clear he works in a model that is under transition. Currently, he is the only pastor. There are two offices, a single pastor, and deacons. In addition, there are various committees. He said that technically they would fall under the traditional category of a deacon-led church. However, because of the conflict the last pastor had with the chairmen of the deacons, he has led the church to become committee-led. Specifically, there is an advisory committee that helps him lead and give direction to the church. He believes they act in the absence of a plurality of elders. In addition, they provide accountability to the pastor. Because of the prior conflict, both the previous pastor and chairman of the deacons left the church. Although the deacons historically ran the church, they currently do not. Under their transition, they have stripped leadership authority from the deacons. With that change, under their new hybrid model of committee-led leadership, he believes he has the freedom to lead the church. He currently has a great relationship with the new chairman of the deacons. The new chairman also believes that deacons should not be running the church and supports the pastor in developing a new model of church leadership. Their long-range goal is to become an elder-led church. Currently, the committees make the final decisions which are brought before the church under the leadership of the pastor. He sees his role as an elder who should be leading and managing the affairs of the church. With the advisory council, he can do that. He said historically the church has seen the pastor as the leader “until they don’t want to.” Until he came, the pastor had “a vote” on committees. He still has only one vote, but he is intentional about being an influencer. Currently the committees recognize his leadership and recognize that they have historically had a hard time following their pastors; their expectation was that everything in the church should be voted on. However, since he has been the pastor the key leaders are following him. As the pastor, he sees it as his responsibility to teach the church to understand biblical roles of leadership. He is

intentional about expository preaching on the subject and about teaching the current deacons their role. To that end he has instituted deacon training. This current model has created a good team environment where the pastor feels like he is a valuable team member. They currently have no conflict. He is currently satisfied with their current model and the direction they are going. He said he would not be satisfied under the deacon-led model and would not go back to that.

RQ1 Composite Themes

Figure 2

RQ1 Themes



The need to empower the right people. The primary theme of RQ1 was the recognition that the right people need to be serving in the right positions of leadership. Five out of the five pastors recognized this need. It became an axiomatic theme that the wrong people serving in leadership roles can derail the unity of the church. It only takes a single individual to make that

happen. While all recognized that reality, not all of them had the ability to remove a person from leadership if they were not qualified.

- **D1** – “And, and so there are times where we have really good leaders serving in that role (as deacons). And then we have times where we don't have that well of a leader, or a well-trained leader, and so we have more followers. And so when we have good leaders in that role, we have a lot of good teamwork. When they're lacking in that role, and there's been some years where that has really been a problem, they've not worked out well together. And it's not that these guys aren't really good guys, because they are, and they love the Lord. It's just they lack a leader in that role. And so there's been some years where it's not being as well received in terms of working as a team.”

“Yeah, I don't know. I don't know if I can prove this. This is really my perception of it. I think I'm right on this, but there's usually at least one person in the room who's a deacon, who may not be a really good leader themselves, but they are the most liked and they're the most popular, and when they vote a certain way or when they speak on a matter, then there are the ones who are there that aren't real leaders, but really good people, but are more followers, they will vote with the one that's the most popular, with the one that they like the most, the one that they you know, maybe hang out with more.”

- **D2** – “We've had some critical junctures with this particular one. I think that if you get the wrong set of leaders, you could go sideways really quick.”
- **D3** – “But the danger of that model or even of an elder-led model, is strong personalities not in tune with the character of God.”
- **D4** – “And so the deacons were forced to do things and lead in ways that they just never had before. They weren't trained to lead in, and frankly weren't gifted to lead, and frankly it was just like a disaster waiting to happen. They did the best they could, but I mean, but their best just wasn't good enough because they weren't ... that wasn't the role they had been called to or gifted to do, you know.”

“...and being able to, you know, pick leaders or put people in position of leadership that's super important to me ... you know, if I'm not going to be able to trust them to do the job that they're signing up to do without me more or less micromanaging it, then, you know, maybe we need to look somewhere else.”

- **D5** – “...so when I got here, we were really diligent to try to put people in positions of influence, in positions of leadership who were humble, who wanted to follow the Lord, who were committed to the Bible, who felt the desire to follow the pastor's leadership. think we've got that.”

“But I think, like I said, this is I guess, this will be the big first test in the first few years, I was just trying to get the right people in the right places.”

Intentional Leadership. The theme of intentional leadership also was a consistent theme. Four of the five pastors who were able to effectively lead under this model were intentional in their leadership. They recognized that leadership was something they must focus on and do. They did not all have the same leadership approach, but they all used leadership tools with the intent on providing direction for the church. They sought to be influencers who built trust; they focused on building healthy relationships with others; they focused on collaboration; and they focused on the organizational structure of the church.

- **D2** – “I would say that I'm probably an influencer.... I try to guide people in gospel centered conversations from the pulpit (and in person) and by asking questions and pointing in different directions.” Do you have a good working relationship with other leaders in the church? “Yes, I do believe so. And that comes from spending time with them and having gone through seasons of change and things with them But I tend to try to spend more time nurturing the relationship (with other leaders) ... You know, the chairman of the deacons is someone I spend more time with, and we have a good relationship, and that translates into a good working relationship.

Would you say that you have a supporting role in making decisions or a primary role making decisions? “Primary.” Can you explain a little more? “Yeah, in so most major decisions so like, I'll give an example, starting a new service. Is that a good example? It's probably best explained by an example. So, I would say it would be a small circle at first, staff would be probably first, like pastoral staff or whatever. The circle would get expanded to the deacons, and then support staff, and probably long-range planning. And then it goes out from there, and the discussion and what it's looking like. Usually, right after I get my core focus areas, and talk to them, I then expand out and try, you kind of know which ones are going to be most critical, you just know. So, I usually loop them in fast, and I do that intentionally. Because if you loop them in fast, they feel like they are directly part of the decision-making process. And when it comes to you know, when it comes down to when it hits the church floor. We've already heard their concerns, and we've already addressed them, and we've acknowledged their concerns.

“I think through where we need to go and then I reverse engineer it.... You know, I could never imagine going to a deacons meeting or going to a church business meeting ... and saying for the first time when nobody's ever heard about it, and say, hey we need to start a new service. That's suicide. That's not wise. So, I have a lot of conversations with the inner circle first, and it bleeds out; and I count on my deacons to talk to their wives. And I only share things I want them to be disseminate.”

“Looking back, I failed as a leader. I probably should have said, I don't think this is a good idea for the committee to recommend this person.”

- **D3** – “you know, it's taken a while, you know, I've had to grow in my maturity I so wish I knew in my 30s what I know now. I've learned that relationships are everything. And I mean, everything. It was what Jesus was about. I mean, he did a lot of preaching and teaching, but mostly he spent time with his followers. Jesus had big group gatherings, but he took a small group with him wherever he went. He stopped for the individuals, because the individual mattered. He stopped for Magdala when he saw a demon possessed woman that was desperate. He just stopped and loved her, called out the evil in her life. And he never had a more devoted follower than that one. So, I build relationships with people.

“...and I initiate most things with them and guide it, but I am really big on empowering other leaders with responsibility and accountability and celebrating them. And if they don't do it exactly like I want, that's okay. Because real delegation is not getting people to do what you want. It's getting people or helping people to embrace a vision that you have, then trusting them to lead it with reasonable accountability.”

“I am intentional about leading through influence.”

“...here's the bottom line, if you're only preaching, but you don't really have an impact on how things get done in your church. You're not really preaching. If you can't see the change in where God's leading, and you're not participating in it with other leaders, you're not really leading.”

“Well, when I'm called upon to be more academic, more administrative, and I'm like, ha, that's really not me. But when I need to, I focus and do what I need to do. So, the person that tells me they're introverted, they're usually with 104,000 dear friends in Knoxville at Neyland Stadium. They're not always introverted. I think our passion comes out regardless of our style. Now, don't get me wrong. I am more extroverted, and it is easier for me, and I know that. That's why I don't tell everybody you need to do exactly what I do. But here's the thing. If you love people, but from your past and from your personality development, if expressing that as a struggle, then be intentional.”

- **D4** – “...the intentionality is the is the big thing.”

“I think a healthy church is able to identify the areas that are unhealthy, and probably along with that is sort of understanding where are we on the S curve, right? Kind of constantly being aware of those growth patterns and identifying plateaus before you hit them. And being able to sort of say, okay what shifts or adjustments do we need to make and what we're doing with leadership and what we're doing with ministry as a whole to create a new S curve instead of saying okay, let's just ride this plateau because it's easy. And then whenever things start down, then we'll work on trying to turn it around again.”

“I'm definitely someone who wants to lead out front. But I also want to be collaborative. I'm not ever going to be the person that says, you know, here's what here's what we're going to do, let's do it without any feedback. You know, I am confident you know, in

what God's leading us to do, but also realize that I'm not perfect and so that, you know, a lot of times feedback can help adapt a strategy.... Again, I guess I'm going to lead from the front. Most of the time. You know, I think just because of my personality, you know, when I step in the room, it's like, I feel some obligation to lead..."

"One of the things I always tell our leaders is like, be ready to lean into the awkward situations. Like that's when the rubber is going to meet the road. That's going to be when you see the proof of how good of a leader you are. When the awkward and difficult situations come out. They are ready to lean into it. Let's address it."

"The problems I know about don't scare me. It's the ones that I don't know about. You're not going to throw a problem up in my face that's going to scare me because it's like, well, I'll know about it. So, let's, let's figure out how to lean into this and work through it. It's the ones that people are trying to sweep under the rug or ignore. Those are the ones that get you."

- **D5** – "I've got a pretty clear vision of where we need to go. And I'm pretty assertive in moving us in that direction. But I'm coachable. I mean, I seek out counsel. And I listened to it."

"But what the church sees as my role, I think, generally, they're happy to allow me to lead, I am happy to lead. I think it's a very leadable church.... I mean, really, in the past four years. They have followed well. Like I said, I don't know too many, I think most pastors would say, you're going to try to amend the bylaws, and you've only been there for a year to redefine deacons? I think people would have said, you're nuts. Um, we were able to do that. Because they were able to follow, or at least the key leaders were able to follow."

Conflict. Another prominent theme was conflict. Conflict was consistent with this leadership model. The conflict came in different forms and at different periods of time. Four of the five pastors were subject to either direct conflict because of the model or experienced the effects of previous conflict. Specifically, the deacon-led model produced conflict when pastors were not intentional in their leadership approach, which created a vacuum in leadership that was filled by the deacons; or when pastors were not intentional about teaching leadership roles, and deacons assumed non-biblical roles in the absence of learning the biblical roles. Also, conflict happened when biblically unqualified people assumed the office of deacon.

- **D1** – “Yes, I have certainly experienced conflict. And I think that that this model contributes to it because of me. I am way too silent. And I’ve led them to expect that from me. So yes, in some ways it’s my own fault.”

“I’ve been very, very silent at times, like I’m saying, and truly it has caused me a lot of frustration, especially on big issues. When I felt like I needed to share my thoughts on things, and then I wouldn’t, and then they would make their decisions and they would then expect me to make those things happen. When they happened, many times it didn’t go as planned and I would get blamed for it, even though I didn’t make the decision. And that’s a real problem, especially when you’re quiet like I have been all these years. I’ve said to my wife more times than not, I said I wish I would get chewed out for a decision I actually made as opposed to one that was made by somebody else. And so, though this model has worked well with our church not having a lot of different... This church was known before I got here as a church that fights. But really, since I’ve been here there’s been very little, very little of that; and that is in part, I know, by the way I lead: letting them speak, letting them do, letting them vote; but at the same time I think it has hindered the ministry to a to a large extent where we’re not as effective as we could be.”

“But where, where the problem has been, in two or three examples, has been with a few of the men that did not agree with the group. You know, maybe we voted with 12 or so deacons, maybe it was like 11 to 1 or you know, or 10 to 2, and 2 of those who lost the vote ... a lot of times they have channeled their frustration back toward me even though I didn't make that decision. And that's the part that I did not really know how to actually deal with. It's been very frustrating at times and those guys are here still, and it has changed how they have worked with me, sometimes they won't speak to me, really.”

“So yes, it (the model) has generated conflict with the deacons and then it has expanded beyond the deacons, especially the last 12 or 13 years for sure. ... we have a very strict rule with our body. That what we say in that room remains in that room. Once we vote to make a decision, then we're all on board. The problem is they don't follow that rule. So, some of them go out into the church and then say whatever they say ... a political football gets passed around, telephone campaigns or texting, all the other social media ... and it's very frustrating.”

- **D2** – “Yes. I have experienced conflict under this mode. So, the most fearful and difficult conflict for me, came through a conflict with the then Secretary whose husband was a deacon. And so, under that, she tried to exert her husband's leadership to kind of do what she wanted to do, and she was struggling to do her job with proficiency. It came to a head. She ended up quitting, and she ended up saying a lot of things that were not true.... The model contributed to that conflict, because there was another candidate who was qualified for the position, but they (personnel committee) wanted her because they were friends. The committee structure fed into it. Looking back, I failed as a leader. I probably should have said, I don't think this is a good idea for the committee to recommend this person.”

- **D3** – Have you experienced conflict under this model leadership? “Until our relationships got worked out. And until my teaching got really deep in the soul, you know became a part of our fiber, yes. We still had deacons who were grandstanding in the deacons meeting, who wanted to use it to influence decisions, to honestly kind of gossip and vet too much. I had to do some more training on the importance of going to your pastor, your associate pastor, your youth minister and having conversations, or to a committee chairman, instead of waiting to a business meeting to blow up. Yeah, until the relationships began to get cemented, and Travis, if I can be honest enough, until a few nursing home arrangements and funerals took place. You know, I mean, and that's always the case whether we're going to admit that or not. It's true. But once those things got worked out and matured, I think that's a good word. Yeah, it's no conflict now.”

So, you've had conflict out of this model? “Oh yea, That's why I'm here. I'm here (in his current church) because we had conflict with two of my deacons in my last church They were determined to make me the pastor they wanted me to be.”

“I had in my last church, kind of stuck in the mud. Deacons didn't really serve, they wanted to advise. The church before that, the deacons totally controlled. The deacon chairman was almost adversarial. He wasn't hateful. He just promoted total division. You preach. I'll take care of the church. [Their goal] was to totally reign me in and makes sure nothing changes.”

- **D5** – “The deacons are not currently running the church. That has not historically been the case. But due to some conflict that happened before I got here between the then chairman of the deacons and the previous pastor, that ended up with both of them leaving. Well, yeah, the current chairman of deacons ...a really awesome guy, wants to serve the Lord. Really just he's had this conviction that I agree with, that deacons should not be running everything that they ought to be the lead servants in the church and get back to that and so, we enshrined that in our bylaws about a year after I got here and have really as a transitional step moved towards elder-led.”

I think the large part of the conflict that occurred was because territorialism had set in so much in the church. So, you had, you know, people who, I think, saw themselves as power brokers involved over various territories, that then were fighting for their territories. And then when the, the pastor decided he wanted to lead, I think that became a problem.

So, I take it that the conflict that preceded you was pretty bad. “Yeah, it was pretty bad ... you had a church that had been run by deacons for so long. And the chairman of deacons, he's a power broker in the church. He's a power broker in town. He's the leader of the Masonic Lodge [And the pastor] because he was wanting to lead (he didn't do things wisely), you know, now he's in conflict with this Deacon. That led to the pastor leaving, and led to that Deacon and his entire family leaving, and it led to a big mob for lack of better term, that was stirred up and assembled in the community center where they were yelling, what are we going to do about these deacons? And you know, it led to quite a few people leaving the Church.

Intentional Leadership Development. Four of the five pastors recognized that being intentional about teaching leadership roles was vitally important. Three of the four were intentional about teaching biblical leadership roles. One was just learning the importance of the principle and beginning to implement that. For the ones who were intentional, they did not assume that either the deacons or church members understood the role of deacons and/or elders. They were intentional in teaching deacons as well as church members about the biblical roles of each office. Each pastor did this differently, but they used some form of discipleship method and/or Bible curriculum to teach. The pastors who made this a priority seemed to have a better working relationship with their deacons compared to those who did not make this a priority.

- **D1** – “I think our church is not healthy in terms of leadership. I think that's our main thing. I think looking back at what we tried to do as a church. I prayed for leaders, and then gone and looked for leaders. That's all good and fine, but I haven't developed leaders like I should have developed leaders.”

“It could be that I don't know how to develop leaders. And it's possible that my view of developing leaders is just to preach the Bible to them. And then those that seem to be living for Christ are the leaders.”

- **D3** – “I am the spiritual leader of the church. I collect the church's vision. It's not mine. It's God's and I give it to the church. I focus it and work with our deacons and our ministry teams to direct that vision to make it effective and active. The deacons have accepted my leadership in a couple of ways that have I think have enhanced them. Probably one of my better accomplishments here and in most places. They understand a deacon as a servant. They understand there are three biblical roles for a deacon. If you're looking Acts 6 ... and that is, one, to care for those in need particularly widows or widowers, two) to be a peacemaker, not just on that issue, but to be a peacemaker personally in the life of the church. And we have had several occasions in my almost 20-year tenure to call on the deacons to meet corporately as peacemakers over a church issue. And then finally, three) to service helpers and counselors, a sounding board for effective ministry for our ministry staff.”
- **D4** – “I think people would say I do a good job of trying to make sure that people in other positions of leadership have the resources they need and that they're equipped to do what they need to do. So, whether it's training, so I mean, the deacon thing is obviously a good example of training. But it's not just me doing the training. It's making sure that they have if it's something that (I can't provide) I'm not a specialist and making sure we can get

them to the right conference or training event or you know, the right certificate from southeastern...”

Talking about equipping others: “And so one of the most important things I can do as a leader is make sure they're prepared to lead even when I'm gone. Yeah so I'm just sort of borrowing bits and pieces from different leadership books that I've come across that I think are helpful. Yeah, in preparing leaders for this particular role, and sort of piecing that together.”

- **D5** – “And I'm now, you know, just now beginning to teach them on the concept of plurality of elders. So I mean, it's, you know, if that happens, it's going to be in five years before that happens.”

“I've been preaching through First Timothy chapter five. Let the elders who rule well be worthy of double honor. Right. And explaining to the congregation the concept of a plurality of elders and the responsibility of the elders which is to manage the affairs of the church; and if our model, whatever our model is, if our model is keeping the elders from managing the affairs of the church, then it is an unbiblical model.”

Hybrid Leadership Model. Three of the five pastors believed that their deacons functioned more as elders. They recognized that the distinctions in the offices were blurred. Where this was true, the office of the deacon functioned more as the office of the elders instead of being true deacons as defined by scripture.

- **D1** – “And so even though our deacon body has function, like elders, I don't think I've thought of them that way.”
- **D2** – “In the deacon-led model, I think you've got deacon and elder smashed together on in a lot of Southern Baptist churches, which is what we kind of have to some extent what we have here... The roles of the elder and the deacons are smashed together. So, they (the deacons) kind of function as elders, which is why issues like divorce deacons, and you know, depending on where you are on the issue, you know, female deacons are out of the question, because those two offices are sort of meshed together.”
- **D4** – “... we don't have a plurality of elders. In our situation, I guess. You could say that we're single elder in the sense that the pastor is the elder. But the deacons do fill some of the functions of elders as well. And just to be clear, like my understanding of the role of elders, they (the current deacons) are certainly involved in making leadership decisions. And then even in like the teaching ministry, of the church. None of them are preaching on Sunday mornings, but they are either teaching in small groups, Sunday school, other teaching opportunities in the church.”

Deacons Make Final Leadership Decisions. Three out of the five pastors indicated that deacons are the ones who make the final leadership decisions, before taking things to the church for a vote.

- **D1** – “I’ve just remained quiet on non-Bible stuff. Let them do their work on these decisions, and then bring them to the church.... There’s usually one or two (deacons) in the room that make the decisions and a lot of people are just quiet.”
- **D2** – “And, you know, really the only kind of major pushback I’ve ever, had was probably the one I described earlier with the tinkering of the Deacon model... The decisions are coming in from the deacon body essentially. And that will be influenced by other committees, like the long-range planning committee.”

“As far as direction leadership issues, I would say that it’s probably decided more at the deacon level and then disperses out from there. I would say that’s what happens. There’s another committee that also helps give direction, called Long Range Planning. And usually what happens is the long-range planning committee and deacons come together in unified efforts to move forward on the large ticket items.”

D4 – “With most things, with big changes, I’m still going to call for a vote from the deacons.”

Deacons as Servants. Two of the five pastors were clear that the deacons functioned as servants according to the teaching of scripture. This was the result of intentional teaching about the biblical role of deacons. The second church moved in that direction after the church suffered much conflict because of an unbiblical deacon ministry that split the church before the current pastor arrived.

- **D3** – “Ours is congregational, with deacons, primarily as Minister servants. With a few administrative responsibilities, just to get the ball rolling for our lay leadership teams. They’re not a board of directors. They’re primarily servants and advisors, peacemakers.”
- **D5** – “Well, yeah, the current chairman of deacons ...a really awesome guy, wants to serve the Lord. Really just he’s had this conviction that I agree with, that deacons should not be running everything that they ought to be the lead servants in the church and get back to that and so, we enshrined that in our bylaws about a year after I got here and have really as a transitional step moved towards elder-led.”

RQ1 for Elder-led Churches

The first research question is the same as that used for deacon-led churches, and focused on the impact the leadership model has on a pastor's ability to lead: RQ1. *How has the church's model of leadership contributed to a pastor's ability to lead the church.*

Summary Textural Descriptions

E1 – The pastor believes that he has freedom to lead. He currently works under an elder-led model that is congregational. He leads the church with two other elders. In addition, the church has deacons who serve the congregation. He describes the church as elder-led and deacon-supported. About the ministry of the deacons, he was clear that they function as servants. The elders have the freedom to call on them when circumstances require their assistance. While the deacons have an important role in the life of the church, he said they do not lead. The pastor said they serve the church as servants, and they also function as peacemakers when needed. However, the elders set the agenda for the church, lead through the teaching of the Word, and seek to guide the church by casting the vision. To that end, they allow the Word to give direction to everything they do, even in unusual situations that require their direction. The Word of God takes center stage in their leadership. The elders also make it a point to spend time with people and to engage in and lead discipleship. When asked how the model contributes to his ability to lead, he said that the church has a great amount of trust in the elders. No one person makes the decisions. They work together discussing and praying about the things the church needs to be doing and the direction it is taking. In addition, he pointed out that each of the elders has two pastors. They pray together, do ministry together, lead together, and hold each other accountable. That support and accountability greatly affects their ability to lead the congregation. He gave an example of how they lead together. The church was recently blessed with a large sum of money.

They decided they did not need to keep it all and wanted to use some of it for kingdom purposes. The elders came up with a tentative plan. Then they designed a teaching series on stewardship which they preached to the church. After that series was over, as a congregation they discussed what they learned, discussed the plan, and made any changes in light of what they learned. Further, the elders work together as a team, are very transparent with each other, and they see each other as equals. He was clear that the transparency they have among the elders influences the congregation and fosters trust. In addition, they have not experienced conflict because of the model. He was very satisfied working under this model.

E2 – Under this model, the pastor has experienced conflict. In his evaluation, the model contributed to the conflict. However, the model they practiced did not include congregationalism. Yet, despite the conflict he does not feel the model ever directly hindered his ability to lead. Under the model itself, he was one of equals. The main problem is that the elders were not “aligned.” They were pulling in different directions. That reality hindered their ability to lead as a team. He said elder teams can work well when they “have healthy relationship and alignment of vision.” In their case, one elder had a different vision for the church. The result was a church split. One of the problems they encountered was that it was difficult to know what pastoral authority meant amongst the team. The elders he appointed to lead with him had less experience and biblical knowledge but had stronger personalities and a clear agenda that included Christian Nationalism. There were times when he believed that he needed more pastoral authority. He did not want more authority for the sake of authority, but believed a distinction was needed at times as to who had final authority. As a leader he prefers “plurality and representation.” By that he wants to share leadership with a team of people. He likes collaboration as a team. However, he emphasized that they needed to be aligned behind a vision.

He believes that an elder with authority should not use that authority often, but only when needed – and it should only be used with accountability. Unfortunately, outside the elder team, there were no other groups within the church that were able to hold the elder team accountable. The elder with the Christian Nationalism agenda recruited others in the church to follow him, and they eventually left to plant a new church. He emphasized that the model was not the primary problem. He believes the model can contribute to having a team environment. He said that “elder leadership is ok, just as long as there is a clear understanding of pastoral authority.” Despite that, after the church split, they began to move away from their form of elder-led leadership. They formed a leadership team to develop a new leadership model for the church. The elders will be a part of that team, but there will be others who have an important role to play in the leadership of the church. They will share leadership as a team that represents the congregation. The elders will primarily focus on teaching. They are also seeking to move in the direction of congregationalism as well. The church will have final authority. In their new model he believes that the role of the elder should be to guide and insert (biblical) wisdom into a leadership environment but not direct the environment. It is important to have others in the church who are part of the leadership team. The elders will not carry the direction of the church by themselves. They should be seen “as the older (not necessarily older in age) and wiser experienced voices in the room that gives guidance to the church (as influencers).” In that regard, the leadership role of elders will be limited from what it was in the past. When asked if he was satisfied working under the model, he said, “No, I’m not going say that I would not pastor another elder-led church again, but I would do things differently.”

E3 – Under this model, the pastor believes he has much freedom to lead. He said they are elder-led, deacon-served, and church member-affirmed. They have three elders. They all lead by

giving guidance to ministry teams. He said they also make requests of teams and at times, when needed, they give more firm direction by providing specific direction to teams. He said the church has a lot of trust for the elders. However, they never act like dictators. Their goal is to give guidance and direction. He said, “It’s less saying what needs to happen (by way of giving directives), and more guiding people to see spiritually and biblically why we should do what we do.” In that regard they focus their leadership on teaching through scripture why they do the things they are doing. Ultimately, he said their goal is to make mature disciples. They do this by teaching the Word, counseling, encouraging, and at times, discipline. Furthermore, the elders spend a lot of time with the people, talking to the people, and praying with people to build healthy relationships. Their goal is to lead the members to grow in their faith. Focusing on building relationships is foundational to their leadership. As such, he said, “I might end up being more patient and working with people to get them to the point where they need to be before we can move on.” In other words, he puts the people before any ministry or tasks that he believes should be done. And while he is task-focused, making sure the people are moving together in their spiritual growth is more important. As far as the elders, he was clear that they lead together and trust each other. He stated,

The term that we use is that I as the lead elder would be a leader among equals.... We work together, we meet weekly, and we pray together. We work through things [together], we are in conversation every day about the church and about our people. And so, there’s an ownership and a partnership that we have.

He said that in the rare times they may not agree on something, as the lead elder he can make the final decision, and the other two will follow his leadership. When asked how the model contributes to teamwork, he said that it has helped to build a healthy partnership with the other elders. They are intentional about bearing the burdens of ministry together. In addition, they serve together as friends which contributes to a healthy environment. He said there is a unity

among them that allows them to move the church forward together, and that the unity they have among the elders flows out into the church. “The church sees that ... and I believe that one of the aspects of the health of our church that we have seen in our people is the unity of the church. And I think that flows downward,” he said. He does not feel curtailed in his leadership in any way. He stated, “There is a lot of freedom in this model. I don’t have to make every decision. And when we stand before the congregation, we do so together, and we trust the Lord will be at a work through it.” He noted that because they are the leaders, it does not mean that they always get their way. The important thing is that “here is an aspect where we’re owning this together and working through this together (as a church) ... I think it goes back to the ownership and the partnership.” They also have deacons in the church. The deacons focus on the physical needs of the church and the people, whether that is working on building and grounds or ministering to widow and widowers. There are several ministries they serve on, but they do not lead. The deacons also undergo leadership training, so they understand their role as deacons. When asked if he was satisfied working under this model, he said, “I am fully satisfied with the model.”

E4 – This pastor transitioned his church to an become an elder-led church over eight years ago. They have several elders. The church has experienced many transitions over his 32 years at the church. Before they were elder-led they were staff-led; and before that they were board-directed; and before that they were deacon-led. “When I came to the church it was deacon-led. I said, that’s wholly unbiblical. Here’s what deacons do (i.e., he taught them the biblical office),” he stated. He believes the office of the deacon is too important to the church to allow it to function in an unbiblical way. The church needs the deacons to function as deacons. When they do, they are a tremendous blessing to the church. When asked how the current church model contributes to his ability to lead, he said, “It’s diminished my ability to lead the church.” He

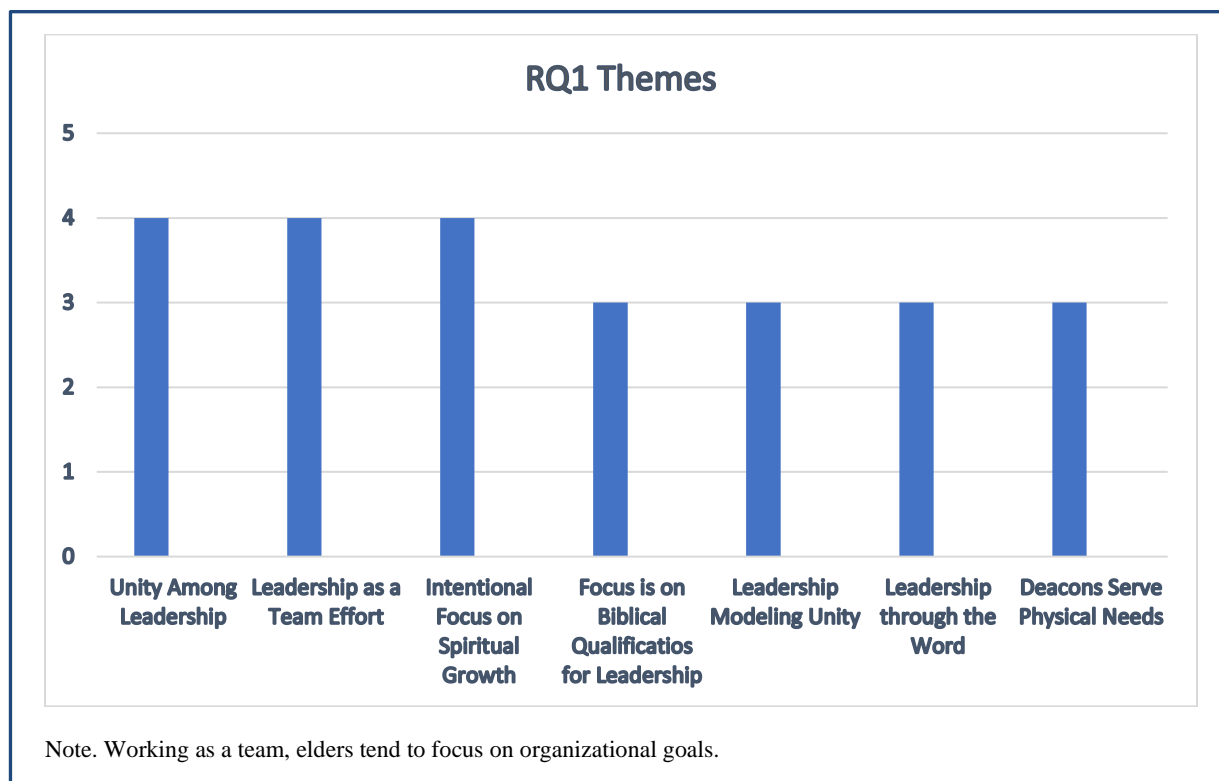
explained that because there are more voices in leadership, his influence has diminished. However, the overall effect of having several leaders has benefited the church. Because each elder has equal authority, they can voice their positions on a topic. The result is they have robust discussion about things. However, he was quick to point out that all the elders are godly men who know how to lead. He has confidence in them as elders. So, while his leadership is diminished, the overall effect on the church is positive. He went on to explain that with more leaders, the church is better supported and led, which has the effect of raising the spiritual maturity of the congregation. However, he pointed out while decision making can be slower with an elder body, the church “is much more apt, I think, to respond quickly and appreciably to the decision that has been made by the elders.” Sometimes those meetings can be tough, where the elders discuss important issues facing the church. However, one of their goals is to shield and protect the church. For example, during COVID tensions between the elders ran high. Throughout that time, there was much friction about how to respond. But the point is that while the elders struggled with how to respond, they ultimately presented a unified plan to the church. They will not allow disunity to enter the congregation, seeking to protect the church in that regard. And while they may not agree on everything, they appreciate and love each other. As such, they have a good working relationship amongst the elder body. Ultimately, they seek to work together to do what is best for the church. “So, in the end, it all benefits the church, but you have to have men whose hearts are soft,” he said. To work together, they need to take issues seriously but not take things personally when they disagree. He emphasized that it is important for elders to distinguish between what is best for the church versus seeking “what I want.” Soft hearts are open to hearing the ideas of others, but still capable of standing for a position when they believe it is important. When asked if the model can detract from unity, he said it can only

detract “if somebody was behaving non-biblically.” And while they take debating issues very seriously, they do not have conflict among themselves nor in the church. Conflict would be the result of having an elder who does not have the character to be in that office. Ultimately, the pastor said that he is very satisfied working in this model. He said, it benefits the church very much, “raising everybody and I can see the value that it has brought to the congregation. But it can be an extremely frustrating model to work with.”

RQ1 Composite Themes

Figure 3

RQ1 Themes



Unity among Leadership. All four pastors expressed the same leadership dynamic. With the elders, each elder has equal authority to make decisions. While they have equal authority, they do not all have the same role within the church. Of the four, one elder was the lead elder. He had the authority within the group to make a final decision if it was needed. Another elder who

experienced conflict under this model believed that had he had such authority, he could have saved the church from conflict. The other two churches held to the idea of each elder having equal authority. In one church, this leads the elder team to engage in robust discussion and debate about issues facing the church. The pastor of that church believes this is good for the church.

- **E1** – “And because we're equals, we make a big emphasis on transparency with each other. You know, just being open with what we're going through, praying for one another. And we also are aware of each other's strengths and weaknesses.”
- **E2** – “Yeah. I was one of the equals and there wasn't really a distinction of me being a pastor.”
- **E3** – “The term that we use is that I as the lead elder would be a leader among equals.”
- **E4** – “When talking about elder meetings: “And sometimes you walk in and feel like, yeah, I was heard and I think that's what you're asking for is a hearing not to get your way, but that you get a hearing.”

“It's not my church. I brought elders on because I felt as though they presented stability to a congregation.”

Leadership as a Team Effort. Another theme that was common to all four churches was the idea that the elders lead as a team. No one person gives direction to the church. Their leadership effort is a team activity that spans all areas of church life. In three of the churches, the team works together to give direction to the church, but the congregation makes the final decision through a congregational vote. In one church, a lack of congregational accountability led to a church split.

- **E1** – “Our church trusts the other elders as we work together. They know that I'm not a lone ranger. I'm not I'm not making these decisions by myself. I'm not just coming up with, you know, things that we need to do off the top of my head; but I'm running it past these guys. We're having conversations about them. We're praying about them. So, it builds a large amount of trust with the congregation. Knowing that, you know, I'm not I'm not a pastor, who is without a pastor.”

- **E2** – “I think that that when our team was aligned, when we add healthy relationships, alignment of vision, it was great. You know, that was probably the majority of the time it worked just fine.”
- **E3** – “But there is an aspect where we're owning this together and working through this together.”
- **E4** – “It used to be a staff led Church and the staff could say let's do something, and boom, it was off. Now the staff says something, and we bring it to the elders, and the elders say, let's think about that. You know, and so there's a way in which that ...now here's what's happened, watch this. You take up, you take a tent with a single pole, and only so much of it rises high. But if you put six to ten poles more of the church rises high. So I'm telling you, having an elder leadership has risen the maturity and the responsibility of the entire congregation, and the congregation is better off for it.

Intentional Focus on Spiritual Growth/Direction. Another major theme that emerged is that the elders are intentional about seeing their people grow and develop into Christlikeness. Their leadership is focused on where the people are spiritually. The goal of discipleship and growth into Christlikeness informs how they lead their people.

- **E1** – “I would say, primarily, our focus is spiritual growth, spiritual health. And, you know, from that numerical growth will occur. And we've slowly and gradually, you know, we've seen that over time.”
- “There's this foundation of unity, right? Relationally, that we're all working together to you know, hold each other accountable to love Christ together, you know, and to grow up into the image of him, then also within that unity, there's a diversity of gifts. And then how do we, you know, how do we bring those two together? You know, unity and diversity, you know, to glorify the Lord.”
- **E2** – “We want them to be looked at as the older wiser, experienced voices in the room. That's what we're after. We feel like it's the heart of the New Testament. One of the things we're asking is that our elders are really elders. They don't have to be old they just need to have some miles on them.”
 - “Yeah. You know, one thing that was really insightful for me is in Acts 15 at the Jerusalem Council. So I've got this problem in the community, you know, in the Jerusalem church, like, basically, do you have to become Jewish, become Christian. And they, you know, they get together, you have to be circumcised and all that. They make the ruling. And then I guess it's Peter that says that I'm not sure that when he's given the report, he says that this phrase really got my attention. He says, ‘it seemed best to us and the Holy Spirit.’ You know, he didn't say, we did our study—I'm sure they did—and here's the truth, so swallow this. He said, ‘it seemed best to us and the Holy Spirit.’ That's what

healthy leadership does ... they they're committed to truth. But they're looking out for the community and saying, this seems best for us, in this time and place, illuminated by the Spirit and committed to the truth as we understand scripture. But we're not looking for a magic answer, you know, not gonna bring you one verse and say, this is this, therefore, it's like, no, we're going to get the witness of scripture. And that's what elders are supposed to do."

"We encourage people be with Jesus in this. Let him be God to you, and then make it your ambition to become like him."

- **E3** – "I encourage the elders to spend a lot of time with the people, talking to the people, praying with people, because there has to be that relationship, so that they can do that guiding and do that spiritual shepherding. So, there is that investment aspect, and so it's more focused on the relationships between the leadership and the people seeking to guide them for spiritual growth."

"I might end up being more patient and working with people to get them to the point where they need to be before we can move on. So being patient with people spiritually, because, you know, because we want people want to grow."

- **E4** – "I have the heart of the church and I understand the heart of the church. I can say things in a way and people receive things from me differently than they receive from somebody else."

"I think people can sense unity. I think people are attracted to unity. People are attracted to love. So, I think if the elder model can work right, if it can model for the church how the church should live, and that can seep into the bedrock of where the congregation is being fed, that it comes up and flowers, if you will, it comes up in beauty. And I think that's what we're seeing, and that contributes to growth, to spiritual growth and numeric growth."

"I think pastors and churches hide sicknesses by this rotating door of churches and pastors."

Focus is on Biblical Qualifications for Leadership. Three of the four pastors spoke about the need to ensure the offices of the church adhere to the biblical qualification for leaders. The pastor that experienced conflict acknowledged that this should have been a stronger consideration when electing elders and suggested that this was a factor in its conflict and subsequent church split. One pastor was clear that there needs to be a clear division of labor

among the offices, and they adhere to that. The other is intentional about teaching the biblical roles of each office.

- **E2** – “The formation of elders, in my view, you don’t want to do it prematurely. That’s a lesson learned. Because it needs to be something that is more organically developed in the community. I think I appointed elders out of a need. I didn’t want to control the church. I wanted to share that. But the other thing I have learned as we have moved on, there was a disconnect between, like it was difficult to know what pastoral authority meant on our elder team, because I had a lot more knowledge, and my knowledge, I mean, not just theological formation, that too, but I think just personal knowledge of God and His ways, than the rest of the team. But I was probably the least aggressive personality on the team. So, I had guys on the team with me who had stronger personalities and stronger opinions and agendas, but knew quite a bit less, and had less ministry experience.”
- **E3** – “...but I guess the difference for us would be wanting to have spiritual leadership come from those that are qualified from scripture.”

“But we've gone through the nomination process, and now the nominated ones that the elders have selected, have their shadowing, they're shadowing our [current] deacons right now. We've read through some literature with them. The nine marks books and so that's where we are now. And so, the next steps will be then to affirm them and do the ordination.”

- **E4** – When asked, “So do you think this model contributes to teamwork then with the other elders?” He replied, “It certainly does. It would only detract from it if somebody was behaving non biblically, yeah. You know, or somebody caught a root of bitterness in their heart and, and then you couldn’t work with somebody, it wouldn’t be the issue anymore. It would be that you had a contention. Again, this elder who was a deacon came on and served for about a year and eventually all the elders looked at him and said, brother, you're just not fit for this office.”

“And eventually we all had to look at him, even the church, and say brother, you’re just not fit for that office, you're undermining the purpose of the office and the character you are exhibiting is wholly contrary to that of an elder. And that was repeated warnings, and repeated warnings, and repeated warnings.”

“And teaching from scripture. Here’s what deacons do.”

Leadership Modeling Unity. Three of the four pastors were clear that the elders of the church create the environment that the members will emulate. They believed it was important for

the leaders to demonstrate what things like unity and transparency looked like. The congregation will rise to the level of their leaders, as they lead by example.

- **E1** – “... that transparency then spills over into the congregation, which then I feel comfortable being very transparent with the congregation as well, you know, so that modeling transparency, which, which then helps the congregation feel more comfortable about being transparent with us and with others.”

“... and not just a just a lack of conflict. And I think we've achieved that. But also, you think, okay, so a word that is a synonym for unity? Maybe you would, you could throw order into that. You know, so I think we have relational unity ... a presence of harmony relationally, but also working together, using our gifts, you know, to advance God's kingdom.”

- **E3** – “The church sees that ... and I believe that one of the aspects of the health of our church that we have seen in our people is the unity of the church. And I think that flows downward.”
- **E4** – “And let that unity then go before the church.”

“The model should not generate conflict in the church. It should teach the church how to mediate conflict.”

Does the model foster unity in the church: “Yeah, because it teaches the church how to get along with each other, how to love each other, how to appreciate those who are different from you, and how all the various giftings of the church can work together because we've got an elder who's over prayer intercessory prayer, and elders over evangelism and elders over missions. I'm over preaching and teaching and elders over finance that kind of thing. And so, so it shows the church how the, the body should cooperate as the elders are cooperating, you know, using our various giftings and passions to the body.”

Leadership through Teaching the Word. Another theme that emerged is that teaching and preaching the Word is central to elder leadership. They are intentional in their preaching to cast the vision and explain why a church does what it does. They also use the Word to address situations as they arise. One pastor explained that the elders will even write position papers about things concerning a variety of issues. This is for the purpose of not only leading the direction of the church, but also in addressing important issues the church may face.

- **E1** – “My primary role is preaching and teaching, you know, put the time in to, you know, study God’s Word, and prayer, and prepare to preach every Sunday, and then also, to coincide that with, you know, teaching where it may be appropriate ... if something comes up where we need to address something specifically.”
- **E3** – “So what our goal is, and we believe our goal is mature, making mature disciples of Christ. So spiritual shepherding in that way, would be teaching...”

“We do a lot of guiding from scripture so that people understand which movements we need to be taking.”

- **E4** – “So my primary role of the church is preaching and teaching. That’s my primary role of the church, preaching and teaching, serving as an elder and counseling.”

By way of example: “We’ve created this leadership affirmation statement, put it out to the church, and said we want you to add to this, we want you to think about this. We want you to detract from this. Give us your feeling on it. All of these core theological questions the church relies on me.”

Deacons are Servants who Meet Physical Needs. Three of the four pastors explained that their deacon ministry is one of service. They focus on the various physical needs of the congregation. And while their ministry is vitally important, they do not provide leadership.

- **E1** – About the deacon ministry: “I would say the deacons are servants. So, whenever there are things that pop up, may come about that requires we need the deacons to step in and fill that role of serving the church in one form or other, will ask them to do that.”

About the deacons as peacemakers: “Just so, in the midst of conflict we bring them in, you know, so that they can help us minister to those who are straying, but also protect the rest of the flock and help us, you know, guard the flock, from division and other things of that nature.”

- **E3** – “And so our deacons ministry, their goal was ministry, and so they minister to our widows and widowers; they are involved in other ministries, the buildings and grounds and family ministries, so they don’t run those but they’re involved in them. They’re helping to take care of the physical needs of the church.”
- **E4** – “When I came to the church it was deacon-led. I said, that’s wholly unbiblical. Here’s what deacons do” (i.e., he taught them the biblical office). He said “one of the problems with the model is that if deacons are not deaconing, then who is? And deaconing is so important to the church that it needs to be done; and thus there has to be a clear delineation of elders and deacons. And that’s for the sake of the church. It is such an important office.”

“When I got here, the deacons had administrative control of the church, okay. And so, ... the pastor came in to work for them, so to speak. And I basically just preached the Bible and said, here’s what deacons do. And I’m telling you, since three years into my pastorate, we’ve had the most incredible deacon body and deacon board. Our deacons are the most fantastic people on the face of the earth, and they always have been, they understand their position and they live out their position, they minister to the material, and physical and wellbeing of our congregation in the community, and they’re spot on at doing it. They are crazy in love with Jesus. I always say to the deacons, your ministry is to make Jesus look good. That’s what you do you make Jesus look good in the church and in the community.”

RQ2 for Deacon-led churches

The second research question focused on the impact the leadership model has on the health of the church from the perspective of the pastor: *RQ2. How do pastors perceive the health of the church in a deacon-led church?*

Summary Textural Descriptions

D1 – The pastor said that in the early years it appeared the model contributed to the health of the church. It brought a form of unity to the church as it led to more voices being brought to the table. The pastor experienced this unity for the first 13 years of his tenure. But he qualified that unity as being an absence of conflict, which he didn’t realize until later. He noted that during that time the church did not engage in large projects or do anything out of the ordinary. He said, “In the last 13 years, however, we have not been unified. It’s been a tale of two cities.” During the last 13 years, as the church has engaged in large ministry projects, there has been a lack of unity. He believes that the lack of unity is a result of the model, believing it fostered “the illusion of unity,” rather than true gospel unity. He also noted that as a seminary student he was given the advice that he should not make any changes in the church for the first five years. He took that to heart. And when nothing changed, all was fine. But as change began to take place, what appeared to be unity on the surface turned out to be superficial. He believes that the lack of unity reflects a lack of health among the leadership of the church. He said,

“That’s the main thing.” As a result, he believes the model contributes to a lack of health among the leadership, which has influenced the church. When change was introduced, there was conflict among the deacons, and that spilled into the congregation. Deacons would leave meetings and seek support among the congregation for their position against other deacons. When asked if he believed the church was currently healthy, he said, “No, I don’t think we are healthy right now. We are getting healthier.” He attributes the change to his deliberate change in his leadership approach. He is beginning to become more assertive as a leader. Also, he recognized that he has not been intentional in developing leaders. He said, “But I haven’t developed leaders like I should have developed leaders.” During his time as the pastor, the deacons have always functioned more like elders, taking a significant leadership role. When asked why he did not focus on developing leaders, he said,

It could be that I don’t know how to develop leaders. And it’s possible that my view of developing leaders is just to preach the Bible to them. And then those that seem to be living for Christ are the leaders.

He gave an analogy of a bus. Instead of teaching people to drive the bus (i.e., teaching leadership), he has always been content to simply get people on the bus (i.e., fill leadership roles). Over the last few years, he has recognized that he needs to be more proactive in making a distinction between the roles of the elders and the deacons. He said he wants to slowly move towards an elder-led model of leadership. So, he attributes the lack of health to leaders not fulfilling the biblical role of leadership, which he is now trying to address. When asked what factors make for a healthy church, he said having good leadership, a good vision, expository preaching, prayer, fellowship, a logical and coherent plan of discipleship, and engaging in missions and evangelism. He said that the factors that make for an unhealthy church are poor leadership, lack of vision, lack of leadership development, a lack of biblical foundation, lack of

prayer, and a failure to do missions. In addition, the pastor needs to be mentally healthy, “unlike me, I’m tired and burned out.” However, he is making changes that are leading to better mental health. He believes that a healthy pastor will lead to a healthy church. When asked how the model contributes to growth, he said, “I don’t think it does.” He believed the problem goes back to having unhealthy leaders in the church.

D2 – The pastor said, overall, he does not believe this model contributes to the health of the church, although he believes his church is moderately healthy at the time. He said that “committee-led and deacon-led churches lead to turmoil and turf-war issues, which causes division, which is a threat to the unity of the body.” This is something he has experienced in the past. He said the term “committee” itself suggests separation, “like right vs. left, democrat vs. republican, and right vs. wrong.” He said we should instead talk about having teams that work together. He said committees fight for resources; teams work together to accomplish a mission. In that regard, he believes the deacon model as a system has greater potential for conflict than elder-led (he has worked under both). However, there can be conflict in elder-led models. “We battled whispers in the corner ... the elders have too much power and they are going to put me out of the church....” he stated. As far as deacon-led churches, he also said that the model tends to focus more on relationships than qualifications. In other words, people are chosen for leadership roles based on who they know rather than because they are biblically qualified. People in leadership, under this model, tend to put their friends and those they like into leadership roles. When asked if he believes his church is healthy or unhealthy, he said “in-between. We are not where we need to be, but we are a lot better than we were ten years ago.” They had some critical junctures with “this set of leaders. If you have the wrong leaders (with either deacon or elder-led), it could go sideways real quick. These guys I have right now are really good at being shock

absorbers with unity.” His current deacons understand the role of being a deacon, which has contributed to having unity in the church as well as having good working relationships among leaders. As such, they are experiencing unity at the time. When asked about the factors that make for a healthy church, he said he believes that what Nine-Marks Ministry teaches are good indicators. When asked about the marks of an unhealthy church, he said a rejection of the Word of God. Specifically,

an extreme lethargic nature where they just don’t prioritize it or just don’t believe it; and also when there is no urgency for the Great Commission. So, the Word contains the gospel, [and where there] is no gospel centeredness or focus... then there is nothing to tell the world. Too much water is in the boat, and the boat is underwater, at that point.

He said that one way the deacon-led model contributes to growth as he has experienced it compared with the elder-led model, is that more people experience “a higher degree of ownership with the deacon-led model.” He thinks more people are encouraged to be a part of specific ministries, whereas in elder-led churches people do not take as much ownership. “But I may have been in an unhealthy church at the time” he reported.

D3 – When asked if the model contributes to the health or lack of health in a church, he said that he believes it is less about the model and more about the people working under that model. Specifically, he believes that for any model to work, the people working in that model must be godly people who are humble and willing to follow the leadership of the Holy Spirit. He has served in five churches, all deacon-led churches. In three of those churches, he had bad experiences. He said they were very divisive, controlling, and very dysfunctional. One church wanted to make him “the pastor they wanted him to be.” Another focused too much on process and was very controlling as a result. However, he believes the same is true for an elder-led church. They can experience the same things. His prior church essentially ran him off. However, despite that, he believed that model was not the real problem, but “personalities not in tune with

the character of God ... can corrupt any model. I think the model could have worked. But the two personalities in particular really subverted it.” In his current church, the deacons clearly understand their role and are intentional at being peacemakers. He said, “They value peacemaking.” This has created a very healthy environment for everyone. However, he said a church can become unhealthy when the pastor creates adversarial relationships because he is full of himself or because people disagree with him, or when deacons become too controlling. During his time at his current church, he has made it his priority to build healthy relationships with the members of the church, but especially with other leaders. In doing so he has also modeled what that looks like. He has a passion for people. The other leaders have learned from his example, and this has, in turn, led not only to healthy relationships with leaders, but among the members of the church as well. They have begun to replicate his passion. Additionally, the pastor has also practiced humility in those relationships. In that regard, he stated it is okay when the people choose not to follow a particular vision that he encourages the church to follow. He said, “I could have been wrong, it was the wrong time, or they are just going to miss a blessing. And that’s okay.” Ultimately, it is not the model, but the people. When asked about the factors that make for an unhealthy church, he said, “a breakdown of relationships, selfishness, arrogance. Let me be really blunt here and say it in three letters: S.I.N.”

D4 – The pastor believed that the current model is contributing to the health of the church. He said that in the past (with the former pastor) it did not. But he believes that the former pastor had very poor leadership skills. So, the problems the church encountered under his leadership had less to do with the model than the leader working under that model. He does not think the model contributes to anything that is unhealthy in the church, and currently believes the church is moving in the right direction. He said, “We are getting healthier. Two years ago, the

answer would have been no.” He attributes the turnaround to his proactivity in providing leadership to the church. He believes the health of the church is directly related to the leadership the church is receiving. While he acknowledges there are parts that are still unhealthy, the big change is learning how to lead and seeing where leadership is needed. When asked the question, “What makes for a healthy church?” he said he believes in evaluating where things are not working, then making changes before they become a problem. Too many churches take the easy road and just ride out the disfunction because leaning into “the awkwardness” is hard to do. But that is what leadership does. He believes that healthy churches have leaders who are not afraid to address difficult situations. That is what separates good leaders from bad. He believes that currently, the model contributes to growth because it has built trust within the church. The members currently trust the leaders and are willing to speak up about things as needed. This creates an atmosphere of open communication between members and leaders and between leaders and leaders. In the past, the church was not willing to address uncomfortable situations. Those situations were allowed to go on longer than they should have, and that contributed to a lack of health in the church.

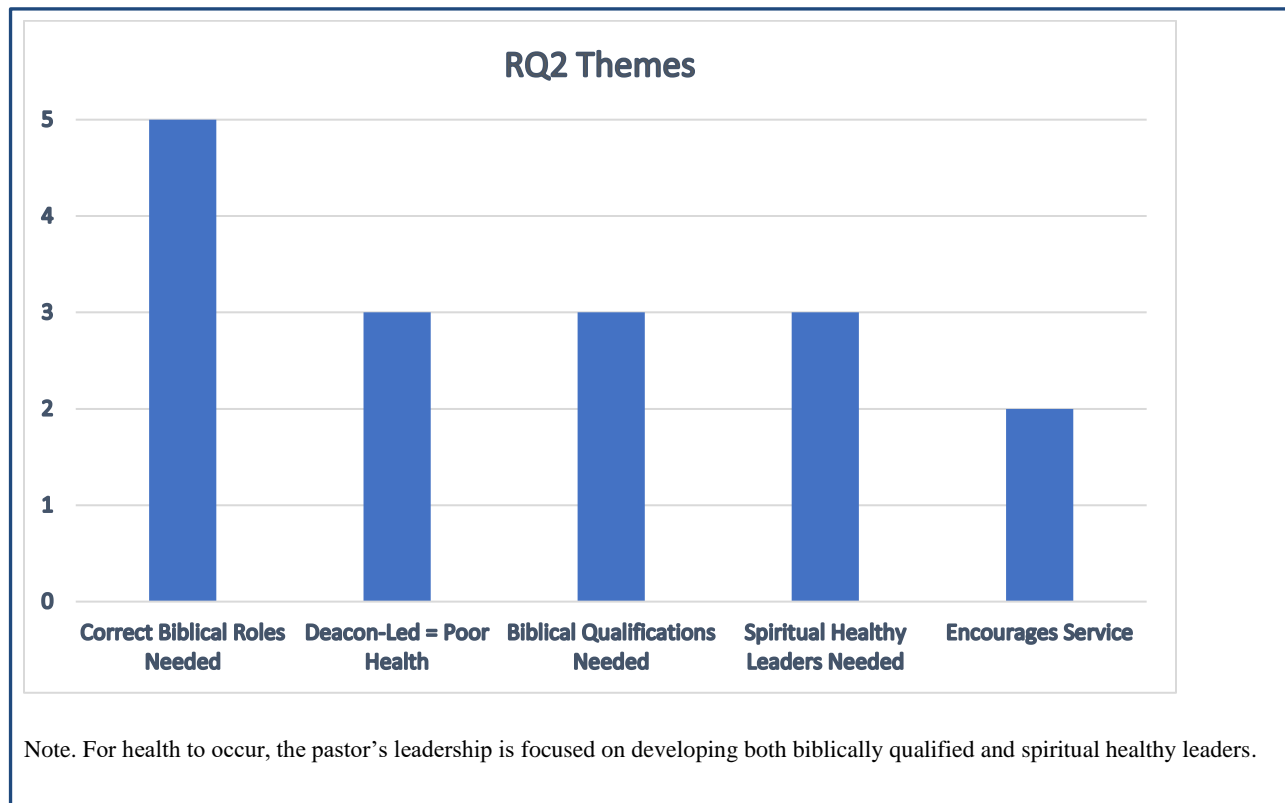
D5 - The pastor believed that a deacon-led model, which the church had just come out from under, did not contribute to the health of the church. They are currently in a transition model, working to become an elder-led church. While the pastor was clear that he believes the deacon-led model contributes to dysfunction, he was quick to point out that it is important to have the right people serving in the right places. The wrong people will contribute to dysfunction under any model. Under their transition model, the pastor believes the church is currently healthy and moving in the right direction. When asked about the factors that make for a healthy church, he believes a commitment to the authority of scripture, effective discipleship structures, biblical

practice of the offices of the church, and a desire to reach people with the gospel are good indicators of health. When asked about factors that make for an unhealthy church, he believes this is seen when a church does not follow scripture in how it governs itself or in how it chooses its leaders. He believes that churches do not put enough emphasis on the biblical qualifications of leaders or on the leadership model presented in scripture. In addition, if a church does not have a healthy discipleship focus, this will lead to poor health as well. When asked about unity within the church, he believes that the deacon model generally does not foster unity. However, under their current transitional model, they are experiencing unity. About their transition, he said, "I think there is a sense in which people feel like they have a voice." He believes that giving people a voice fosters unity within the body. When asked how their current model contributes to growth, he believes that it contributes because they are quickly able to mobilize people to serve in the church. When people can find a ministry to serve in, they are more likely to stay. As far as growing spiritually, he said that because they have the right (leadership) people in place, they are asking the questions, "What is scripture leading us to do, and what is the Holy Spirit leading us to do? That's very helpful." Ultimately, for a church to be healthy it must be seeking the will of God. In that regard the pastor has been able to get the church to change its focus from looking inward and thinking about what they want, to looking outward and seeking the Lord's will. He said, however, that could not have happened "if the Lord did not have the right people in places of influence already."

RQ2 Composite Themes

Figure 4

RQ2 Themes



Correct Biblical Roles of Leaders Needed. The primary theme from RQ2 was the need to ensure leaders not only understand their biblical roles (see RQ1), but also are functioning in those roles. It was a firm belief that when leaders are functioning in their correct roles, the church is going to be healthier than when they are not. In this regard, the pastors recognized that there are times when the deacons function as elders. However, they believe the church's health suffers as a result. There was a consistent desire to see elders functioning as elders and deacons functioning as deacons.

- **D1** – “So I think I’m going to have to develop more leaders even with this model. But, part of my hesitancy in trying to answer that question is where I’m considering now after 27 years into leading the church away from this model. And, you know, really more to

having deacons being more of a biblical role of deacon and then moving toward elders. And so, I in my brain, I don't know if I could have said this, five years ago, whatever how long ago it was, but I think in my brain, I see a distinction in terms of developing leaders, between elders and deacons. And so even though our deacon body has functioned like elders, I don't, I don't think I've thought of them that way. And so that's probably hindered me from the development of leaders getting back in the model."

- **D2** – "In the deacon-led model, I think you've got deacon and elder smashed together in a lot of Southern Baptist churches, which is what we kind of have to some extent here... the roles of the elder and the deacons are smashed together. So, they (the deacons) kind of function as elders, which is why issues like divorced deacons, and you know, depending on where you are on the issue, you know, female deacons, or wherever you are on the issue, because those two offices are sort of meshed together."

"I think with the New Testament makes a division of offices between elder and deacon. The qualifications are different, and their roles are also different. So, I think the qualifications of the leadership of elders is meant to be bent towards the spiritual shepherding role, being responsible for prayer and the handling of the Word. Probably best modeled after the apostles when they said, pick from among yourselves men who will wait on tables. The deacons being those who would follow more of the physical needs of the church to be taken care of."

- **D3** – When talking about the role of deacons, "They're primarily servants and advisors, peacemakers."

"Probably one of my better accomplishments here and most places, you know, they understand a deacon a servant. They understand there are three biblical roles for a deacon..."

"And you know, along those lines, I would say three of those six really received coaching on Deacon ministry really well. I would take a very, very biblical approach in coaching them, and along with it affirm them when they do it, right. I encourage them to be servants..."

- **D4** – "I don't want to like overshare about context, but the previous pastoral leadership was just really, really weak, which forced the deacons to play a role that they had never played before They did the best they could, but I mean, but their best just wasn't good enough because they weren't ... that wasn't the role they had been called to or gifted to do, you know."

"I've just got a lot of trust with and so after spending several months sort of working through this and praying through it, you know, I was able to start bringing them in and we started meeting on a monthly basis working through what the Bible says, and so even now, I mean, they're, they're in agreement with me on what Scripture says about church leadership, and maybe we need to make some adjustments with that."

- **D5** – So, for the deacon-led model, how does it contribute to the health of the church? Poorly. And in your transition model? How is that contributing to the health of the church? “Better than a deacon-led model. But probably not as healthy as we would be if we were if we were led by God called and equipped elders.”

“It's a commitment to anything other than the authority of Scripture, whether that be tradition or personality or an unhealthy leadership model, which is, I would define as unbiblical, or it's a commitment to an unbiblical leadership model. So that I would define a deacon-led model as an unbiblical leadership model for the church. And or having the wrong leaders in place – unqualified leaders in place and that's a huge problem in our churches. That is, we don't follow the qualifications for elders and deacons in First Timothy chapter three. And, and a lack of focus on healthy discipleship.”

Deacon-led Churches Lead to Poor Church Health. Three of the five pastors believe that the deacon-led model directly contributes to poor health. Instead of promoting unity, they believe it actively promotes dysfunction within the church.

- **D1** – “The model has generated conflict with the deacons, and then it has expanded beyond the deacons, especially the last 12 or 13 years for sure. “... we have a very strict rule with our body. That what we say in that room remains in that room. Once we vote to make a decision, then we're all on board. The problem is they don't follow that rule. So,, some of them go out into the church and then say, whatever they say... very frustrating.”

When asked “how does your model contribute to growth, both numerically and spiritually.” D1 replied, “I don't think that it does.”

- “But I think the weakness of the model ... during the first 13 there was unity, but there was really an absence of conflict, and least open conflict, but we have not been unified the last, you know, twelve or thirteen years, and that really has to do with the fact that we bought property for the pre-school, and we sold property, and all the stuff that we did. So, I think it's a tale of two cities, kind of thing. There was one way where it was positive, then it wasn't for the last 12 or 13 years. While we weren't doing much, we had unity, but when we did, disunity came to the surface. When we engaged in significant projects the model did not lend itself to unity.”
- **D2** – “Does this leadership model contribute to the health of the church? “No, I don't think it does. It does not contribute. If anything, I would say that this is detrimental to the health of the church in some ways.”

“Committee-led and deacon-led churches lead to turmoil and turf-war issues, which causes division, which is a threat to the unity of the body.”

- **D5** – “I don't see too many deacon-led churches growing numerically. Because I think generally, they're not a healthy place to be. I don't think people want to be in an

unhealthy place. And, and because, in my experience, at least, there's been so much division and conflict surrounding it. And obviously, that's not conducive to spiritual growth.”

Biblical Qualifications for Leadership Needed. The need to ensure leaders meet the correct qualifications was another theme that emerged. Pastors expressed the belief that the deacon-led model does not put enough emphasis on the biblical qualifications for leaders within the church. This would apply to deacons and the many committee leaders within a church that have a large amount of influence over the church. A lack of focus on biblical qualifications negatively effects the health of the church.

- **D1** – “...but if you're trying to just to get people to get on the bus, you will lead them in one way just to go sit in the chair. But if you are going to get somebody to drive the bus, you want to train them how to drive the bus. And so maybe with the model that we use, I'm just trying to get them in the seat as opposed to getting them to drive the bus.”
- **D2** – “In this model, relationships are given priority over qualifications. ... a lot of personnel committees can be really bad sometimes because people don't think about proficiencies and abilities. Sometimes they just think about relationships.”
- **D4** – “I think there's still certain parts of it that that are unhealthy. And even, like, we're still working through leadership, right? We're still working through leadership training and getting these guys to ... because our deacons now will tell you that they stepped into the role of not having any, that's why they were so eager to start this because they just knew, they stepped into this role and not having any clue about what they were supposed to do.”

Spiritually Healthy Leaders Needed. Another theme that emerged was the need to ensure that leaders are spiritually healthy and fit to hold their respective offices. One pastor observed that an unhealthy pastor will translate into an unhealthy church. This is also true of deacons. This area does not speak to the qualifications of an office holder, but to their spiritual fitness to effectively function in that capacity. A pastor or deacon can be qualified to hold an office, but perhaps at the time is not spiritually healthy. His lack of spiritual health can negatively affect the church.

- **D1** – “I think we are getting healthier. But I don't think we're healthy yet. And I think part of that is the change I've made in my approach to where I am now speaking.” So, your change in your leadership approach as of late has led to more healthy church? “Yeah, it may be fair to say its leading to a more healthy pastor, which I think will hopefully in turn lead to a more healthy church. I can tell you this much I've gotten more sleep at night since I have made this change.”

“An unhealthy pastor makes for an unhealthy church. Healthy pastor, healthy church.”

- **D3** – Does this leadership model contribute to the health of the church and how so? “Yes, but again, I think, that assumes godly people who have a measure of humility and confidence in the sovereignty of God and in the leadership of the Spirit; and at both ends, the pastor and deacons. I think it assumes that.”

“I think the model still could work. But the danger of that model or even of an elder-led model, is strong personalities not in tune with the character of God can corrupt any model.”

When talking about leading by example, he stated, “All this stuff works together. And I perceive that this creates a healthy church.” Members have said to the pastor: “You teach us with osmosis. You're modeling for us all the time what we should do in great detail and how you do it and why you do it. You let us absorb it from you.”

- **D4** – “But there's also the first two years that I've been here there's been a lot of time spent and just building trust with these guys. Trying to get these guys in a healthy position, trying to give them some of the leadership training that they need, because of the way that our church is structured. That has taken away, I don't want to say taken away from doing some other things for the church as a whole, because this really is contributing to what that the church can do in the future.”

“And we've actually now, we've got three deacons that have already rotated into a mentor role. And then in a year will actually step into almost like a deacon emeritus ... And so, we've got three candidates that are working through that. It's a one year process where they are assigned a mentor, and they will be taking that mentor's seat in a year when they're ordained Then I'm also meeting with them once a month, spending the first six months walking through, okay, what does the Bible say about church leadership?”

Encourages people to serve: Two of the pastors believe that their model encourages people to serve. They believe for a church to be healthy people need to take ownership of the ministry. Actively participating also ensures people remain in the church, as it gives people a sense of meaning and value.

- **D2** – “... people need to feel that they are leaders in significant ways in the church, and they don't have to be leaders in the sense of overseeing or like an elder body, but still leaving room for them to have positions of leadership that matter; not just like, go there and sweep the floor. But like, things where there's a sense of meaning to what they're doing.”
- When asked how does the model contribute to growth? D2 replied, “I think if there is a positive side to people being leaders in different areas of leadership, I would probably say they are more spread out among committees and deacons ... and there is I think, contrast in the two models, people feel a higher degree of maybe ownership of the church (in the deacon model). So yeah, come be a part of this. I am contributing In the elder-led, people were just sitting back and not feeling like they have skin in the game.”
- **D5** – When asked how their current model contributes to growth? D5 said, “I think numerically, it contributes to growth because we are able to quickly mobilize people for service. And so, whether it's because the committees or ministry teams were able to pretty quickly incorporate people into service in the church, and if people are serving, they're more likely to stay.”

RQ2 for Elder-led churches

The second research question is the same as that used for deacon-led churches, and focused on the impact the leadership model has on the health of the church from the perspective of the pastor: *RQ2. How do pastors perceive the health of the church in an elder-led church?*

Summary Textural Descriptions

E1 – This pastor believes his church is healthy and believes the model contributes the overall health of the church. Specifically, he explained that the model allows the pastors to work together to shield the congregation from spiritual attacks and things that might otherwise disrupt the unity of the church. They believe protecting the church is an important part of their roles as elders. When asked if there were any specific metrics that he believed pointed to the health of the church, he explained that the church is very transparent with their walk in Christ. As a result, they have a good amount of unity and trust within the congregation. He believes that as a church they are a lot like a family. They are committed to loving each other and have learned to work through problems together when they arise. He believes that unity is an important factor for

being a healthy church, and believes they are currently healthy in that regard. He also pointed out that their unity is not just the absence of conflict. He said they have “relational unity” which, he said, is the presence of harmony. And this relational unity lends the church to working together to advance God’s kingdom. He said they need to work on being better organized. They could do better in putting things in order. By that, he seemed to mean that organizing people for ministry was something they needed to work on. However, despite that, he believes unity is foundational for the life of the church. He pointed out the emphasis Paul had on unity in his epistles. He believes it was central to his teaching for the church. When asked how his model contributes to growth both numerically and spiritually, he believes that their unity and transparency leads the members to submit to one another. In addition, they feel they have the freedom to work with each other as they exercise their spiritual gifts. As a result, he believes his church is growing spiritually, and he thinks numerical growth is a product of spiritual growth. He said, “And we’ve slowly and gradually, you know, we’ve seen that over time.” When asked if he was satisfied working under this model he said, “Absolutely.”

E2 – This pastor said that his congregation is in the process of healing. The past conflict took its toll on the church. With their transition away from being a purely elder-led model, they are beginning to become a healthier church. However, before the conflict happened, he said about the church, “I think that when our team was aligned, when we had healthy relationships, alignment of vision, it was great. You know, that was probably the majority of the time it worked just fine. But then trust began to erode.” In that regard, he said the model can contribute to the health of the church:

You know, given the conditions of a healthy community and, you know, commitment to following the guidance of the Holy Spirit. I think it can be, and maybe we can say it should, but it is all dependent on the level of healthy discipleship in the community. If we are looking at Jesus, it’s got a real chance.

He also believes that the elder model can contribute to unity. But he cautioned and said, “there needs to be balance. Without the right balance it can generate conflict.” Specifically, he stated, “I think the way we did it, it certainly did. We were siloed and separate.” In reflecting on the conflict, they all learned a lot. He believes that as a leader he was too passive; but then when things went off the rails, he responded too strongly and hurt some people. In their healing process, the pastor and current leadership are encouraging the people to “be with Jesus in this. Let him be God to you, and then make it your ambition to become like him.” When asked about what makes for a healthy church, he said truth-telling in the church. By that, he means honesty among the congregation. He also believes that gratitude is a very good indicator of health.

When we can encourage each other to respond to good things with gratitude and hard things with gratitude. Man, I think there is a lot of power in thanksgiving. I [also] think mutual submission in the church. I just mean yeah, there’s a kind of reciprocity. Like, we’re here to give and contribute and listen; that mutual submission is so important, because when you do that, you are nurturing a culture where people aren’t looking after number one.

In addition, an important factor,

would just be a community that is taking seriously looking to Jesus, kind of [focusing on] the centrality and supremacy of Christ. The scriptures are pointing to Jesus and the Holy Spirit’s bearing witness to Jesus. God the Father is saying that’s my son, and I’m proud of him. Listen to him.

When asked about what makes for an unhealthy church, he said looking to the wrong metrics. We all want baptisms and numerical growth, “but anything other than making much of Jesus. Anything that is not about pointing to Jesus. Also, internalizing our troubles ... Jesus said we are to deny ourselves. That’s first base. And an unwillingness to suffer.” In that regard, he quoted a theologian, “Every true act of leadership is an act of suffering. If it’s a true act of leadership, it isn’t about you. You are choosing against what you want for the sake of someone else.” He claimed to have learned a lot along the way.

E3 – This pastor believes the leadership model has contributed to the health of the church. He said, “I definitely think it contributes.” He then explained that the unity of the elders has contributed to the unity of the church. The other ministry teams witness that unity and seek to emulate it. In addition, as leaders they do not force their way on the congregation. They lead “as a shepherd would lead.” The result is that the church feels cared for and loved by the elders. When asked if he thought his church was healthy, he said they are intentional about “pursuing health.” They have witnessed much growth as a church. However, he said, “I would say are healthy, but also far from perfect, and we still have our struggles.” When I asked him if there was any metric of health he could point to, he explained that the membership of the church talks about the unity that currently exists in the body. He said that it is more than just good fellowship. As a church they experienced genuine community. He believes the two are different. He said they are intentional about building community and genuinely want to be together. They are very much like a close family. When asked where the church might be unhealthy, he said there were not specific things that he could point to and say, “this is unhealthy and we need to address it,” he just believes there are areas where they still need growth. When asked about what factors make for a healthy church, he said, investing in personal discipleship is important. He also believes seeing a love for the preaching and teaching of the Word is a good sign of health. Unity is also an essential element needed. In addition, health is seen in how members contribute financially as well as how those resources are used. Finally, “you see it in a trust of God who is leading them on their mission ... and you see it in their sacrificial service together...” When asked about the factors that make for an unhealthy church, he said,

things that come to my mind, are all wrapped around the selfishness of a person that would separate from the unity and so like, the answer is the inward focus, right? The inward focus that is, and I’ve seen this in pastors and I’ve seen this in deacon boards too, but like, when I’m pushing for my agenda, where you want to push forward for your one

selfish focus or selfish endeavor.... I think that you can see that in a lot of other ways, too. And so that inward focus that brings dissension, that would bring gossip, or the, I'm going to withhold this because I don't like what you're doing. I think that it's seen in the disunity there; and an unwillingness to submit...

He does not believe his church is experiencing conflict, and the model does not contribute to it.

When asked how their model contributes to growth, he explained that when they focus on spiritual growth it should lead to numerical growth. Specifically, as members are intentional about their discipleship, they tend to share the gospel more. In addition, they tend to bring that element of their faith into their family as they desire to see their children follow Christ. So, people who are serious about following Christ work to bring more people into the kingdom. In that regard, he believes their model does pursue spiritual growth.

E4 – This pastor believes that the model contributes to the health of a church and has contributed to the health of his church. One reason is that the congregation has a lot of confidence and trust in the elders. They know that the elders work hard together to vet ideas and to lead the church together. When asked if the model can contribute to a church being unhealthy, he said, “Haven't seen it yet.” He went on to explain that if a leader worked behind the scenes, “he could wreak havoc in the church as an elder because he does have, again, a concentric circle of friendships, a particular group, that he could lead contrarily to the elders.” He has not experienced that in his church but “if it was discovered I think the elders would quickly bring it to task.” When asked if he thought his church was healthy, he said, “I consider our church to be extremely healthy.” When asked if the elder model contributed to that, he said, “Absolutely. It's the elder leadership model that contributes to that to a very great extent. Yeah.” When asked about the factors that make for a healthy church, he said,

Let me tell you, for me, loving Jesus makes for a healthy church. Calvin would say the heart is an idol making factory. Whether it's an elder or a deacon, everybody who joins your church says this is a great church, if... This would be a great church, but....

Everyone who joins a church comes with an agenda, whether it's acknowledged or not. Sometimes they themselves don't know it. But really, to me, what makes a healthy church is everybody loves Christ first and most; and thus, nothing is going to get in the way of me loving Jesus first and most; and that to the greatest extent, above all else, is me.... And so even if I disagree with you, the way in which I disagree with you must honor Christ, because I love Christ more than my own way, more than my own presentation. Jesus becomes the fulcrum by which everything is measured. And I believe with all my heart that the key is loving Christ first and most.

When asked what factors make for an unhealthy church, he said,

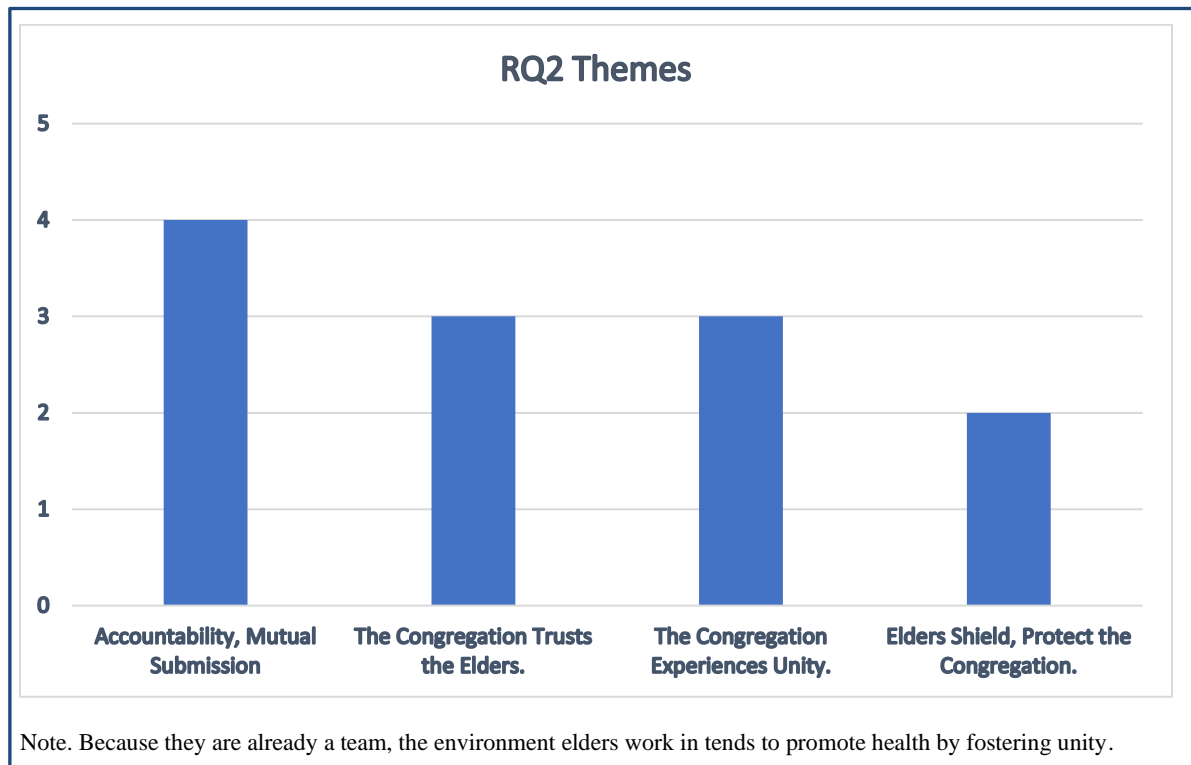
I mean, you got seven elders, and one guy who's holding to a position and the other six are looking at him saying repeatedly brother, we love you, but this position is not a valid position, this doesn't hold water. At that point, he loves himself more than he loves the church. He loves his perspective and that's going to create disunity. And I'm telling you, that's the issue every single time. It's, I love me more than I love Christ.

He believed that the model should not generate conflict in the church. Instead, it should mediate conflict. Even when the elders disagree with each other, they tell the church that they are praying together about it and continuing to discuss the matter. They want the church to see how they approach difficult things and model that for the congregation. "So, it should not generate conflict, it ought to contribute to the health of the church," he said. In that regard, the model helps foster unity, "because it teaches the church how to get along with each other, how to love each other, how to appreciate those who are different from you, and how all the various giftings of the church can work together." And so, it shows the church how the body can cooperate together as the elder's model that for the congregation. When asked how the model contributes to growth at this church, he commented that people are attracted to unity and love. He explained that the elder model contributes to growth because it models these things for the congregation. "And that can seep into the bedrock of where the congregation is being fed, then it comes up and flowers, if you will, it comes up in beauty," he said. He believes they have experienced this as a church.

RQ2 Composite Themes

Figure 5

RQ2 Themes



Accountability/Mutual Submission. A theme that was consistent with all four churches is that the elder-led model provides accountability to the pastors as they practice mutual submission to each other. The pastor is never alone in his ministry and he himself has a pastor. They support each other, correct each other, and encourage each other as they lead the church together.

- E1** – “One of the things that I always talk about is the thing about our model that is so beneficial to me personally, is that, you know, not only do our elders pastor the congregation, but we all have pastors. I have two pastors. They have two pastors. And so, as far as the amount of trust that people have, I think is greatly increased because of that.” “Also, because we're, we're equals, you know, we make a big, a big emphasis on transparency with each other, you know, just being open with what we're going through praying for one another. You know, so and we also are aware of each other's strengths and weaknesses.”

“...but the fact he felt comfortable, that he came up to me talk to me about it. He was very, very gracious in the way he talked about it. And, you know, I’ve thought about it, I thought about it a lot. Just how that may have happened in a different situation, you know, where I was blessed by it, you know, I could see how that may not go over so well in other places, you know, in many ways.”

- **E2** – “I think mutual submission in the church. I just mean yeah, there's a kind of reciprocity. Like, we're here to give and contribute and listen; that mutual submission is so important, because when you do that, you are nurturing a culture where people aren't looking after number one.”
- **E3** – “...we work together, we meet weekly, and we pray together. We work through things (together), we are in conversation every day about the church and about our people. And so, there's an ownership and a partnership that we have.”

“We work together to bear the burdens of ministry ... and so that is flushed out in friends working together, which makes it more healthy, and which makes it more enjoyable, which makes sure there is unity that we're seeking to display.”

“...and that's part of the accountability of the elders, or the plurality, at least that we have that we fostered is that we fight for each other if we need to. But it's also to kind of be a sounding board and to calm each other down if we need to. Also, that camaraderie, the friendship, the ability that we have to rely on each other.”

- **E4** – “...it's enhanced the leadership of the church, but it's diminished my leadership of the church?”

“So, in the end, it all benefits the church, but you have to have men whose hearts are soft.”

The Congregation Trusts the Elders. In three of the four churches there was the theme of trust. The congregation has a lot of trust in the leadership of elders as a team. The pastors expressed that trust and emphasized that having a team of men leading is what contributes to that trust.

- **E1** – “...our church, you know, trusts the other elders as we work together So it, it builds a large amount of trust with the congregation. Knowing that, you know, I'm not I'm not a pastor, who is without a pastor.”
- **E3** – “So my role is really to prayerfully lead in a biblical way, the church and so leading spiritually, leading through other avenues, but as my goal remains focused on what's best for the church, then really what we see and what we have seen is that I can make suggestions I can make requests. In my leadership, I can give specific directions when

needed. But the way the elder-led has benefited us, is that I can work together with the teams that we have and I can trust the leadership of the Lord, the leadership around me. And then they end up trusting me, they end up trusting the elders.”

- **E4** – “Absolutely, again, by the time we bring something to the congregation, the congregation feels as though it's been vetted by more than one set of eyes, one mind, one opinion, so the congregation has greater confidence in it because each of these men have different area groups, concentric circles that they influence, all of those circles are brought to a greater level of maturity, rather than one guy trying to reach the whole congregation.”

The Congregation Experiences Unity. In three of the four churches there was a theme of unity within the church. The church has a spirit of unity, and the elders expressed their belief that the model contributes to that unity. They said that unity begins with leadership, is modeled for the congregation, and then is practiced by congregation. In that regard, unity is a goal the elders seek for the congregation. In their minds, unity must come before everything else the church accomplishes.

- **E1** -- “We have transparency, trust, unity, you know, we can be authentic with each other. And it’s not like we don’t, you know, everybody struggles with being completely transparent. Perfect no. Healthy, yes. In regard to that answer. You know, just a real emphasis on family, you know, we're going to work through stuff; we're going to, you know, when we don't get our way or something, it offends us, we don't tuck tail and, you know, go take our ball and play somewhere else, you know? So yes, I would say in regard to unity, and love for one another we are healthy.”
- **E3** – “I definitely think it contributes. So, I kind of mentioned earlier just with our elder’s unity, when elders have unity, and it's not us forcing our own way. It's leading as a shepherd would lead. The church then feels cared for and they feel the compassion of the elders. And so, they see that unity of cooperating together; and then the other teams follow that. Other committees follow that too, or at least they see the example, and so definitely, I definitely believe it does contribute to the health of the church.”
- “And so, so this is something I see, but it's also something that our members continually talk about, is the unity in the community that God has developed; and that it's not, you know, like, a lot of what people might call fellowship, but you've been in an opportunity for fellowship, and have been in an opportunity to have community, and they are different. Our people want to be together, and they are intentional (about community), and you know, the majority of them want to be together. They want to be intentional. They want to be encouraging it's just that it’s a gospel community that's seeking to be family. And that's one of the areas that that I hear people talking about.”

- **E4** – “Well, let me tell you this. I think people can sense unity. I think people are attracted to unity. People are attracted to love. So I think if the elder model can work right, if it can model for the church how the church should live, and that can seep into the bedrock of where the congregation is being fed, then it comes up and flowers, if you will, it comes up in beauty. And I think that's what we're seeing, and that contributes to growth and to spiritual growth into numeric growth.”

“... and here's Israel in the wilderness. You're supposed to present a kingdom ethic that makes other nations jealous. And that's the purpose of the church in the world. It is to make people jealous. Here's a group of people who disagree with each other, and yet can love each other and stay on mission with each other. I can be a part of that. You're showing me how to navigate the problems with my wife, my husband, my children, my grandchildren, you know, you're demonstrating that, the way you're living as believers, I can get on board with that. You're not just dismissing each other; you're not speaking angrily or mean to one another. You're conducting yourselves in a way that's holistically beneficial to you personally and to the congregation as at large. And I like that, and so I think our congregation sees that as the elders really do try to practice that. None of us are trying to play the hypocrite.”

Elders Shield/Protect the Congregation. The theme of intentionally protecting the church from things that might bring division and conflict was evident in two of the churches. In both churches this was seen as a responsibility of the elder body.

- **E1** – “You know, as we've gone through conflict in the past, what we've come to find out is that we, as shepherds, we've been able to guard to guard the flock against, we have been willing to take blows for them, that they were unaware of, and it seemed like they didn't experience the weight, the attack of the enemy as much. So, you know, protecting the flock contribute to the health of the church.”
- **E4** – “You have to say, look, we're going to fight and squabble and yell and scream and holler and throw stuff at each other (he was being facetious), but this does not get out to the church. That's part of our responsibility is that we're kind of the filter. So, we let all the frustration fall on us, and let that unity then go before the church. COVID was horrendous for the elders. But it was good for our congregation. Our congregation had no idea of the difficulty the elders faced.”

RQ3 for Deacon-led churches

The third research question focused on the impact the leadership model has on the desire for the pastor to remain in pastoral ministry: RQ3. *How does the church model contribute to a pastor's desire to continue in the pastoral ministry?*

Summary Textural Descriptions

D1 – This pastor has experienced much frustration working under this leadership model. However, his desire to remain in pastoral ministry is about the calling on his life from the Lord. Therefore, the model of leadership is less important than his calling. The commitment to pastoral ministry is a commitment to his calling. However, he has experienced frustration and mental exhaustion, and questions how long he can remain being a pastor. He also noted that the calling itself has created a lot of pressure because he feels that because of his calling, he cannot quit. The result is that at times he feels trapped.

D2 – This pastor said that his commitment to pastoral ministry is independent of any model of leadership or church polity. However, there have been times he has questioned whether to remain in pastoral ministry, just because “ministry it is hard. Dealing with people is hard. The model is not as much of a problem as it is our hearts.”

D3 – When asked if this model of leadership has reaffirmed his commitment to pastoral ministry, he said, “Totally.” He said there have been times when he questioned if he could remain in pastoral ministry. He then began a long series of stories about the conflict he had with various deacons in his previous churches. His conclusion, however, is that the model is less important than the people who work in the model. People can be hard. “So, it’s really more about again, understanding your role in building good healthy relationships,” he stated. He was implying that being proactive in building relationships mitigates against being put into the position of questioning one’s calling to serve. In his current church, he has been able to build strong relationships with deacons and other leaders. He has been intentional in his leadership, in his teaching leadership roles, and in making sure the right people are in positions of leadership. The result is that he is committed to serve and completely satisfied with his ministry,

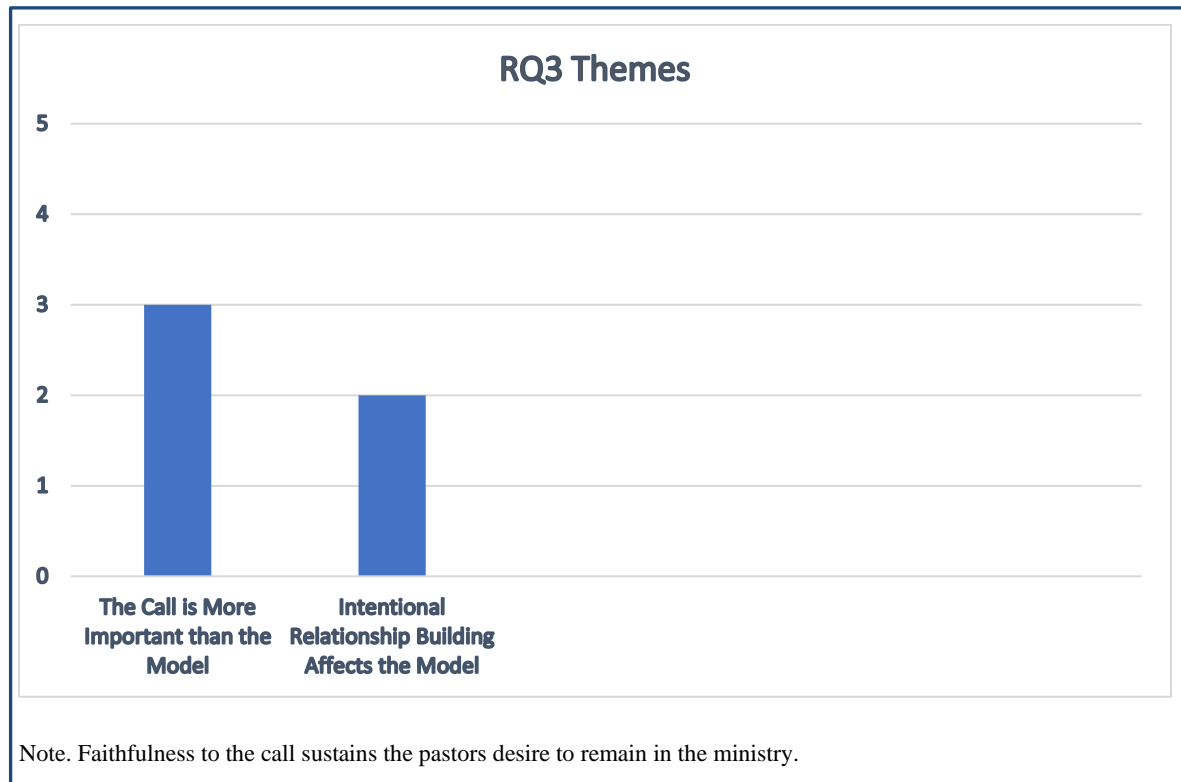
D4 – He gave a very short but concise answer. When asked if the model has reinforced his commitment to the ministry, he simply said, “Yeah, I think so.” He has great relationships with the deacons and other leaders. They have made significant changes that have had positive impacts on the church. He enjoys where he is at and does not see himself moving anytime soon.

D5 – The pastor said he is committed to ministry. None of the bad experiences diminishes his desire to remain as a pastor. He said that working under a deacon-led model of leadership would not be affirming to his love for the ministry. He also said he would be resistant to going back to a deacon-led model of leadership. However, with the church’s transition, he is encouraged in his commitment to pastoral ministry. “Being in a place where they’re following my leadership, where I feel like we’re moving in a healthier direction, does bring me more joy in my ministry. It does bring me more fulfillment,” he said. Ultimately, he said it is his calling to the ministry that sustains him. However, he believes that there are certain criteria for serving at a particular church. He would not believe the Lord is calling him to a place where his family is at risk. Or, if he was speaking to a church about becoming a pastor, he could not go to a church that did not share his convictions on what a pastor is called to do. He stated, “Because if the Lord has called pastors lead, and I believe he has, and a church won’t allow the pastor to lead, then I can’t see how the Lord would be calling me to that church.”

RQ3 Composite Themes

Figure 6

RQ3 Themes



The Call is More Important than the Model. Three of the five pastors were clear that their calling to ministry is more important than the model. One pastor said he has no problem serving under either a deacon-led or elder-led model. He has served under both. One has struggled under the deacon-led model, but believes his calling sustains him, though at times he has felt trapped. And another believes his calling keeps him in ministry but does not believe God would send him to a church where God’s direction for leadership is ignored. He would see that as a criterion of his calling.

- **D1** – “To be honest, I don't make the connection between my commitment to pastoring through my leadership model. I’m called to pastor, so I'm going to pastor. But to the next question, my leadership role has made me question whether or not I can physically remain in it and mentally in it. Just for the fact that I'm just so exhausted at times.”

“And even that in itself is another way that you are pressured because you know, you're called and so you cannot quit. But yet you are experiencing things where it's really hurting you mentally and in some cases physically. And a word that I don't like, but it works, is you're called and you're in a bad spot, so you feel trapped. And, and that's, that's a terrible place to be.

- **D2** – “My commitment to pastoral ministry is independent of polity.”
- **D5** – “I'm going to always be where I feel like the Lord is wanting me to be ... my commitment to ministry still there. I'm going to find someplace to pastor.”

Being Intentional about Building Relationships will Positively Affect the Model. One pastor was very clear that it is not about the model. Any model will rise or fall depending on the people who work under it. His approach is to be intentional about building healthy relationships so that the ministry can thrive, despite the model.

- **D2** – “But I tend to try to spend more time nurturing the relationship (with other leaders) ... You know, the chairman of the deacons is someone I spend more time with, and we have a good relationship, and that translates into a good working relationship.”
- **D3** – “So, it's really more about again, understanding your role in building good healthy relationships.”

RQ3 for Elder-led Churches

The third research question is the same as that used for deacon-led churches, and focused on the impact the leadership model has on the desire for the pastor to remain in pastoral ministry: RQ3.

How does the churches model contribute to a pastor's desire to continue in the pastoral ministry?

Summary Textural Descriptions

E1 – When asked if this model of ministry has reaffirmed his commitment to pastoral ministry, he said, “Absolutely. I would go so far as to say I would not want to lead under a different model.” He said that his church does not make pastoring difficult. He quoted Hebrews 13:17, where it says, “Obey those who rule over you and be submissive for they watch out for

your souls as those who must give an account, let them do so joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.” He said he is able to lead his church with joy. He went on to say that if he was called to serve under a different model, he would, but would prefer not to. When asked if this model of ministry has made him question whether to remain in ministry, he said, “I think it would be much more difficult for me to want to remain in pastoral ministry if it wasn’t this model.” But as it stands, he said, “I am 100% committed to remain in pastoral ministry.”

E2 – This pastor said because of the conflict he experienced, “You know, I have thought about joining that great resignation group.” But he went on to explain that the season of trial he went through allowed him to see his own faults and led him to question himself. However, through that process he was able to “come out and say, well, this is a call, you know. I didn’t choose this, he chose me. And so, it’s deepened my commitment to my call.” While no one wants to go through a dark season, it ultimately reinforced his commitment.

E3 – When asked if this model has reaffirmed his commitment to pastoral ministry, he said, “Yeah. So, I think it’s it has reaffirmed where I know God wants me to be.” He explained that that when the church extended a call for him to be the senior pastor, “I told them that I wouldn’t be the pastor if we didn’t keep this model.” At his current stage in life, with a young family, he knew he needed others to do ministry with. “I could not be the lead pastor and bear that burden alone.... Yeah, it’s non-negotiable for me right now in this stage of life,” he said. In addition, he believes that when pastors serve by themselves in leadership, they have to fight for themselves. However, with a group of elders, his experience has been that not only do they support each other, but they fight for each other when needed.

E4 – When asked if this model reaffirmed his commitment to pastoral ministry, he replied that it has given him the opportunity to raise up other men to lead the church. He said that

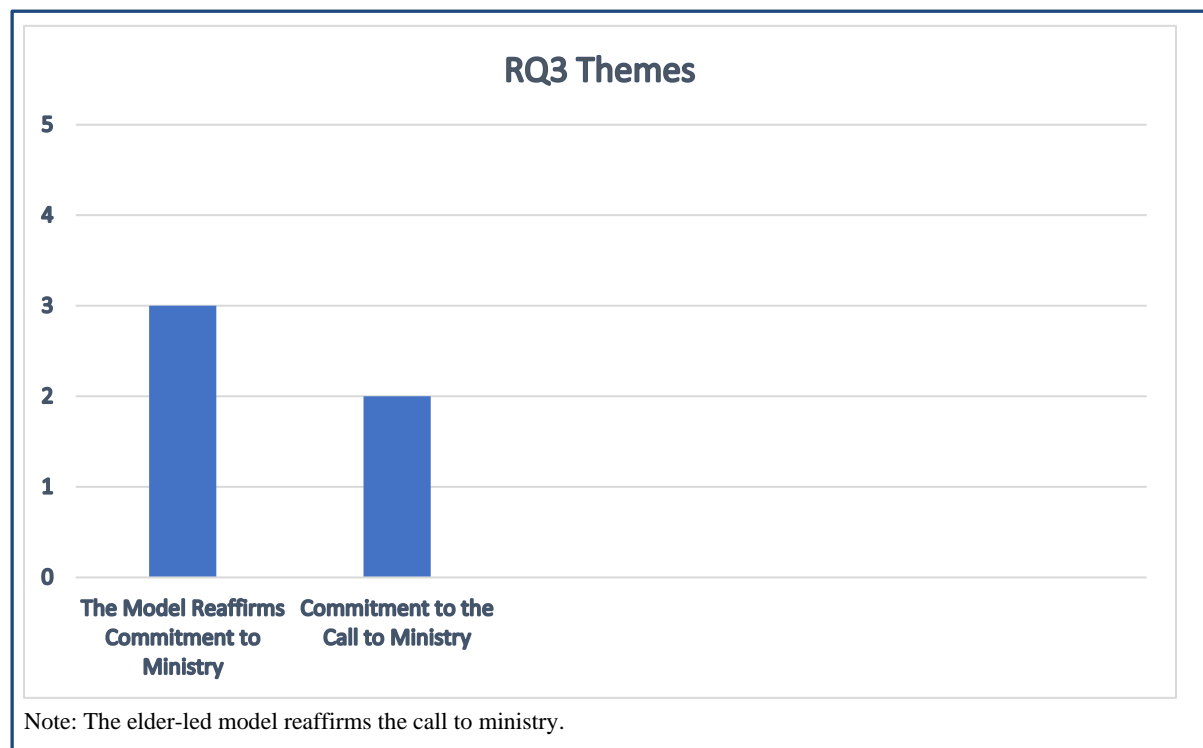
it “gives me the opportunity to do that at close range—hand to hand combat so to speak. So, it’s made me value more the pastoral leadership in the church.... That’s really where I’m focused.”

In addition, he has a few men other than elders whom he is mentoring. They preach for him when he is not in the pulpit on Wednesday nights. “But I’m raising up elders and other men. And I see that with deacons as well as just raising up people to lead the church,” he stated. He believes that raising other leaders from within the church benefits the congregation, explaining, “The more I can teach these guys and invest in these guys, the better off the church is now, and the more secure the church will be in the future.”

RQ3 Composite Themes

Figure 7

RQ3 Themes



The Model Reaffirms Commitment to the Ministry. A common theme for three of the pastors is that the model encourages their commitment to the ministry. For one, ministry is a joy;

for the other, it relieves the burden of doing ministry alone; and for a third, it provides the ability to mentor other men in the ministry.

- **E1** – “I want to remain in pastoral ministry. They don’t make pastoring difficult. It makes me think of Hebrews 13:17, ‘Obey those who rule over you and be submissive for they watch out for your souls as those who must give an account, let them do so joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.’ It’s a joy for me.”
- **E3** – “Yeah. So, I think it's it has reaffirmed, where I know where I know God wants me to be. So, when the church asked me to be the pastor, I told them that I wouldn't be the pastor if we didn't keep this model...”
- **E4** – “I view it, and it may be my age, I view pastoral ministry, that you're raising up men to lead the church, and elder leadership gives me the opportunity to do that at close range. Hand to combat so to speak. So, it's made me value more the pastoral leadership in the church but it really does give you hand to hand, close encounters with men whom you're raising up to lead the church; and again, at my age, that's really where I'm focusing.”

Commitment to the Call. One pastor said he was committed to his call. Throughout the interview, he made it clear that he was no longer committed to the model. However, through his hardship, his calling was made clear. Another pastor said he would not want to work under another model, but if called, he would. Ultimately, he is committed to the ministry.

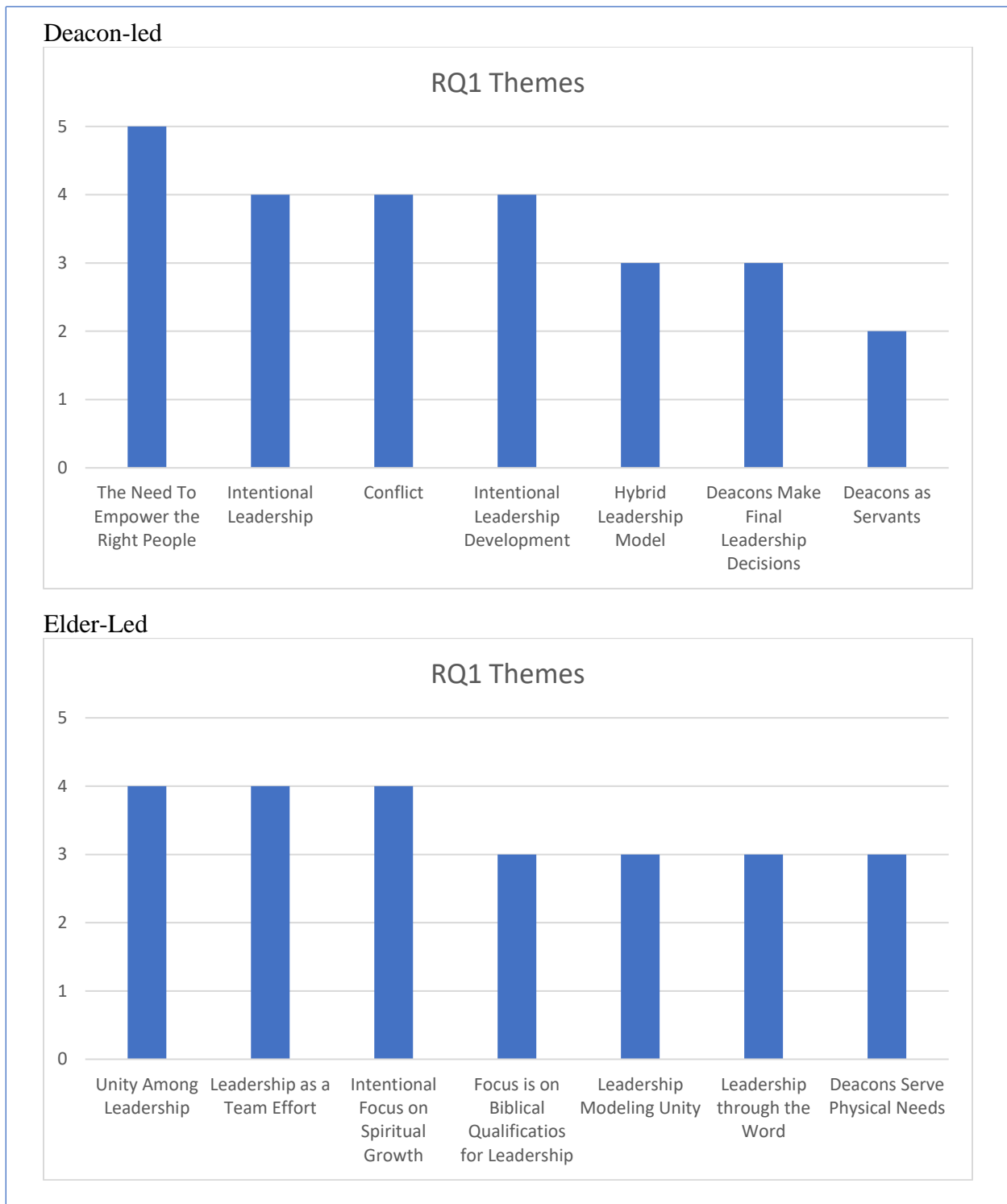
- **E1** – “I wouldn’t say I wouldn’t lead under this model, but I wouldn’t want to I know, it would be much more difficult for me to want to remain in pastoral ministry if I wasn’t in this model. But you think about the possibility of having to go somewhere... I would. I am 100% committed to remain in pastoral ministry.”
- **E2** – But I had to go through those questions to come out and say, well, this is a call, you know. I didn’t choose this, he chose me. And so, it's deepened my commitment to my call.... So, I had to go through a fairly dark season to say no, this is what I'm supposed to be doing.”

Side by Side Comparison of RQ Charts

RQ1 Deacon-led and Elder-led

How has the church’s model of leadership contributed to a pastor’s ability to lead the church?

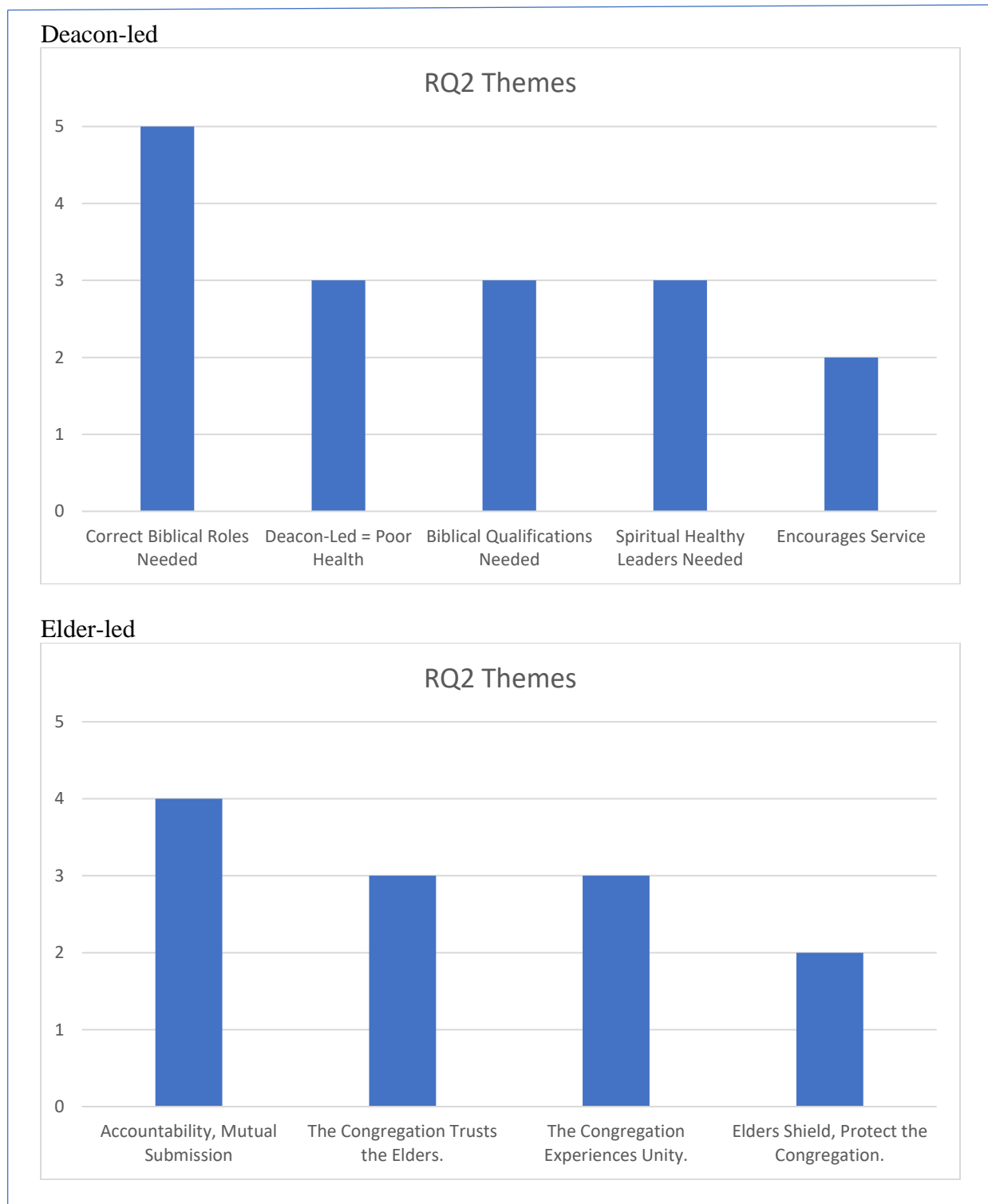
Figure 8



RQ2 Deacon-led and Elder-led

How do pastors perceive the health of the church in a deacon-led/elder-led church?

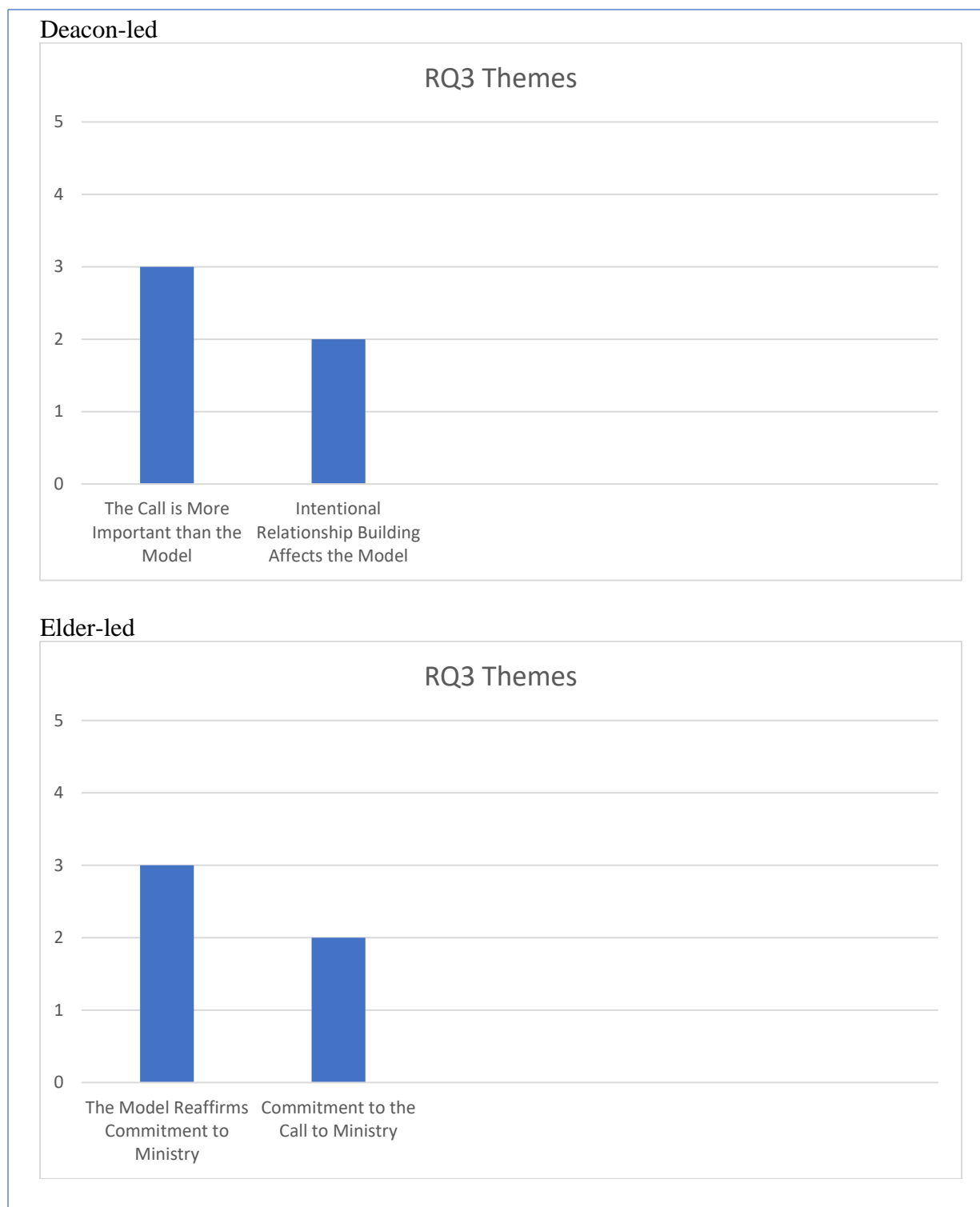
Figure 9



RQ3 Deacon-led and Elder-led

How does the church's model contribute to a pastor's desire to continue in the pastoral ministry?

Figure 10



Evaluation of the Research Design

Former studies have argued that much conflict and forced terminations are a result of practicing a deacon-led model of church governance (Harbuck, 2018; Hicks, 2010; Payne, 1996). This study was unique in that it sought to understand the subject from the lived experience of pastors. As such, it sought to compare how a leadership model impacts a pastor's ability to lead, and how it impacts the health of the church from the perspective of the pastor. Specifically, it sought to discern the difference between a deacon-led church and elder-led church's impact on a pastor's ability to lead a church, and its impact on the health of the church. The final section of this chapter looks at the strengths and weaknesses of the research design.

Strengths

The strength of this qualitative study was found in its ability to explore the real-life experiences of pastors who are currently working under their respective leadership models. As Moustakas (1994) maintained, it assumed that real knowledge can be learned from the experiences of individuals as they interact with their environments. The pastors who participated in this study provided a rich mosaic of experience and wisdom that cannot be communicated through numbers, statistics, or percentages. These men represent a vast multitude of quiet, dedicated servants who labor for the kingdom. Their experiences are born out of the daily toils, struggles, joys, hardships, victories, celebrations, insecurities, and tears that are a result of seeking to lead God's people. As such, what they provided reveals what real ministry looks like. Their experiences are more than just reactions to circumstances and stand as a testimony to the complex nature of ministry in today's churches with all its variations and challenges.

Another strength of the qualitative method is that it reveals not only the real experiences of those interviewed but considers how the pastors themselves are impacted by their

environment. When a rock tossed into the water makes contact, it changes the surface in tangible ways. These pastors have provided a testimony to how a ministry model impacts their ability to lead, and in doing so revealed that the impact goes beyond church structures or organizational models and enters the very heart of who they are, shaping who they have become as servants of the King. No one serving in this capacity as a pastor walks away unchanged by the experience. As such, their stories have provided a wealth of insight into how churches can affect the men called to lead God's people. Through their stories and testimonies of victories, defeats, regrets, and struggle, they have provided the reader with a description of what real, everyday leadership looks like. And in so doing, they have allowed the reader to peer behind the curtain and see the hearts of men who toil on the church's behalf.

Another strength of the qualitative method is the use of open-ended questions, which allows for the rich variation of experiences to be revealed. Each pastor brought unique insights that reveal what leadership looks like in the trenches. As such, each pastor's voice was allowed to be heard. Their experience tells a story that helps the church better understand what it is like to be a pastor in today's churches. For many, church is something they do on Sundays. For the pastor, it is their passion and life calling. Their stories and unique perspectives better humanize the imperfect but devoted men who serve on the church's behalf. Each story is unique and has the potential to lead someone in the church to ask, "What's it like to be my pastor?"

Still another strength of this method is found in the anonymity provided to the pastors interviewed. In revealing the real-life experiences of these pastors, what is real can emerge. One pastor made an astute but sad observation when he said, "I think pastors and churches hide sicknesses by this rotating door of churches and pastors." He went on to say that a church near him had to lie to get a pastor. He observed that there are pastors who, likewise, lie to get a

church. Health cannot be achieved by hiding real sickness. That same pastor said, “And you're foolish not to want to know what's really there.” The bride of Christ needs honesty and transparency. The gospel compels these things. Healing, forgiveness, grace, and transformation come about when honest conversation is allowed to take place.

One final strength of this research design was found in the use of Zoom and Otter.ai. These platforms allowed the researcher a long reach in interviewing pastors from around the country. In addition, the ability to record the audio and have transcripts made by Otter.ai allowed for more freedom in the conversation. While the researcher took notes and made memos during the interviews, he was free to ask questions and explore themes knowing he could go back and scour the record.

Weaknesses

A weakness in this design can be seen in the time needed to conduct interviews. Pastors are busy, making participation in such a study difficult. This can limit those voices that could otherwise add to the rich mosaic of experience detailed in the study, shedding light on the subject. There were a few reluctant pastors who did in fact first agree to be interviewed, but then withdrew for time considerations.

A second weakness was seen in the recruitment process. The researcher assumed that the SBC conventions would be helpful in sending emails out to the pastors in their states. This assumption was made because the researcher has received multiple emails over the years from various SBC entities inviting pastors to participate in various studies. When the state conventions were called, they said that for policy reasons they could not help. They recommended calling the state associational offices. One state convention was gracious enough to send the emails and numbers of all the associations in their state. For other states, the researcher looked up the

associations online. Thankfully, most state conventions provide that information on their websites. The response from associations did not prove to be fruitful. Out of the 26 associations called and emailed, two responded positively. From one of them came the first interview. Through word of mouth, the researcher was able to contact other pastors. They began to network with pastors they knew, and from there came the other eight interviews.

A third weakness was seen in the researcher's own development of the criterion for participation. Assuming a more robust response from recruitment, a very narrow criterion was developed. To allow for more participation, a broader criterion needed to be made. In hindsight, this not only allowed for more voices, but opened the door to seasoned pastors in larger churches who brought a wealth of experience and insight into church leadership. The criterion changes were applied for and approved by the IRB (see Appendix E).

A fourth weakness involves the concept of data saturation. Creswell and Creswell (2018) argued that interviews should be conducted until no more new themes emerge. This would require more interviews to know if saturation had taken place. While the data collected from this study is useful and sheds light on how the leadership model impacts a pastor's ability to lead, church health, and a pastor's desire to remain in ministry, more interviews would be needed to increase confidence in the composite themes and their transferability. In that regard, more time would be needed to conduct interviews, along with a more effective recruitment strategy.

A final weakness can be seen in limiting the study to a purely qualitative design. While the personal stories, testimonies, and experiences of each pastor reveal something important about how church polity effects a pastor, it is unknown if what was revealed is statistically representative of the SBC. A mixed-method study, combined with a solid partnership from

leaders in state conventions and/or associations that help expand the study, would shed better light on the scope of the issue in the SBC.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

This chapter offers conclusions drawn from the data and its analysis in Chapter Four. It explores the implications of the data and considers some applications of that data. In addition, this chapter considers the research limitations and concludes by considering further research.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore and compare the lived experiences of pastors who work under a deacon-led and an elder-led model of church governance. Further, this study sought to understand how pastors perceive that church governance structure impacts their ability to lead, the health of the church, and pastoral retention.

Research Questions

RQ1. How has the church's model of leadership contributed to a pastor's ability to lead the church?

RQ2. How do pastors perceive the health of the church in a deacon-led or elder-led church?

RQ3. How does the church's model contribute to a pastor's desire to continue in the pastoral ministry?

Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications

This study sought to understand the lived experience of pastors who work under both a deacon-led model of church leadership as well as under an elder-led model. The purpose of exploring both models of leadership was to ascertain if there is a real difference in the impact a leadership model has on a pastor's ability to lead, the health of the church, and the pastor's desire to remain in pastoral ministry based on that model.

In this study it cannot be said that X causes Y; or specifically, it cannot be said that certain experiences are the result of a particular model of leadership. However, the experiences of each pastor are real, and through their experience real knowledge about what it is like to work

under those respective models has emerged. In addition, through their experiences, real knowledge about how one conducts leadership under each model has emerged. Below are the conclusions drawn from each research question.

Conclusions of RQ1 for Deacon-led Churches

Research question one sought to understand the impact a leadership model has on a pastor's ability to lead. The answers to the questions reveal both the impact on the pastor as well as the necessary leadership attributes needed to navigate the leadership model successfully. The first conclusion is that the deacon-led model of leadership does not prevent a pastor from leading a church. However, another conclusion is that the model does present challenges for a pastor that he must be intentional to overcome. As such, a third conclusion is that the leadership model does not enhance the ability of the pastor to lead, but ultimately detracts from it. Each conclusion will be considered in turn.

Conclusion one: The deacon-led model of leadership does not prevent a pastor from leading a church. The pastors who worked under this model had a wide range of experience as well as time working under this model. It was clear, however, that to the degree they chose to lead, they were able to lead. Some experienced more success than others, but it appeared that the only barrier to leadership was the pastor himself. Different churches presented different challenges, but to the degree the pastor chose to be a leader, he was not prevented from doing so.

Of the five pastors interviewed, one pastor chose not to lead. Although at the present time he is currently changing his leadership approach, he has spent a significant amount of time curtailing or limiting what he has done by way of leadership. This was done because of his perception of the church's expectations for his leadership. Of the five pastors, he is the only one who experienced emotional hardship by way of burnout and/or mental/spiritual exhaustion. As

discussed in Chapter Two, burnout negatively affects pastors and has a significant impact on their sense of wellbeing. In addition, it was discussed that burnout is a problem caused by excessive time demands, unreasonable expectations, isolation, and loneliness, which results in pastors' personal lives being "severely imbalanced, and their spiritual lives ironically dry...." (Exantus, 2011, p. 23). For this pastor, his perceptions of the congregation's expectations for his role in leadership led to his experience of burnout and fatigue. In other words, the hardships he experienced, by his own testimony, were the result of his own self-imposed limitations based on what he believed to be the church's expectations. As a result, he spent much time second guessing himself, which led to his feelings of burnout and exhaustion. He noted that as he is beginning to make leadership changes, which includes being more assertive and confident in own decisions, those same hardships are beginning to decrease.

Another pastor, who has been at his current church for twenty years and who was very intentional about leadership, has not only experienced success, but also enjoys a healthy congregation where he has great relationships with other leaders. It appears that the experiences of both this pastor and the one described previously create a range that other pastors fall in between. Not everyone is suffering and not everyone has a mountain top experience, but to the extent they are choosing to lead, by their own evaluation they are moving in the right direction.

A practical application of this conclusion is that leadership must be intentional. In that regard, leadership must be seen as a valid spiritual pursuit. In the same way pastors spend time praying and studying the Word, they need to spend time learning about and applying leadership to their church. The pastors who were intentional were either beginning to see positive change or were already experiencing positive change in their church. It must be noted, however, that intentional leadership does not translate into immediate success. Intentional leadership itself can

create challenges for a pastor. Those who were intentional had to face their detractors, and even experienced people leaving because they did not like the leadership of the pastor. But those challenges did not lead the pastors to become passive in their leadership approach. In that regard, a lesson learned through their experience is that *laissez-faire* is not a valid leadership approach. The term comes from economics and communicates a policy of not interfering. As others have noted, however, power abhors a vacuum. It was clear that where a pastor chose to not lead, someone in the congregation stepped in and offered leadership. Not all pastors will embrace the same leadership approach. Indeed, the interviews revealed a range of leadership approaches that enabled the pastors to be effective in their churches; but to be effective, leadership as a valid spiritual pursuit was needed.

A theological implication is that leadership is a spiritual gift, not unlike other spiritual gifts in the body of Christ (Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 12:1, 4-11). This suggests that to receive a call as a pastor is to be called into leadership. The writer of the book of Hebrews expressed this when he said,

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. ... Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Heb. 13:7, 17).

When God calls a man into ministry, he is placing that man into a significant leadership role. As such, learning to lead is as important as learning to preach.

This was discussed in Chapter Two. As the leaders of the church, pastors are called to lead (Akin & Pace, 2017) and must be intentional about their efforts. They lead through teaching, preaching, discipleship, and prayer. In addition, as seen above, because they are placed in a leadership role, they also are to exercise authority over the flock (Heb. 13:7; 17). This is not an

authority to intimidate, but an authority to empower and equip the church for ministry (Eph. 4:11-16). This authority is exercised by teaching and preaching the Word of God. It includes oversight of church members (via discipleship and even discipline), and oversight of the mission of the church. The larger implication is that these responsibilities should be channeled through a leadership strategy that seeks the spiritual growth of the church. Much like a coach that is intentional in his drills during practices, pastors should strategically focus their efforts while teaching, preaching, discipling, etc.

Conclusion two: The deacon-led model presents challenges that the pastor must be intentional to overcome. The first significant challenge is the pastor, as a pastor, must lead alone. This is a significant contrast to the elder-led model where pastors work together as a team in leading the congregation. The pastors who were able to cultivate a good working relationship with other leaders were intentional in team building. This required they actively teach the biblical roles of leadership. Biblically qualified leaders contribute to a functional team.

The pastors who were intentional did not assume other leaders understood their roles. As such, they underscored the need to ensure the men serving were qualified to serve. One pastor lamented that often deacons were chosen for their likeability or for their status in the community. His teaching sought to change that, and at times it was even rejected. One of the disadvantages of the deacon-led model, in this regard, is that once an unqualified person filled the office, the pastor had to work with him despite his lack of qualification. This is a stark contrast to the elder-led model where other elders have authority to remove, as a team, an individual who is not qualified for office. The pastors who experienced this admitted they had to endure a problem person until they rotated off their leadership role.

This, however, poses another challenge for pastoral leadership under this model. The pastor does not have the authority to remove a problem person. However, the pastors who were able to overcome this difficulty cultivated a healthy leadership team and were very intentional in building good relationships. They went out of their way to cultivate relationships with other leaders for the purpose of having influence over them. One pastor with a long tenure admitted that in the first decade of his tenure, he was challenged as he built a healthy leadership team. Once the team was built, and the leaders clearly understood their role and functioned accordingly, things worked great.

Another pastor who spoke about the need to be intentional in influencing others said he was very strategic in how he approached that task. Like the pastor mentioned above, he builds relationships for the purpose of influence. While there is wisdom in that, his explanation came very close to being Machiavellian. This contrasted sharply with the elder-led model where elders had influence by virtue of working together as a team. When they presented a vision, the congregation was more ready to accept the vision by virtue of the fact that it was coming from a group of men who had been working and praying about it together. In the elder-led churches the congregations trusted their leaders to lead. However, the pastors who were able to influence others in the deacon-led model had to approach people individually and with great intentionality over a period of time, winning them over to an idea or a ministry objective they had for the church. This was a critical observation. In the deacon-led churches, the pastors had to spend much time focusing on individual people, building teams for one ministry objective at a time. In contrast, because the elder-led churches already had a team that worked together, they were able to spend more time focusing on ministry and organizational objectives. In other words, in the

deacon-led churches, pastors had to focus on individual objections from multiple people concerning a single ministry objective before the ministry objective could become a reality.

However, a practical application is that team building is just as important as providing leadership in the church. The pastors who were experiencing a degree of success under the deacon-led model did not overlook this aspect of leadership. They understood that the burden fell on them to accomplish this necessary task and they sought to build healthy teams. Those who had strong teams were intentional in that task. Another implication is that under this model, unity in the church is the result of intentional team building. During the interviews, one of the themes that emerged was that conflict is commonly associated with this model. However, the pastors who overcame conflict did so by building a healthy leadership team. In most cases, under both models, when the leadership team experienced unity then the church did as well. The contrast with the elder-led model is that the elders did not have to work as hard at building a team, and they did not have to build relationships for the purpose of influence within the team. However, under the deacon-led model, once the pastor developed a healthy team, unity followed.

A theological implication is that church is a team effort. As noted in Chapter Two, the church works as a body (1 Cor.12:12-27). A human body is composed of systems that work together to function as a healthy organism. In the same way, for there to be life in the church, every member must be working together as a single “organism.” As a God-called leader, the pastor must take it as his responsibility to build a healthy team so the church’s body can function as God intended. Those who were intentional about building teams experienced unity.

Conclusion three: The deacon-led church model does not enhance the ability of the pastor to lead but ultimately detracts from it. Despite the previously mentioned observations, the pastor who has experienced a lot of success under this model admitted that to get to the place

where the church was experiencing healthy growth, he had to labor intensively. Part of the shortcoming is seen in the observation that pastors under this model sought to build relationships for the purpose of influencing other leaders. Instead of walking together with other leaders in serving the Lord, in many cases the pastor was required to spend a significant amount of time, sometimes even years, in winning over other leaders so they would follow. While this type of leadership is important and at times necessary, it is only one of many leadership tasks for which a pastor is responsible. It should not take years to get the church to the point where they will follow the leadership God has provided. As one pastor noted, this model encourages factions within the church. As such, unity is not a product of the model, but can be achieved despite the model. Those who achieved that unity spent a significant amount of time cultivating relationships so they can lead others to follow instead of using that time leading others to grow in Christ and leading the church to fulfill the Great Commission.

An implication is that while leadership is necessary, it should not be imbalanced towards a single task or goal. It was noted above that leadership should be seen as a spiritual pursuit. However, when the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to describe the leadership role of the pastor, the emphasis was on leading the church to grow into Christlikeness and equipping the church for ministry so it can accomplish the great commission (Eph. 4:11-16). Nowhere in scripture are leaders given advice on how to get the church to follow. It is assumed they will follow (Heb. 13:7, 17). The pastor's primary leadership task is not convincing disciples of Christ to be on mission for Christ but equipping disciples to be on mission for Christ. Imbalanced leadership detracts from the mission of the church.

Conclusions of RQ1 for Elder-led Churches.

RQ1 sought to understand the impact a leadership model has on a pastor's ability to lead. The answers to the questions reveal that the elder-led leadership model has a positive effect on a pastor's ability to lead. The first conclusion is that the model promotes teamwork, which enhances the ability of the pastors to lead. The second conclusion is that the elder-led model positively impacts the congregation. Each conclusion is considered in turn.

Conclusion one: elder-led leadership promotes teamwork, which enhances the ability of the pastors to lead. Whereas the deacon-led model puts the pastor in the position to lead alone, all four pastors were clear that they have a team that works together in leading the ministry. As discussed in Chapter Two, when the church was born in the book of Acts, Jesus revealed that it would spread to the entire world (Acts 1:8). As it spread across the region, these local congregations of Christians would be guided by a group of godly leaders (Getz, 2003). As these leaders led the church to fulfill the Great Commission, they did so by working as a team (Hartwig & Bird, 2015). It was also noted in Chapter Two that the word "elders" is always in the plural. In every case mentioned, they lead together as a team. Further, because of scripture's emphasis on teams, the office of the elder leads best when it practices shared leadership (Strauch, 1995). Shared leadership includes the idea of a council of equals (Strauch, 1995). The role of the elder is one of collective leadership in which each elder equally shares the position, power, and duty of the office with other elders. Using this leadership style, each elder on the team is given the opportunity to have an impact on other team members, which motivates them to work together to reach organizational goals and objectives (Robinson, 2018). Teams that employ shared leadership also have more cohesion, trust, and consensus than teams that follow other

leadership theories, which is an extra advantage of this leadership style (Northouse, 2019). This was evidenced in the elder-led churches.

As discussed previously under RQ1 in deacon-led churches, one of the characteristics of the deacon-led church was the need for pastors to network with other leaders in the church, with both deacons and chairpersons of committees, to lead the ministry. This included spending time one-on-one with those leaders, “strategically” influencing them to support a single ministry objective at a time. This aspect of leadership was altogether missing in the elder-led model. The elders who work together were not spending time building a team around a ministry objective. Instead, as a team, they worked together to formulate the vision they had for the church, and when it was ready, they presented the vision to the congregation. As such, they spent more time focused on organizational objectives. Of the four pastors, one did experience conflict in this process. He noted that it is important for the elders to be aligned, which his team was not. For the other three, they had no such conflict. However, they did spend time discussing ideas. Sometimes those discussions became debates. But as one pastor noted, elders who have soft hearts will seek what is best for the church. Of note, the elders did not just spend time discussing ideas but were intentional about praying together as they led.

Another characteristic of teamwork seen in the elder-led churches is that each elder has other elders to whom they are accountable and who support them. One elder said that each elder in the church has a pastor. So, while they lead and pastor the congregation together, they themselves have others who minister to them. Two of the elders spoke about how the elders confess sins to each other and share their struggles with each other. One said they were intentional on practicing transparency. This characteristic was not seen in any of the deacon-led churches. The benefit for the elders, and ultimately the church, is that as they support and

minister to each other, they encourage spiritual health, which leads to better overall church health.

As a result, one of the components that was missing with the elder-led pastors was a tension that seemed to exist in some of the deacon-led churches. Among the elders, each elder is seen as an equal. The pastors who served in the deacon-led model did not have the same experience. Even the pastors who were seen as the leaders communicated a tacit tension that seemed to be a product of not always having clear lines of authority. Even for the pastors who were seen as leaders, it was necessary to get “buy-in” from other leaders, usually multiple leaders. In this regard, one of the pastors who has strong relationships with other leaders in his church said that the deacon model promotes dysfunction because, “committee-led and deacon-led churches lead to turmoil and turf war issues, which causes division, which is a threat to the unity of the body.” For three of the four elder-led pastors, this tension did not exist. The elders did not have to spend time politicking an issue to gain support.

An implication is that people who see themselves as a part of a team are more likely to experience greater freedom in the pursuit of team objectives. Even when the elder-led model slowed down decision-making as the team worked through an issue, the team was free to focus its attention on whatever ministry objectives they deemed necessary to pursue. In this regard, there is a difference in how pastors expressed leadership under both models. While both practiced leadership, the expression of that leadership was not the same. The pastors under the deacon-led model spent a significant amount of time influencing others and team building. And the teams built were constructed one ministry goal at a time. Because the team was already in place under the elder-led model, they were now free to focus on the objectives of the ministry, which seemed to enhance the overall health of the church.

Conclusion two: The elder-led model positively impacts the congregation. Because the elders were focused on the ministry objectives, they spent more time considering the impact the ministry has on the membership of the church. This was another contrast that stood out between the models. Those in the elder-led model spoke about how they spend a lot of time thinking about where their people are spiritually. They are intentional about building disciples and about teaching the Word of God to the congregation. Some of the elders, as teams, work on sermons together so everyone is clear on the direction they are taking as a church. They also spend time thinking about and teaching how current trends in the culture impact the church. In this regard, the elders in one church spoke about writing papers so the membership can be aware of how to think biblically about different subjects current in the culture. As a team, they were intentional about leading the members of the church to grow in Christ. In that regard, they had clear goals for the spiritual growth of the members of their church.

An implication, both theological and practical, is that leadership teams in the church should be goal-oriented for the spiritual growth of its members. The biblical mandate given to leaders suggests this very thing. As discussed in Chapter Two, Ephesians chapter four gives a clear job description for leaders:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (Eph. 4:11-16).

This is not to suggest that pastors under the deacon-led model do not think about these things.

However, only two of the five pastors interviewed were intentional about making spiritual

growth a goal, and they did so as the pastor. They did not speak about working with other teams to foster spiritual growth within the church as an organizational goal. In contrast, in the elder-led model, all four pastors were intentional about speaking to this issue as a necessary goal of leadership.

Another way this model positively impacts the church was seen in the attitude of the elders. They all had a healthy sense of self-awareness as a team. Except for one church, where an elder intentionally split the church, most of the elders were aware that how they functioned as a leadership team would become a model for the congregation to follow. As such, they were intentional about modeling things like unity, transparency, and mutual submission. One pastor under the deacon-led model was clear that his leadership would become a model for others to follow, and he led accordingly. However, under the deacon-led model, this never came up as a goal for leadership teams. However, it was a major theme for the pastors in the elder-led model.

An obvious implication is that leadership teams do not function in isolation from the rest of an organization. To be a leader is to assume a mantle of influence. This was discussed in Chapter Two as well. Manala (2010) argued that to succeed in influencing others, the pastor/elder has three primary (comprehensive) roles to fulfill (Manala, 2010). These include the pastor as leader, manager, and servant leader. All three work together to accomplish God's will for the community of faith. As the leader, the pastor seeks to influence others so that the church will learn to trust, follow, and depend on the head of the church (Christ) so they can effectively do the Lord's will themselves (Manala, 2010).

An implication is that to achieve self-awareness, leaders should be intentional about learning self-awareness. This is not a characteristic that always comes naturally to people, even to gifted leaders. But recent research into emotional intelligence suggests that this is a

characteristic that can be learned (Goleman, 2017). Of note, is that with one exception, the elder-led churches appeared to have some level of this important characteristic. A team environment where members have equal authority seems to encourage team members to be more aware of the environment their team creates for the organization. In contrast, in deacon-led churches, where deacons and pastors compete for influence, this attribute of self-awareness seemed to be missing. As such, learning about emotional intelligence and how it impacts environments should be a goal of team building for churches. As leaders lead, members will follow and will usually mimic the example provided by their leaders.

A Concluding thought: In the deacon-led churches, conflict was common. In contrast, for the elder-led churches unity was common. A significant difference between the two models is the component of teamwork amongst equals. Important to the elder-led churches is that the team was a group of elders. In the deacon-led churches, pastors may work well with a team of deacons; and indeed, they may see themselves as a healthy team. But as one pastor under the elder-led model pointed out, ministry was his life. He had a passion for ministry. Thankfully, he was able to share that passion with the other elders on his team, and they in turn had the same passion. In the deacon-led churches, a group of deacons functioning as elders may successfully guide a church. But the testimony of pastors working under this hybrid model suggests that the focus of deacons, even those functioning as elders, is different from that of the pastor. It is not difficult to discern that their focus is different because their calling is different. Elders are not called to be deacons and deacons are not called to be elders. God calls and equips each office differently, and both are needed. It appears, however, that the elder-led model better benefits a congregation because men with the same calling are serving the same purpose together. As such, “as iron sharpens iron,” so each elder encourages the other elders in their God called mission

(Proverbs 27:17). As such, their mutual enthusiasm becomes contagious and spreads to the rest of the congregation. When a pastor is not in such an environment, he is still going to be influenced by the men around him. However, because their focus is different (working with deacons), his enthusiasm and passion can become diluted by a lack of mutual encouragement. The net effect is that the congregation loses the God-called passion that elders, as a team, can bring to the church.

Conclusions of RQ2 for Deacon-led Churches

RQ2 sought to understand the impact the leadership model has on the health of the Church. The answers to the questions reveal that the impact on the overall health of the church tends to be negative. The first conclusion is that for health to occur, pastors need to focus on developing healthy leaders. The second conclusion is that healthy leadership is more important than the leadership model. Each conclusion will be considered in turn.

Conclusion one: For church health to occur, pastors need to focus on developing healthy leaders. In RQ1 conflict was a theme that seemed to affect the church in some way. Four of the five pastors experienced conflict at some point as a result of the model. During the interviews it was clear that most of the conflict was caused by the wrong people occupying leadership roles. It was for this reason that in RQ2, three pastors expressed their belief that the model itself directly contributes to dysfunction in the body. This was a testimony given by pastors who are not currently experiencing conflict.

One reason these themes emerged is because under this model the biblical roles of each office become blurred. As a result, the effectiveness of each office is diluted. Too often under this model, deacons function as elders. This was discussed in Chapter Two. Because of two streams of influence during the 19th century, the office of the deacon was changed from focusing

on serving the needs of the congregation to functioning as the de facto leaders in the church, usually at the expense of the biblical office of the elder. For RQ1, three pastors described their leadership in those terms. In contrast, this was not an issue in elder-led churches. As a result, in RQ2, the main theme that emerged was correct biblical roles are needed for the church to experience health. The churches that were experiencing health were intentional about ensuring deacons served the biblical function of deacons and elders the same, even if there was only a single pastor. Another theme in RQ2 was the need for leaders to be biblically qualified. Hence, a factor that contributes to poor health is a lack of emphasis on biblical qualifications for leaders. When men who would otherwise make good deacons assume the functional role of the elder, they are operating in a role they were not called to nor equipped for.

A practical application is that pastors must make teaching biblical roles and the qualifications for those roles a priority. In the RQ1 conclusions, it was recognized that team building is a necessary function of the pastor. However, to build effective teams, the people who occupy leadership roles must be biblically qualified to do so. One of the temptations in deacon-led churches is to put people in places of leadership simply because they are available. However, one is hard-pressed to find an organization outside of the church that operates that way. One pastor said that his method for leadership development was to “get people on the bus.” Only through experience has he learned that the church is better served when he instead teaches people “to drive the bus.”

According to the same pastor another temptation is to choose people for leadership because they “appear” to be growing spiritually. He offered no metrics to define what that looks like. However, this researcher has observed over the years that simply attending church sometimes becomes synonymous with spiritual growth. Another pastor was frank when he

observed that some people are chosen for leadership because they are liked by others or hold positions of prominence in the local community. However, this overlooks the fact that in scripture qualifications are not suggestions. And in the sixth chapter of the book of Acts, when the first deacons were called into duty, a major factor in their selection as deacons was the reality that they were fruitful in the things of God. They were called to serve because they already stood out of the crowd for their dedication, service, and love for the Lord as well as the members of the church. Thus, godly character and fruitfulness were the bases of their call, not popularity or influence in the larger community.

A theological reality, however, is that leadership qualifications in the church are defined by God. As discussed in Chapter Two, an unintended consequence of changing the office of the elder is that a church now opens the door of leadership to those whom God has not called to lead. However, the biblical system of church governance is crucial because it directly influences who is eligible to lead the church (Merkle, 2008). In traditional SBC churches, deacon-led churches have developed a committee system where both members and leaders of various church committees make important decisions for the church. However, these members and their leaders are not held accountable for the qualifications set forth for leaders (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1). Under these circumstances the church could be led by people who are not biblically qualified to lead. Often this happens when a church prioritizes a candidate's professional achievements over his personal character, spiritual maturity, and family life (Merkle, 2008). Other factors, such as how leaders are picked (majority vote, for example) are affected by changing the office as well. Therefore, when people who do not meet the biblical standards for leadership are allowed places of influence, the church suffers, and the mission of the church is compromised (Merkle, 2008).

When those qualifications are otherwise ignored, the message communicated is that scripture is not the rule of faith for the church. An important implication is that a prequalification for a church to have healthy leadership is for the church to recognize the primacy of scripture over every area of life (1 Timothy 3:16). Only a firm commitment to the authority of the Word by a congregation can ensure it begins to move in the direction of health. Leaders must stand on the authority of Word and not allow the biblical qualifications for leadership to be diluted. Another implication is that the church that does not recognize the authority of the Word as the rule of faith in one area will most likely find their beliefs erode in others as well.

Conclusion two: Healthy leadership is more important than the leadership model. The churches that focused on developing biblically qualified leaders, under both models, experienced unity and overall church health. A theme in RQ2 was the need for spiritually healthy leaders in the church. As noted in Chapter Four, spiritual health is not the same as biblical qualifications. A man may be biblically qualified for an office, but currently not spiritually healthy. The same is true for elders. People can enter a season where their spiritual health suffers for various reasons. However, when these people are in leadership, they have the potential to negatively affect the spiritual health of those they lead.

For one pastor, his goal was to develop healthy relationships and healthy leaders. When discussing the health of his church, the metric he used was healthy relationships amongst leadership. This theme emerged under the elder-led model as well. Having spiritually mature people is necessary for church health to occur. Included in that idea is having leaders who also meet the biblical qualifications for leadership. But it was emphasized that leaders who are spiritually healthy, faithfully walking with the Lord, submitting to his leadership, and as a result

to one another, are free to follow Christ. Healthy leaders who are following Christ will produce other healthy church members who also desire to follow Christ.

A theological implication is that true leadership happens when followership takes place. The best biblical leaders, whether elders or deacons, are those who are actively following Christ. The biblical term for one who follows is, “disciple.” The word “disciple,” as discussed in Chapter Two, means a follower, specifically a follower of Jesus. Those who follow Jesus are no longer concerned with their own agenda in the church. What they desire is for the Lord’s will to be done (Rom. 12:1-2). A leader who is spiritually healthy and who is following the Lord will display to others what that looks like, and those who follow will mimic their example (1 Cor. 11:1).

A practical application is that pastors should have a plan for making disciples in the church. Often churches have plans for missions and evangelism, but they are not always as intentional at developing models of discipleship for their members. When asked about the metrics that contribute to church health, several pastors under both models spoke about the necessity for intentional discipleship.

Conclusions of RQ2 for Elder-led Churches

RQ2 sought to understand the impact the leadership model has on the health of the church. The answers to the questions reveal that the impact on the overall health of the church tends to be positive. The conclusion is that the elder-led model promotes unity, and it does so because the elders make unity a priority for themselves as leaders and for the church.

First, the elders make unity a priority for themselves as leaders. With only one exception, a common theme with the elder-led churches was that the elders were intentional on having healthy relationships among the elder team. As elders they are genuinely concerned about each

other as fellow brothers in Christ, and as such, they apply the gospel to their relationships as a team. To the extent that they live the gospel in front of the congregation, they are modeling for the church how the gospel can shape relationships in healthy ways. This is like the point previously mentioned in discussing RQ1. However, they are not modeling the gospel for the sake of modeling it; they are modeling the gospel because they are intentional about living it. The pastors admitted that this does not come without its challenges, but the key is intentionality.

It should be noted that unity does not mean agreement on every issue. One pastor said that their unity was the absence of conflict. Though they may not always agree, they still had harmony. Specifically, he said they had “relational harmony.” This does not mean they do not disagree about things. They do, but they don’t allow disagreement to become conflict. In that regard, another pastor said this about disagreeing with others: “...so even if I disagree with you, the way in which I disagree with you must honor Christ, because I love Christ more than my own way, more than my own presentation.” He said that if there is conflict among leaders, it is because, “he loves himself more than he loves the church. He loves his perspective, and that’s going to create disunity. And I’m telling you, that’s the issue every single time.”

The practical way they focused on unity was by practicing mutual submission. This was the number one theme for RQ2 for elder-led churches. As discussed previously in RQ1, because the elders see themselves as equals, they have the freedom to minister to each other and to hold each other accountable when needed. One elder gave testimony to how the other two elders have at times needed to hold him accountable. He said he was grateful that they felt like they could speak to him about an issue, stating he was glad they spoke to him before the issue “went off the rails.” This was also the same pastor who emphasized how each elder has two other pastors who support each other.

Being intentional about mutual submission makes the gospel come alive for the church the elders lead. As the elders were intentional about unity among themselves as leaders, so too they were intentional about fostering unity in the congregation. Of note, when asked about metrics that make for a healthy church, the elder-led pastors emphasized unity. One pastor said that unity must come before anything else. Another pastor said this was the most important metric. This contrasted with the deacon-led churches. While they too wanted unity, they were not as intentional about making unity an organizational goal first for the leadership and then for the congregation.

A theological implication is that unity reflects the gospel. The absence of unity then reveals an absence of the gospel. If a church is experiencing conflict, maybe a question leaders should ask is, “when did we stop living the gospel?” To the Corinthian church, Paul was concerned about the factions that developed. They evidenced a lack of unity. In his second letter to them, he said,

For the love of Christ controls us (compels us, so NKJV), because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. ... Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:14-15, 17-20).

The factions within the church would not end until the church understood three things. First, they needed to understand that they were reconciled to God through Christ. Second, they needed to understand that because they were reconciled to God, they had been given the ministry of reconciliation. And third, their ministry of reconciliation can only be effective when they understand that they are to “no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and

was raised.” In short, Paul was calling on the church to live the gospel. When leaders model the gospel, the congregation is more apt to learn from their behavior.

Another implication is that if leaders truly model the gospel, they will be vulnerable about how sin affects them. The implication is that when a pastor declares he needs the gospel as much as anyone, he is then admitting that he too is a sinner who needs others to minister to him. Leaders need to acknowledge their vulnerability to sin, and they need others to minister to them. One of the problems in deacon-led churches, where there is only one pastor, is that there is a danger where members might seek to place the pastor on pedestal. But when their pastor sins (and all do to some degree), then those churches become either angry or disillusioned. The problem is that often those pastors have no one to minister to them. However, if those churches can acknowledge that their leader(s) needs a savior as much as they do, that will go a long way towards creating an environment where the gospel can flourish. By virtue of the elders practicing mutual submission, this model then encourages two important and necessary attributes of biblical leadership: pastors under this model are more apt to be vulnerable and transparent with churches about their own sin; and as a result, they allow other elders to minister to them. This creates healthy leaders, and it ensures the leadership team models what the gospel looks like in practice for the church.

Conclusions of RQ3 for Deacon-led Churches.

The third research question sought to understand the impact the leadership model has on the desire for the pastor to remain in pastoral ministry. The answers to the questions reveal that the leadership model has no real impact on a pastor’s desire to either stay or remain in ministry. Instead, the pastor’s call to ministry is what compels him to stay. As such, the conclusion for this section is that success is defined by faithfulness to Christ in fulfilling that call.

At least one pastor was very satisfied working under this model, but he admitted to having struggles in the past. However, he was clear to point out that he was intentional in focusing on the people who would be leaders under this model. His example demonstrates that where one is determined to be faithful to the call and continue in the work, despite the difficulties, success can be experienced. An implication, then, is that faithfulness to Christ itself is an indicator of success. While there are pastors like the previously mentioned who are currently experiencing a growing ministry, there are also pastors who have remained faithful to their call but who have not seen growth. Can it be said they are not successful?

When asked about metrics for health, one pastor pointed out that often the definition of success for pastors, and even for the SBC, is defined in numbers and stats. Indeed, pastors who see many baptisms are often touted as success stories. Every pastor wants to see such things. However, there are biblical examples of faithful servants who saw no such metrics of success yet remained faithful to their calling. Jeremiah is an example of a man who was called and yet became known as the weeping prophet. Instead of seeing multitudes come to faith, he saw many people respond with hostility to his ministry. Despite the hostility of the those he was called to serve, he was determined, indeed compelled, to stay true to God's calling on his life. Other examples can be seen in Hebrews chapter eleven. Often referred to as the Great Hall of Faith, this chapter of scripture defines faithfulness to Christ as one true metric of success. Consider the following:

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets-- who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went

about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated – of whom the world was not worthy – wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth (Heb. 11:32-38).

Such a description would not land one on the who's who of rising stars in our current denominational life. Too often, however, in our Western culture, churches define success by measurable metrics that are comparable to business models. This was discussed in Chapter Two. Secular theories often focus on the “what” question, seeking to ascertain outcomes, where Christian leaders are called to focus on the “why” question, seeking to understand their motivation for leading and/or serving (Huizing, 2011). Hence, there is a danger in starting with the wrong question. General leadership studies often begin by first establishing desired outcomes which are measured in sales numbers, acquisitions, stock prices, and other metrics of measurable growth (Huizing, 2011). Christian leadership, on the other hand, must have an entirely different focus. Instead of focusing on measurable outcomes, Christian leaders are called to focus on such things as spiritual growth and transformation (Eph. 4:11-16). While numbers can be important, they do not always translate into kingdom values. Therefore, the different questions (what versus why) lead to different understandings of what it means to be successful. As such, biblical success is seen in a determination to remain faithful to God's call, no matter the outcome. The ultimate metric for success will not be seen in how many people a pastor leads to Christ but heard in the words of Christ when he says, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master” (Matt. 25:23).

Conclusions of RQ3 for Elder-led Churches.

RQ3 sought to understand the impact the leadership model has on the desire for the pastor to remain in pastoral ministry. The answers to the questions reveal that the leadership

model has a positive impact on a pastor's desire to remain in ministry. The conclusion is that the elder-led model of leadership reinforces a pastor's desire to remain in ministry.

Under the deacon-led model, a pastor's desire to remain in the ministry was defined by his calling. The same was true for two of the pastors under the elder-led model. However, three of them were clear that the model enhances their ability to lead and as such they believe the model itself creates the environment where that is possible. In contrast, four of the pastors under the deacon-led model were committed to the ministry despite the model. Of those five, three were moving in the direction of elder-led; and after working under both models, one said he preferred the elder-led model. One pastor under the elder-led model was moving away from that model. However, they were moving in the direction of congregationalism, which all the other churches, both deacon-led and elder-led, currently practice.

An implication is that the leadership model a church practices matters. Under the deacon-led model, it was said that the model is less important than the call. Those pastors were committed to their call above a church polity. However, those under the elder-led model, while agreeing that their call was more important, did not retreat to their call to justify staying in the ministry. Three of them were clear that they do not want to serve under a different model, and then spoke about how the model positively affects their ability to do the job God has called them to do. One pastor under the deacon-led model said he also experienced joy under his model, but also pointed out that it took over a decade to get to that point in his current church. Such a testimony was not heard from those under the elder-led model.

A theological implication is that revelation matters in all areas of church life. There are some who argue that the Bible does not present a blueprint for church polity. It can be agreed that the Bible leaves a lot of room for churches to define how they organize certain things.

However, the biblical record seems clear that the church has two offices: the office of the deacon and the office of the elders. Furthermore, the biblical record seems to be clear that elders lead and deacons serve. It also seems to be clear, as discussed in Chapter Two, that the biblical record never speaks of elders in the singular.

Patterson (2004) pointed out that in Revelation chapters two and three Jesus spoke to the “angels” of the churches, and he interpreted that as being the pastors, in the singular, of each church. While the text may be descriptive of that reality, and that is open for debate, it is not prescriptive. In contrast, there are several texts in the book of Acts and in Paul’s epistles that are prescriptive for church leadership. There is not a single instance of Paul instructing the church to install an elder, in the singular, to be the leader of the church. The word is always used in the plural, referring to a single church.

Further, there is not a single instance in scripture where we see deacons serving as elders as many do today. During the interviews, one pastor said, “...if deacons are not deaconing, then who is? And deaconing is so important to the church that it needs to be done; and thus, there has to be a clear delineation of elders and deacons.” Scripture makes a clear distinction. It is up to churches to follow that distinction in practice. And it appears that when that distinction is followed the pastor’s ability to do the job of leading the church is enhanced.

The writer of the book of Hebrews said,

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. *Let them do this with joy* and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Heb. 13:17, emphasis added).

For one pastor in the elder-led model, that was his testimony. He was able to lead with joy, and he believes that has much to do with the model he works under. It stands to reason: Christ died for the church, and through his sacrifice and resurrection he created the church. Just as he

designed our salvation, should we not consider that he has designed the church? To follow Christ in salvation is to experience a “joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory” (1 Peter 1:8).

Should we not expect this to be true when serving Christ in leadership? Fidelity to truth yields joy. This is not to argue, however, that elder-led churches do not experience conflict, nor that deacon-led churches cannot experience joy. Both were seen during the interviews. It is simply to suggest that when God’s blueprint for leadership is followed, things work better than when it is not followed. These interviews appear to confirm that assertion regarding God’s design for leadership.

Research Limitations

This is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four. However, during this research, two significant limitations presented themselves. First, the number of pastors interviewed was not the total number sought for this research. The design called for five pastors under each model. Only four were interviewed under the elder-led model. Ideally, a minimum of five were needed for each. In addition, there was no opportunity in the research period to conduct more for the purpose of discerning if saturation was attained. The researcher initially had enough elder-led churches, but two pastors retracted their desire to participate after they initially agreed. The researcher made several attempts to contact other elder-led pastors, but to no avail. This was the product of another weakness. The recruitment could have been strengthened by having more avenues from which to recruit pastors. The researcher made some assumptions about recruitment that turned out to be false. It was believed that, specifically, SBC state conventions would assist in the process. When that did not materialize, interviews were gained by word of mouth from those who participated. Thankfully, this provided a good range of pastors with various

backgrounds and experience to participate, but a more robust recruitment plan might have proven more fruitful.

Further Research

There has been little research on how church polity affects the office of the pastor. A few D. Min. dissertations have been conducted over the course of 20 years that argue the deacon-led polity has a negative impact on churches and pastors. This study implemented a qualitative phenomenological approach to discern if that was true. Qualitative research is helpful in hearing the voices of people and understanding their lived experience. This study sought to hear their voices and discern if a real difference exists between elder-led and deacon-led models of church polity based on their experience. However, with any research approach, there are limitations and weaknesses that limit the scope of transferability. To strengthen the scope of the research this section identifies four recommendations for further research.

The first recommendation would be to expand the study to include statistical analysis on two fronts. First, an analysis of pastoral departures over a set period might generate trends in pastoral movement. In Chapter Two it was reported that control issues are the main cause of conflict, and the reasons pastors leave a church. Another component of Chapter Two was that it focused on anecdotal evidence, which lends itself to qualitative analysis. However, statistical trends might show patterns of movement which paint a different picture than that of anecdotal evidence. For example, given a range of years, a trend may be observed that suggests pastors were dismissed from their posts, or otherwise left because of a factor that has nothing to do with church control issues derived from church polity. Another area of statistical analysis might be found in having pastors and other leaders in the church fill out an online survey that seeks to discern specific reasons for conflict and, where appropriate, to determine a pastor's premature

departure from a church. An analysis that looks at two sides of the story might generate more specific data about why conflict occurs in our churches among leaders. As such, a mixed-methods research design would be a helpful complement to the qualitative design found here.

A second recommendation would be to study the impact leadership studies have on improving the overall tenure and health of pastors. A mixed-methods study that compares pastors who have extensive training in leadership skills and theory could be compared with those who have not had such training. One conclusion from this study is that any limitations these pastors believe they have concerning their ability to lead are self-imposed. Leadership can be rejected by those a leader seeks to influence, but that rejection does not prevent a pastor from being intentional about leading. Those pastors who experienced growth and a healthy congregation were intentional about their leadership. To what extent, then, does leadership training prepare a pastor to enter that role?

A third recommendation would be to discern how the teaching of leadership roles by the pastor impacts the overall health of the church as well as the pastor's ability to lead. This study suggests that the pastors who were intentional and proactive about teaching their congregations the biblical roles and qualifications of each office experienced less conflict and better overall church health. This could be conducted through a mixed-methods study that looks for specific content of teaching as well as the testimony of those who received that teaching. How has their view of leadership changed by virtue of that training? And how has the church benefited as well?

A fourth recommendation would be to conduct a mixed-methods study that focuses only on the members of churches. A comparison of church members from both models of church polity could be compared. In Chapters One and Two a study was cited claiming 43% of church members surveyed indicated that at some point during their church life they witnessed major

conflict between the pastors and deacons. A study that focuses on overall satisfaction with their church and church leadership might yield fruitful data independent of those who are in leadership.

A fifth recommendation would be to ask whether the polity a church practices impacts church member's understanding of the gospel. In Chapter Two it was discussed that the role a pastor assumes can influence a church member in significant ways. It was also suggested that in many deacon-led churches pastors see their role as more of a chaplain who is there to meet the needs of the congregation. One pastor in this study fell into that category. Specifically, if the pastor sees it as his role to be an encourager instead of an equipper, the effect can lead church members to shift their focus inward. In Chapter Two, an entire section was devoted to individualism in the church and the negative impact it has on the church. Either a qualitative method or a mixed-methods study could explore how or if a given church polity encourages an inward focus verses an outward focus of the gospel.

Summary of Conclusions

This research suggests that the polity practiced by a church does impact a pastor's ability to lead as well as the health of the church. In comparing the deacon-led model with the elder-led model from the perspectives of the pastors, it was observed that the deacon-led model does not prevent a pastor from leading, but presents challenges not seen in the elder-led model. In contrast, the elder-led model seems to enhance a pastor's ability to lead.

While pastors are required to provide leadership under both models, under the deacon-led model that leadership is expressed differently. Specifically, the deacon-led model requires more intentionality in team building and relationship building for the express purpose of leveraging influence. Pastors who work under this model can experience growth and success, but this

appears to be to the degree that they are able to get buy-in from other leaders in the church. In contrast, under the elder-led model, as pastors work with a team, their focus is less on seeking to gain influence and more on the objectives of ministry.

Furthermore, the elder-led model appears to enhance the ability of pastors to lead by virtue of the fact that they work with a team of not only like-minded individuals, but with men who share the same calling and passion of leading the church. They can minister to each other as they work together in leading the church. In contrast, the pastors in the deacon-led model are required to lead alone. They do not have the same ministry support that the pastors in the elder-led model enjoy. In addition, even for the pastors who build healthy relationships with the deacons, under that model there is a qualitative difference in the relationship between pastor and deacon versus elder and elder as seen in the elder-led churches. The elders work together as equals; and as one pastor said, they do so as friends who are working together to move the church forward. The pastor and deacons, while they may have a good functional relationship, did not appear to have the same level of unity, trust, and transparency that the elders enjoyed.

As far as the impact the church polity had on the health of the church, the testimony from four of the five pastors working under the deacon-led model is that conflict seems to appear at some point, to some degree or another, because of the model. Except for one church, every pastor either experienced direct conflict because of the model or came to the church after a conflict which was the result of the model. In contrast, while one elder-led church experienced significant conflict, the other three were untouched by it. Those pastors instead spoke about the unity that defined the church community as whole. This was a consistent theme with the elder-led churches. Also, trust in the leadership was a common theme under that model.

Another observation that impacts the health of the church is that in the elder-led churches there was a clear division of labor. Elders led and deacons served. As such, both offices were functioning under their biblical mandates and the church benefited from their respective service. In contrast, under the deacon-led model, deacons often functioned as elders, blurring the distinction between the offices. A consequence is that men who are not called to be elders nor biblically qualified to do so have assumed the role of leadership in the church. This had a negative impact on deacon-led churches.

Another distinction between the two models is that under the elder-led model, the elders as a team had significant influence over the congregation by virtue of their interaction as a team. They were able to demonstrate things like unity, transparency, and mutual submission to the church. The net effect on the congregation was very positive. As the elders modeled these things to the church, they became tangible characteristics of the congregation. In contrast, this was not seen in the deacon-led churches. While at least one of the pastors was very intentional about modeling these things, this was not done as a team. Not a single pastor under the deacon-led model talked about how the unity between the pastor and deacons positively influenced the congregation to live out those characteristics.

In addition, while the impact on a pastor's desire to leave the ministry was not tangible under either model, the impact on the part of a pastor to continue in the ministry was reaffirmed by the elder-led model. Under the deacon-led model, pastors were committed to their call, but some of them were committed to their call despite the model. And, ultimately, while both models can experience things like unity and growth, this study suggests that there is a noticeable difference in how the polity practiced by a church impacts a pastor's ability to lead and the overall health of the church.

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APPENDIX A – IRB Approved Consent Form
Consent

Title of the Project: A Phenomenological Study of Congregational Health and Pastoral Retention Based on a Church’s Leadership Model

Principal Investigator: Travis L. Biller, Doctoral Candidate, Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. Those who are eligible for this study include pastors who have been in their position for at least two years and who work with a deacon board to lead the ministries of the church or with an active elder-led form of leadership. All subjects will pastor Southern Baptist churches. Participants will be pastors from churches that have 700 members or less, have a yearly budget of between 150k to 1.5 million, and who have been an established church for at least 10 years. In addition, it will be required that participants have a Bachelor of Ministry, or a Master of Divinity or equivalent from an accredited seminary. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to learn about the effect church polity has on both pastoral retention and church health from the perspective of a pastor. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to explore and compare the lived experiences of pastors who work under a deacon-led and an elder-led model of church governance. This study seeks to understand how the leadership model of a church impacts a pastor’s ability and desire to lead in their particular context; and to understand from their perspective how the leadership model they work under impacts the health of the church.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in an audio-recorded interview via Zoom that will take no more than 1-2 hours. All interviews will be recorded via Otter.ai.
2. Review the transcript provided by otter.ai to check for accuracy. Review times will vary depending on the person reading the transcript but should not take more than 30 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society:

Former studies reveal that conflict and forced terminations of pastors are common in ministry. It has been argued that much conflict and forced terminations are a result of practicing a deacon-led model of church governance. As such, gaining an understanding of the impact of a church's leadership model may prevent unnecessary conflict and forced terminations. Further, it may help both pastors and churches alike navigate the leadership challenges they face. Many pastors report feeling unsupported in their ministry role. Feelings of isolation can lead to frustration, burnout, and loss of purpose, which, in turn, can lead to misunderstandings and conflict. Gaining an understanding of the leadership model's impact can help pastors better understand their circumstances, leading to a healthy response. Also, understanding the impact of a church's polity on its pastor may help a congregation better understand their pastor, and equip them to better minister to their pastor, which might have the result of reducing frustration and burnout amongst clergy. Further, understanding the impact may help congregations evaluate the leadership model employed by their church, perhaps resulting in a restructuring of their leadership model to reflect fidelity to a more biblical model.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with codes.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies and/or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data (transcripts) will be stored on a password-locked computer that is kept at the home of the researcher. After three years all electronic records will be deleted.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer until participants have reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and then deleted. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Travis L. Biller. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [REDACTED] or at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Donald Bosch, at dbosch@liberty.edu.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

APPENDIX B – Research Questions

RQ1. How has the church’s model of leadership contributed to a pastor’s ability to lead the church?

IQ1. What is the current leadership model you are working under?

IQ2. Describe your perceived role under this leadership model.

IQ3. How has the model you are working under contributed to your ability to lead and pastor the church?

IQ4. Do you feel like you have the freedom to lead the church under this model of leadership? If so, what does that look like? If not, describe how that freedom is curtailed.

IQ5. Under this model, do you have a good working relationship with other leaders in the church? If yes, please describe how the model contributes to those relationships. If not, describe how the model detracts from those relationships.

IQ6. Does this model contribute to teamwork with other leaders? If so, how? If not, how does it detract from working as a team?

IQ7. Do you feel like you are a valuable team member? If so, what does that look like? If not, why do you not feel like a valuable team member?

IQ8. Do you feel like a subordinate who must get permission from others to lead? If so, what does that look like?

IQ9. Have you experienced conflict under this model of leadership? If so, how does the model contribute to this conflict?

IQ10. Are you satisfied working under this model of leadership?

RQ2. How do pastors perceive the health of the church in a deacon-led or elder-led church?

IQ1. Does this leadership model contribute to the health of the church? How so?

IQ2. Does this leadership model lead the church to be unhealthy? How so?

IQ3. Do you consider your church to be healthy? Why?

IQ4. Do you consider your church to be unhealthy? Why?

IQ5. What factors make for a healthy church?

IQ6. What factors make for an unhealthy church?

IQ7. Does your model foster unity within the church? How so?

IQ8. Does your model generate conflict within the church? How so?

IQ9. How does your model contribute to growth, both numerically and spiritually?

RQ3. How does the church's model contribute to a pastor's desire to continue in the pastoral ministry?

IQ1. Has this model of leadership reaffirmed your commitment to pastoral ministry? How so? Please explain.

IQ2. Has this model of leadership made you question whether or not to remain in pastoral ministry? How so?

APPENDIX C – Recruitment Letter

Dear pastor,

I hope this finds you well. I understand that you are busy and have many demands upon you. I hope you will take a few minutes to consider what I am asking. I am a fellow pastor and doctoral candidate (Ph.D) at the Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University. I am conducting research to learn about the effect church polity has on both pastoral retention and church health from the perspective of you, the pastor. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to explore and compare the lived experiences of pastors who work under a deacon-led and an elder-led model of church governance. The purpose of my research is to understand how the leadership model of a church impacts a pastor's ability and desire to lead in their particular context; and to understand from their perspective how the leadership model they work under impacts the health of the church. I am writing to invite you to join my study.

Those who are eligible for this study include pastors who have been in their position for at least two years and who work with a deacon board to lead the ministries of the church or with an active elder-led form of leadership. All subjects will pastor Southern Baptist churches. Participants will be pastors from churches that have 700 members or less, have a yearly budget of between 150k to 1.5 million, and who have been an established church for at least 10 years. In addition, it will be required that participants have a Bachelor of Ministry, or a Master of Divinity or equivalent from an accredited seminary. Participants are being asked to participate in a one-on-one, audio-recorded interview via Zoom. It should take approximately one to two hours to complete the interview. Transcripts of the interview will be recorded via otter.ai, and participants will be asked to review them to check for accuracy. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but participant identities and their churches will not be disclosed in the published study.

If you meet the above criterion and are willing to participate, please contact me at [REDACTED] or email me at [REDACTED] to schedule an interview. If you meet my participant criteria, I will work with you to schedule a time for the interview. Also, if you meet the study criteria a consent document will be emailed to you one week before the interview takes place. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

Sincerely,

Travis L. Biller
Pastor, Immanuel Baptist Church & Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

[REDACTED]

APPENDIX D – Permission Letter

Dear _____,

I am a pastor and doctoral candidate (Ph.D.) at the Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University. I am conducting research to learn about the effect church polity has on both pastoral retention and church health from the perspective a pastor. The title of my research project is, “A phenomenological study of congregational health and pastoral retention based on a church’s leadership model.” Specifically, the purpose of my study is to explore and compare the lived experiences of pastors who work under a deacon-led and an elder-led model of church governance. The purpose of my research is to understand how the leadership model of a church impacts a pastor’s ability and desire to lead in their particular context; and to understand from their perspective how the leadership model they work under impacts the health of the church.

I am writing to request your permission to utilize your email database list of pastors in your association to invite them to participate in my research study.

Participants will be asked to participate in an interview that will take 1-2 hours and also to review their interview transcripts for accuracy. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please respond by email to [REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Travis L. Biller
Pastor, Immanuel Baptist Church & Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University
[REDACTED]
travisbiller@aol.com

APPENDIX D – IRB Application

Provided as a separate document.

APPENDIX E – IRB Modification Approval Letter**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

October 2, 2023

Travis Biller
Don Bosch

Re: Modification - IRB-FY23-24-114 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF CONGREGATIONAL HEALTH AND PASTOR RETENTION BASED ON A CHURCH'S LEADERHSIP MODEL

Dear Travis Biller, Don Bosch,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has rendered the decision below for IRB-FY23-24-114 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF CONGREGATIONAL HEALTH AND PASTOR RETENTION BASED ON A CHURCH'S LEADERHSIP MODEL.

Decision: Exempt - Limited IRB

Your request to make the following changes has been approved:

1. Reduce participants' time in their positions from at least three years to at least two,
2. Revise the required memberships of their churches from "approximately 300 active members or less" to "a membership between 100 active members to 700,"
3. Revise the budget requirement from "a yearly budget of at least two-hundred and fifty thousand dollars" to "between 150k to 1.5 million," and
4. Revise the age of the church from "have been an established church for at least forty years" to "at least ten years."

Thank you for submitting your revised study documents for our review and documentation. **For a PDF of your modification letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study Details page. Finally, click Modification under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. If your modification required you to submit revised documents, they can be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.** Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Thank you for complying with the IRB's requirements for making changes to your approved study. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions. We wish you well as you continue with your research.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office