

# The Duties of an Elder

## *a traditional understanding*

Simply stated, an elder is an assistant to the pastor in meeting the spiritual needs of a congregation. He is not a replacement for the pastor, but a second set of eyes, ears, and hands for the pastor in ministering to the congregation. He is not given to carry out the duties of the office, such as are set in Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession: “Our churches teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church, or administer the Sacraments, without a rightly ordered call” (the word for *teach* in this article refers to the preaching office, whereby the doctrines of the church are taught to the congregation through preaching).

From the early years of the history of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to the present, congregations have established an office called “elder” (*Vorsteher*<sup>1</sup>) to assist the pastor in carrying out the functions of the office of the public ministry (*Predigtamt*<sup>2</sup>). The duties of this office in synodical congregations generally indicate that elders work closely with the pastor in his divinely assigned responsibility to feed the whole congregation with the Word of God and to watch over it for the sake of its spiritual welfare. Elders serve primarily to assist the pastor in shepherding and overseeing the entire flock of God at their place. They frequently assist in certain aspects of the conduct of the public worship service, such as in the distribution of Holy Communion. In certain emergency situations elders may be asked by the congregation to perform, on a temporary basis, certain distinctive functions of the pastoral office (e.g., lead public worship, deliver a sermon).<sup>3</sup>

It should be stated that it is doctrinally sound for an Elder (or anyone) to Baptize in cases of emergency, but the baptizer should, with all due diligence, report this Baptism to the pastor. It should also be stated that in the emergency situation noted in which an elder would deliver a sermon, he would not be the one who has prepared the sermon; in any event, having an elder deliver a sermon is not a preferred practice in light of AC XIV.

Most constitutions also give an outline of the duties of an elder. We could list an elder’s duties thus (there is no order or hierarchy):

- represent the needs of the pastor to the congregation
  - an elder is to act as an advocate of the pastor to the congregation; speaking on his behalf especially in those times when the pastor is unable to or unwilling to
  - he is to see that the pastor’s needs are met, both temporally/physically and spiritually
    - this includes seeing that the congregation fairly compensates the pastor and regularly reviews this compensation
    - this includes being a source of spiritual care for the pastor and encouraging him to seek pastoral guidance should he deem it necessary
- represent the needs of the congregation to the pastor
  - an elder is to act as an advocate of the congregation to the pastor
    - normally the congregation and pastor can dialog to meet needs, and an elder should see that this happens
    - in some cases, however, members may be more comfortable addressing a concern to an elder to bring to the pastor
  - he is to see that the pastor meets the needs of the congregation
    - this includes seeing that worship is conducted in an orderly manner
    - this involves bringing strengths, weaknesses, problems, omissions, as well as constructive suggestions to the pastor in an evangelical manner (and be willing to work with him in these areas)
      - ensuring that the pastor is not teaching false doctrine, intentionally or not
      - ensuring that the pastor does not willfully neglect his official duties
      - ensuring that the pastor does not lead a scandalous life
- like the pastor, be an example of Christian living and conduct
  - while a temporal leader of the congregation (cf. an officer), the elder is also a spiritual leader of the congregation, while the president, vice-president, treasurer, etc. are strictly temporal leaders
  - if a matter is brought to him in confidence, he shall keep that matter confidential
    - however, there is no seal on the elder’s office (such as on a pastor’s), so in matters of law and public safety, an elder is encouraged to make report to the proper authorities after encouraging the member to do the same, and informing them that he will do so
    - he may inform the pastor that a member has an area of concern without divulging what that concern is
    - he is to encourage the member to approach the pastor with any and all concerns
- assist the pastor in ministering to the congregation
  - again, this includes seeing that worship is conducted in an orderly manner
    - see that the proper orders are used, that the times and practices build up and edify the body of Christ
    - in cases of emergency, he may lead a worship service, though he should not preach and may not administer the Sacrament (cf. AC XIV)
  - this involves visiting the members of the congregation
    - he is encouraged to have a plan independent of the pastor’s
    - he is encouraged to have a plan in conjunction with the pastor’s (though he need not have both, see previous bullet point)
  - this involves noting member’s church attendance and use of the Sacraments, being cognizant of frequent/consecutive absences and non-use
  - this includes seeing that dealing with matters of grievances, complaints, and sins follow the patterns established in Matthew 18:15-20 (for private matters) or Galatians 2:11-21 (for public matters)

Some constitution also give additional duties to elders. For instance, some congregations may charge her elders with fostering support for missions and charities, determining what emphasis needs to be made in continuing stewardship, and submitting a proposed budge to the president (he would have to work with the treasurer and financial secretary in these matters). In most cases, these additional duties fall under the elder’s office in the realm of being a temporal leader (an officer) and not necessarily that of being a spiritual leader.

1 Vorsteher: provost, dean, superintendant, chief or head (German)

2 Predigtamt: ministry (German)

3 CTCR Report, 1995, The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices