

Leadership at Elmbrook Church: Women as Elders

Over the course of nearly sixty years, Elmbrook Church has grown from a group of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ that has naturally and necessarily adjusted, adapted, and refined our models of ministry. We have not, and will not, change our commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture and God's plan of salvation through faith alone by the work on the cross by Jesus Christ alone. Consistent with a value of listening to God's voice, careful change, and after many years of detailed review and discussion, the Council of Elders (COE) recommends a church constitution change regarding the position of women as members of the Elmbrook Church Council of Elders. Unlike our Statement of Faith, which states what we believe in matters of doctrine, our church constitution outlines our practices in the daily outworking of church life.

What's the issue?

To that end, the Elmbrook COE is recommending that the congregation consider a constitutional change which will permit women to be elders, should they be called, freeing women to use their gifts in this position of leadership. For this to occur, the COE proposes the removal of the word "male" from qualifications for elder in our church constitution.

How did we get here?

The COE desires to appoint the most mature, godly, and gifted persons to open positions on the Council whether male or female. At present, our constitution limits membership on the Council to a "minimum of twelve male members". In 1997, the COE invited several women onto the council to serve as "Elder liaisons". As liaisons to the council, their voices are heard and respected, although these women do not have constitutional voting rights. The COE believes it is scripturally supported to have women as elders, with full rights as their male counterparts.

The Elmbrook COE recognizes the issue of women as leaders and elders in the church is a complex issue. Many brilliant, Spirit-filled scholars, each committed to correct and accurate interpretation of the Scriptures, land on both sides of interpretation of the Scriptures regarding this issue. As both constituents are present at Elmbrook, we are deeply committed to respectful dialogue that preserves the unity of the body in this important matter, but not a matter concerning salvation and striving for holiness. We ask that all approach the topic with humility and generosity of spirit.

Over decades, the Elmbrook COE has devoted significant time and attention to this issue and in recent years, re-committed to wrestling through Scripture and making a recommendation based on collective conviction informed by Scripture. Careful review of the Scriptures and recently discovered historical understanding of the relevant texts reveals a convincing argument and interpretation that is supportive of women as elders, and more broadly, supportive of women in leadership at every level within the church.

What does Scripture say?

Under the authority of Scripture, the COE believes several core convictions lead us to a commitment of embracing women as elders at Elmbrook. They are summarized below and explained in greater detail in supporting documents available to all.

1. **God created both men and women in His image and gifts them equally.** We believe that leadership and, therefore, positions on the COE should be based on gifting whether male or female. The fullest expression of the church is found when men and women lead and minister side by side. The New Covenant restores God's creation intent that men and women operate and relate collaboratively in ministry (Joel 2:28-29).
2. **God champions the leadership of women in the New Covenant community.** The divisions that formerly divided men and women are now abolished (Galatians 3:26-28) and there is no favoritism regarding gender roles. Examples in Scripture indicate women were in leadership roles in the New Covenant community during a time during which the cultural norm was an appalling treatment of women, who were considered second class citizens. In contrast to the culture, Jesus was radical and revolutionary in his respect for, and treatment of women. Consequently, in the New Covenant community, there are examples of women serving as apostles, teachers, deacons, and prophets. Examples of a woman or women as an apostle (Junia, Romans 16:7), prophets (Acts 21:9; 1 Corinthians 11:4-5), teacher (Priscilla, Acts 18:24-28) and deacons (Pheobe, Romans 16:1). There are also examples in the Old Testament where God chose women to exercise leadership over Israel such as Deborah (Judges 4). Other examples of women in leadership in the Old Testament include Huldah (2 Kings 22) and Miriam (Exodus 15).
3. **The terms for pastor, elders, and overseers in Scripture are interchangeable** (Acts 20:17-18:28; I Peter 5:1-2). Elmbrook Church decided on this important issue of women in leadership in 1976 when we ordained the first woman pastor to teach, minister, and oversee men and women. Since then, there have been many gifted women who have pastored, led and preached at Elmbrook Church to thousands of men and women, in various ministries.

4. **The Scriptures that forbid women from being leaders or teachers in the church, including the positions of elder, are culturally bound and situation dependent, and not a directive from God for all times.** Several passages appear to restrict the role of women as leaders and elders over men (e.g. 1 Tim 2:11-12, 1 Cor 14:34, Titus 2:3). All biblical principles and directives must take into account their immediate contexts and then, after careful study of those contexts, the principles are developed into application points for our day. After careful study, we believe these and other scriptures that address issues of leadership, teaching, and headship, are interpreted most accurately when the context (including the original language, culture, and specific situation) are considered.
5. **Women as elders and leaders in the church is a non-salvation issue and is unlike the essentials of the faith.** Examples of the essentials of faith are the authority of Scripture, the Trinity, the unique roles of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and God's plan of salvation through Christ alone. Other examples of non-salvation issues include the perspectives about the timing of, and events surrounding, Christ's return, the spiritual gift of tongues, modes of baptism, and particulars about the Lord's Supper. Issues of "church polity", or how churches are organized and led, are never included in the essential creeds of the Church. In fact, the variety of understandings within the Christian Church worldwide should show us that we approach such an issue with deep humility.

Now what?

During the summer months leading to our annual congregational meeting there will be ample opportunity to engage on this issue.

Please note the following dates: July 16-17 Jason will be preaching on "God's Revolutionary View of Women". Then, on August 12-13 Dr. Scot McKnight, New Testament Scholar and prolific author will be preaching on women in leadership in the church in all services across our campuses.

We anticipate a vote of the congregation at the above referenced August 26-27 congregational meeting.

For more information and personal study on this issue, please see the supporting document, "Women in Leadership as Elders at Elmbrook Church" which is attached to this letter.

If you have questions please email the Council of Elders at elders@elmbrook.org

Women in Leadership as Elders at Elmbrook Church

Elmbrook Church Mission and Values

Our mission is to help people become rooted in Jesus and released to His mission.

The following values demonstrate how we uniquely do this at Elmbrook: We listen to God's voice; we dive in with people; we go beyond the walls; we open our hands; we forge new paths; and we multiply at every level.

The following document provides background information from the Elmbrook Church Council of Elders (COE) about the leadership of women in the church. The COE recommends a change to the constitution that permits women to be elders, should they be called, freeing women to use their gifts in this position of leadership. The COE believes that such a change is supported by Scripture and is more consistent with our primary mission and core values. The document is organized by first considering some background and rationale for women as elder's (A), followed by common questions and answers about the recommended change (B), and recommendations for further reading (C). At the end of the document are appendices that address biblical passages that encourage the leadership of women (Appendix A) and those that appear to restrict the leadership of women (Appendix B).

A: BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

To fully embrace our mission and core values at Elmbrook Church, we strive for shared leadership of men and women to serve and freely use their God-given spiritual gifts to build the church. This is possible at almost every level of Elmbrook Church, but not within the Council of Elders (COE). Currently the Elmbrook Church constitution limits membership on the Council to a "minimum of twelve male members", although several women serve on the COE as "Elder Liaisons". As liaisons to the council, their voices are heard and respected, although these women do not have constitutional voting rights. The COE believes it is scripturally supported to have women as elders, with full rights as their male counterparts.

After many years of review, discussion and prayer, the Elmbrook Church COE recommends a church constitution change to permit women who are called to be elders. The COE desires to appoint the most mature, godly and gifted persons to open positions on the Council whether male or female. For this to occur, the COE proposes the removal of the word "male" from qualifications for elder in our church constitution. Our church constitution outlines our practices in the daily outworking of church life and is unlike our Statement of Faith, which states what we believe in matters of doctrine.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Over several decades, the Elmbrook COE has devoted significant time and attention to the issue of inviting women onto the COE. Hence, this is not a new or recent issue for the COE. In recent years, the COE re-committed to prayer and wrestling through Scripture on this issue to make a recommendation based on collective conviction informed by Scripture. Careful review of the Scriptures and recently discovered historical understanding of the relevant texts reveals a convincing argument and interpretation that is supportive of women as elders, and more broadly, supportive of women in leadership at every level within the church.

Over the years, Elmbrook Church has grown in its appreciation of and use of both men and women in ministry. Men and women participate in ministry to children and youth. Men and women teach. Men and women serve on the pastoral team and other subsets of the staff. In fact, Elmbrook called its first woman pastor over four decades ago and over those years has had many different women pastors

who have preached, ministered and led important areas of ministry within the church. The pastoral team has flourished with the breadth and balance of young and older members, male and female. Everyone choosing to attend or join Elmbrook knows that we are part of a church that gives such responsibilities to both men and women. In other words, there is nothing new about men and women in ministry and leadership together at Elmbrook.

In 1997, the Elmbrook COE realized that a dozen or so men sitting in a room, deliberating on policies that affect thousands of men and women in the church, just was not a wise way to operate. Therefore, the elders invited several women to act as liaisons to the Council, to attend the regular monthly meetings and other specially called meetings, and to fully participate in all the discussions and deliberations of the Council. It has been obvious to the Council that the inclusion of women with men has been a marked improvement in the way we function.

We believe that because (1) we know that God gifts both men and women for ministry in the church; (2) we have operated with women on the pastoral team for over 40 years; and (3) we recognize the indispensable value of women participating in the discussions and decisions of the elders; that we should show consistency and not limit the COE from considering women for elders.

In outlining the COEs recommendation, it is helpful to first communicate principles to which we are committed:

1. *The Authority of Scripture:* We have not, and will not change our commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture and God's plan of salvation through faith alone by the work on the cross by Jesus Christ alone. Inerrancy means that we believe there were no errors in the original manuscripts of the biblical text. We are committed to the Eternal Truth of Scripture (Colossians 2:8). We believe Scripture has the final authority in every area of our lives personally and corporately as a church. While our recommendation is informed by culture and diving deep into the Scriptures, our final authority is the Bible.

2. *Stewardship of Spiritual Gifts:* (addressed more fully below in point 1). Briefly, we believe that every believer has a stewardship responsibility to use his or her individual spiritual gifts to build the church and that it would be wrong to prevent a person from using these gifts based on gender.

3. *Unity of the Church:* The Elmbrook COE recognizes the issue of women as leaders and elders in the church is a complex issue with differing opinions. Many brilliant, Spirit-filled scholars committed to correct and accurate interpretation of the Scriptures, land on both sides of interpretation of the Scriptures regarding this issue. As both constituents are present at Elmbrook, we are deeply committed to respectful dialogue that preserves the unity of the body in this important, but not a matter concerning salvation and striving for holiness. We ask that all approach the topic with humility and generosity of spirit and that we do not allow this issue to divide us.

Women as elders and leaders in the church is a non-salvation issue: With these above principles in mind, the Elmbrook Church COE believe that the issue of women as elders and leaders in the church is a non-salvation issue. This is unlike the essentials of the faith that include authority of Scripture, the Trinity, the unique roles of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and God's plan of salvation through Christ alone. Other examples of non-salvation issues include the perspectives about the timing of, and events surrounding, Christ's return, the spiritual gift of tongues, modes of baptism, and particulars about the Lord's Supper. Issues of "church polity", or how churches are organized and led, are never included in the essential creeds of the Church. In fact, the variety of understandings within the Christian Church worldwide should show us that we approach such an issue with deep humility.

There are two primary positions on the issue: (a) complementarian and (b) egalitarian.

- a. The **complementarian** view believes men and women are in equal standing before God, but different in their roles within the Church and Family.
- b. The **egalitarian** view believes that men and women are equal in standing before God and their roles are not different due to gender alone, but due to gifting, training, and abilities.

We, the Elmbrook COEs have chosen to adopt the egalitarian view based on our interpretation of the Scripture.

WHAT DOES SCRIPTURE SAY?

Under the authority of Scripture, the COE believes several core convictions lead us to a commitment of embracing women as elders at Elmbrook, and in church leadership in general.

1. God created both men and women in His image and gifts them equally.

We believe that leadership and therefore, positions on the COE should be based on gifting whether male or female. The fullest expression of the church is found when men and women, lead and minister side by side.

God has given every believer specific spiritual gifts that are to be used for the building of the church (1 Peter 4:10, Romans 12:6-8, Ephesians 4:11-12). Every believer has a stewardship responsibility to use his or her individual spiritual gifts to build the church. We believe it would be wrong to prevent a person from using these gifts based on gender. We strive to be proactive about empowering, equipping and encouraging every male and female Christian to use their gifts in ministry (Matthew 25: 14-30) and working side by side to build the church.

The New Covenant restores God's creation intent that men and women operate and relate collaboratively in ministry (Genesis 1: 28, Joel 2:28-29). God intended that men and women work cooperatively (Genesis 2: 18). This partnership however, was destroyed at the Fall leaving men and women with a struggle for power (Genesis 3:15-16). Importantly, Christ came to reverse the relational impacts of the Fall and restore intimate relationship and communion with Him and with each other. This means that in the New Covenant relationship is one where men and women rule side by side in obedience to Christ.

On the day of Pentecost, the fire of the Spirit fell upon the small band of believers gathered in Jerusalem. They spoke openly and boldly of the wonders of God. Peter found the explanation in the Old Testament prophet Joel: this was the last-days work of God himself:

*"I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy ...
Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy." (Acts 2:17-18. See also Joel 2:28).*

Two divine gifts came together in Peter's explanation: the *work* of the Spirit in giving gifts to God's people, and the *word* of the Spirit in prophetic utterances. He quoted Joel as twice telling us that God would give this gift to *both* men and women. It seems so straightforward that "both men and women" - are servants of God who would prophesy.

2. God champions the leadership of women in the New Covenant community.

"So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:26-28).

The divisions that formerly divided men and women are now abolished (Galatians 3:26-28) and there is no favoritism (Romans 2:11) or gender roles. Examples in Scripture indicate women were in leadership roles in the New Covenant community during a time which the cultural norm was an appalling treatment of women, who were considered second class citizens.

In contrast to the culture, Jesus was radical and revolutionary in his respect for, approval, recognition and treatment of women. Although the testimony of women at that time was disregarded and men were not permitted to speak to women in public, Jesus told parables about the women (Luke 18: 1-18), women were chosen to be the first witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus (John 20; Matthew 28; Mark 16) and Jesus publicly spoke truth to the woman at the well in Samaria (John 4:1-42). Furthermore, Jesus had women in his travelling team. A pivotal moment in the ministry of Jesus was when He treated Mary as a disciple, allowing her to learn at his feet (Luke 10:38-41), sending a strong message to the church. The attitude and actions of Jesus are consistent with the New Covenant ushering in new attitudes and customs concerning the intrinsic value and beneficial involvement of all ethnicities, socio-economic levels, and for this discussion, women.

The New Testament clearly shows that women were involved with men in ministry. In the New Covenant community, there are examples of women serving as apostles, teachers, deacons and prophets. Examples of a woman or women as an apostle (Junia, Romans 16:7), prophets (Acts 21:9; 1 Corinthians 11:4-5), teacher (Priscilla, Acts 18:24-28) and deacons (Pheobe, Romans 16:1).

There are also examples in the Old Testament where God chose women to exercise leadership over Israel such as Deborah (Judges 4). Other examples of women in leadership in the Old Testament include Huldah (2 Kings 22) and Miriam (Exodus 15) to name a few.

The Elmbrook COE's position is that scripture provides evidence and a directive which encourages women to use their gifts to teach men and women and to exercise authority. At the end of this document there are passages highlighting verses where women are encouraged to lead and serve (Appendix A).

3. The terms for pastor, elders and overseers in Scripture are interchangeable.

In the New Testament, both Paul and Peter use the terms 'pastor', 'elders' and 'overseers' interchangeably (Acts 20:17-18, 28; 1 Peter:51-2).

Acts 20:17-18, 28

"...Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders [Greek: presbuteroi] of the church. When they arrived, he said to them: '...Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [Greek: episkopoi, sometimes translated 'bishops']. Be shepherds [Greek: poimen, or 'pastors'] of the church of God..."

1 Peter 5:1-2

"To the elders [presbuteroi] among you I appeal as a fellow elder...Be shepherds [poimen, pastors] of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers [episkopoi, bishops]...eager to serve...examples to the flock."

Three words are used in each of these passages addressing church leaders: *elders, pastors, and overseers* that are more usually translated in church hierarchical structures as 'bishop'. The vocabulary however, is interchangeable: the three different Greek words in the texts for elders, pastors, and overseers describe, for both Paul and Peter, the same group of people. At Elmbrook, we use the word *pastor* for those we have recognized and called in a full-time paid capacity to equip church members for service, while *elder* describes a ruling function. Paul describes two functions of an elder, when he writes to Timothy in a letter of pastoral advice about church organization and practice: *"The elders who direct the affairs of the church are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is teaching and preaching (1 Timothy 5:17)."*ⁱ

Some elders are tasked with administrative leadership, others with teaching and preaching

responsibilities. Whatever the scope of their responsibilities, they were alike *elders* in the Ephesian church. Thus, it is something of a biblical anomaly for Elmbrook to have pastors who are not also elders, and elders who are not also pastors. More to the point, we have no hesitation about having ordained, or commissioned by the laying on of hands, women as pastors, while we exclude them from being elders.

Elmbrook Church decided on this important issue of women in leadership in 1976 when we ordained the first woman pastor to teach, minister, and oversee men and women. Since 1976, there have been many gifted women who have pastored, led and preached at Elmbrook Church to thousands of men and women, in various ministries. Thus, to have women pastors but not elders at Elmbrook Church is inconsistent.

4. The Scriptures that forbid women from being leaders or teachers in the church, including the positions of elder, are culturally bound and situation dependent, and not a directive from God for all times.

Several passages appear to restrict the role of women as leaders and elders over men (e.g. 1 Tim 2:11-12, 1 Cor 14:34, Titus 2:3). After careful study, we believe these and other scriptures that address issues of leadership, teaching, headship and elders are interpreted most accurately when the context (including the original language, culture, and specific situation) are considered. All biblical principles and directives must consider their immediate contexts and then, after careful study of those contexts, consider the principles developed into application points for our day.

We acknowledge that much of the background behind our different opinions about the rightful roles of women in leadership comes from our desire to be faithful students of the Word of God, then to apply its teachings in our practice. Other reasons, including our varied theological and family histories as well as our personal and emotional lives, may be factors in our opinions, but the core of our concerns are likely to be our understanding of the Bible. We also recognize that serious students and scholars of the Word who are committed to its integrity and authority, and deeply committed to the Lordship of Jesus over their thought and lives, have come to opposite conclusions on this question of women in leadership. This should give us pause, whatever we think.

CONCLUSION: NOW WHAT?

We have godly men in the church; we also have godly women. We have strong male leadership in the church; we also have strong female leadership. We have gifted male pastors, and gifted female pastors. Every serving and leading role in the life of Elmbrook Church (keeping in mind that every leader should be a servant first), is open to the calling of the most divinely gifted individual, except for that of elder. Consequently, the COE recommend a change to the constitution to allow women as elders. This will allow us to appoint the most mature, godly and gifted persons to open positions on the Council, male and female. We should not set any arbitrary quotas or representative numbers. We should determine the needs of the Council any time that we make appointments, and seek to fill them with the persons of God's choosing, male or female.

It simply requires that we remove the word male that currently qualifies elders which now prohibits us from appointing godly women to fully serve on the Council of Elders. We recognize that this issue of women in leadership can be emotionally charged. We bring not only our biblical convictions and our religious traditions, but our family histories, personal biases, and interpersonal habits to the question of the role of women in the church. We must seek to understand our emotions and harness them to truth, but we cannot ignore them. Whatever we may do, we must not allow this practical question of governance to become an issue of disunity.

B. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. But what does the Bible mean by “elder,” and doesn’t the Bible say that “elders” have to be men?

There are some churches and denominations that place a very great emphasis on church leadership “office,” whereas others emphasize that leadership roles are “functions of gifting.” The first approach is favored by those who read the biblical passages about “pastors” and “elders” and “deacons,” and believe that the point is that some people can be given such titles and formal roles based on their qualifications. In these churches, there is a great emphasis on “ordination.” The second approach (which reflects how Elmbrook Church operates) reads the biblical passages and finds in words like “pastor,” a functional definition. Little emphasis is placed on ordination. In other words, “pastors” are those who have designated responsibility for “shepherding” the church (the word “pastor” means “shepherd”). Similarly, in this approach it is recognized that the word “elder” in the New Testament means “a (spiritually) mature person.” So, when Paul told Timothy to “appoint elders” in the church, he was urging Timothy to follow the pattern of the Jewish synagogue, which were overseen by a group of mature members, or “elders.” (As was the case with many functions in the ancient world, the elders of the synagogues were always men. Women just did not have enough education, enough information, and enough standing in society to be able to participate.)

The New Testament clearly shows that women were involved with men in ministry, but there are also passages that talk about limits of what women should do in the church. Many biblical interpretations of these passages point out that conflicts arose in some of the early churches including contentious situations between men and women, and some people trying to assert themselves in roles for which they were unprepared. These seemingly limiting passages, then, are correctives for some problems that had arisen, and do not represent eternal limits of what women may do in the church. (Some of these passages are addressed specifically at the end of this document).

There is a parallel here with the issue of slavery, where statements like “slaves should submit to their masters,” were problem-solving practical statements rather than an endorsement of the institution of slavery. Like slavery, the role and leadership of women in the church and society over many hundreds of years is a redemptive movement in Scripture from restriction toward freedom. This is highlighted in the book *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, by Dr. William Webb.

2. If Elmbrook takes the world “male” out of this clause, and allows the Council to appoint women members if it chooses, is this an example of the church following “the ways of the world,” or letting social trends shape the agenda of the church?

No, we should not make changes in the church to look more like society. In our commitment to biblical truth applied to real life, we as a church have always sought to discover biblical principles and apply them to be the church God wants us to be. The polity of churches should remain committed to the core principles of ministry, but also adapt with the developing needs of the church. That is exactly why Elmbrook Church has revised its constitution at different points over the years. It is also why leadership structures were evolving and adapting even within the timeframe of the writing of the New Testament.

The Christian church has almost universally placed restrictions on women’s roles in the church until relatively recently. This has been based on an understanding of certain passages in the New Testament (particularly 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:11–15), encouraged by the example of Jesus being male and his appointing only males to his apostolic team of twelve. The question we must ask is whether recent changes in perspective are a result of the church being driven by the prevailing culture to become “inclusive” in disregard of Scripture, or whether there has been a genuine flaw in the common interpretation of Scripture by many Christians on this issue in the past.

We don't wish to criticize previous consensus about the meaning of Scripture, but we do need to face the fact that longstanding agreements have previously proved to be fallible in several instances. For example, in the widely accepted justification for slavery by Christians in the 18th and 19th centuries, and more recently the position on the superiority of one race over another as practiced in the southern United States, Colonial Africa, and elsewhere. Neither of these issues would be acceptable today as legitimate and biblically justifiable, though both issues were fought for by some "Bible-believing Christians" for many years on the basis of their interpretation of certain parts of the Bible. The reason the issues at stake were not challenged is that this was the practice of the culture at large, so it was easy for Christians to avoid questioning them (with notable exceptions). Similarly, women have been denied equality with men as a general practice in most societies until recently, so the church in the United States has never had to face this question as honestly and deeply as it is being forced to today.

We believe that the like slavery, the role of women in the church is evolving as the redemptive work of Christ move from restriction to the full freedom in Christ as discussed in the book *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*, by Dr. William Webb.

3. But doesn't the Bible teach that men are the head of the church?

No, it does not. Ephesians 5:23 tells us that Christ is the head of the church. We must be careful to define ministry in the church, not in terms of hierarchy and status but of service and submission. Ultimately, the whole church functions under the authority of Jesus Christ. He is its head and our service is to be done "in the name of the Lord Jesus" (which means, under his authority, on his initiative, and by his power). To discuss roles within the church, whether male or female, therefore is to discuss servanthood not hierarchy, submission not authority. Christ is the authority to which we all submit, whether male or female.

4. Who is prompting this question of changing the clause in the constitution?

The elders and pastors of Elmbrook have been talking about this at different points for the at least the past 25 years. In fact, in 1997 we committed to producing a paper laying out these issues. A paper was produced in 2005 by Mel Lawrenz and Dick Robinson, parts of which are incorporated into this larger document. The 2005 document however, was never acted upon. There is now a strong consensus and desire within the COE and executive lead team that this is a wise, appropriate and overdue change to make. It would be entirely wrong to assume that some dissatisfied women in the church are pressing this issue. In fact, the women leaders at Elmbrook over the years have been an extraordinary example of faithful service to Christ and the church, not being divisive or disruptive at all. It is the present members of Council of Elders who urge that we update the constitution by removing the word "male" from the phrase regarding elders. Thus, there is freedom in the future to use the designation "elders" for either men or women who become members the Council.

5. Does changing the constitution on this point make it likely that the church will adapt itself to societal standards, and maybe even compromise on moral issues in the future?

Not at all. Again, the impetus for this change does not come from society, but from the development and change that dynamic churches will always consider as they consider Scripture. Moral standards for qualification for leadership will never change. It is obvious that sexual morality and other matters of spiritual character will always be utmost in deciding qualifications for leadership. And on the matter of change and development, these are good and necessary characteristics of the church. Even in the New Testament age, church leadership was developing. At the start, there were only the apostles. Then the role of deacon began to develop. At some point the early churches looked to "elders" in local congregations to oversee the churches. (The term "pastor" and "elder" were probably two words used for the same role in the New Testament.) And, as the different lists of gifts

and roles indicate, there were a variety of leadership functions developing as the early church was taking shape.

6. But would this change mean that men would be tempted to neglect their responsibility to lead, and don't we have a lot at stake in making sure men are living up to their obligations as husbands and fathers?

Men must live up to their responsibilities in leadership, as must women. Every family, every small group in the church, and every ministry hopes that men will live up to the high calling God has given them. But using the term "elder" for select women who deliberate and decide with the Council does not undermine the faithful service of male elders. Mature men will never feel threatened by or undermined by mature women with whom they are privileged to serve. In fact, our greatest opportunity to live and work as the men and women God wants us to be is if we draw upon all the wisdom and all the gifting God has lavished on the church. Whenever the church has slipped into viewing itself as a hierarchy, it has lost the power of the principle of servanthood.

7. Does making this change mean that Elmbrook Church is dramatically changing its approach to ministry?

Not at all. Because Elmbrook has women and men serving and leading together in all areas of the church this change of one word in the constitution certainly does not mean that Elmbrook is changing its way of operating. The Council of Elders has enjoyed the benefits of women liaisons joining in all meetings, discussions, and deliberations for years now.

8. So then why is the change in the constitution necessary?

The understanding of the Bible, in its context, is the reason a change is necessary. Because Scripture itself sees equality of men and women in ministry within the Church, it is appropriate to change the constitution. Consistency, respect, and honesty are critically important to the integrity of a church. A change in the constitution will be consistent with Scripture and the mission and core values of Elmbrook Church.

9. So what exactly do elders at Elmbrook Church do, and how do they operate as a council?

Most people at Elmbrook do not get an inside look at what our elders do. The elders view their role as being servant-leaders, standing alongside the pastors and many other leaders in the church, seeking God's wisdom in our approaches to ministry. The elders at Elmbrook Church are charged with the responsibility of oversight of ministry of the church. We believe God has blessed us greatly over the years with people with insight, wisdom, and character who have been able to take up important matters of the church, make decisions, and support the pastors, other paid ministry staff, as well as dedicated volunteers in their ongoing work in ministry. In the monthly meeting, the elders take up an agenda that may include matters of church policies, financial decisions, and the general direction of the church. Elders are free to engage in ministry in other ways, like praying for the sick, reconciliation situations, and being assigned to ad hoc groups working on projects. Most of the decisions the Council of Elders makes are based on consensus. The elders rarely have to take official votes (usually only when there is a legal requirement to do so).

10. How would this change happen?

The Council of Elders respects the prerogatives and abilities of the congregation to decide on changing the constitution. In fact, only the congregation (members) of the church can change the constitution. This document is being offered now for the congregation to read and discuss this issue over the next few months. It is the intent of the council of elders to bring this to congregational vote on the weekend of August 26-27, 2017 at the annual congregational meeting.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER READING

How I Changed My Mind about Women in Leadership: Compelling Stories from Prominent Evangelicals (2010) by Alan F. Johnson (Editor), Dallas Willard (Foreword), Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Contributing authors include Stuart and Jill Briscoe.

Beyond Sex Roles (3rd edition, 2006) By Gilbert Bilezikian. Baker Academic Publishing, Michigan.

Men and Women in the Church. (2003) By Sarah Sumner, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois.

Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis. (2001)
By William J. Webb, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois

Two Views on Women in Ministry (2005) by Linda Belleville, Craig Blomberg, Craig Keener, and Thomas Schreiner, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

“The Future of Leadership at Bent Tree” sermon by Pete Briscoe. Bent Tree Bible Church, Carrollton, Texas.

<https://benttree.org/sermon/the-future-of-leadership-at-benttree/>

APPENDIX A: PASSAGES THAT ENCOURAGE WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

Throughout Scripture God releases (and even commands) women to lead in different spheres:

1. Creation:

- a. In creation, God gives women authority over nature (Gen 1:26-29). The Biblical author uses plural pronouns (them) instead of gender specific pronouns (man or woman).
- b. The Bible uses other gender inclusive language that in English may appear to be gender specific.
- c. In Greek, the word *anthropos* ("mankind") refers to both genders, whereas the word *aner* refers to man as male (examples, Hebrews 2:6-8 James 3:7).

2. Family:

- a. God gives mothers authority over their male children. God's desire is for both parents to receive honor (Gen 28:7; Ex 20:12; Lev 19:3; Dt 5:16, 21:18-21; Prov 30:17; Eph 6:1; Col 3:20).
- b. Mothers are given significant responsibility over their families (Ex 4:20-26; Prov 31:15,21,27).
- c. Jesus chose to be obedient to his Joseph and Mary (Lk 2:48-51).

3. Workplace:

- a. God requires the submission of male employees to their female employers (1 Sam 25:18-19; 2 Kings 4:8,24; Esther 4:5). Sheerah was the builder of a massive construction project and would have had authority over both men and women (1 Chron 7:24).
- b. In the New Testament, God Commands servants to be subject to their masters which included men and women (Eph 6:5-8; Col 3:22; 1 Tim 6:1; Titus 2:9; 1 Pt 2:18).
- c. The Bible also mentions prominent women who were leaders over their households (Lk 8:3; Acts 13:50; 17:4,12).

4. State:

- a. God gives authority to female magistrates over its male citizens (Gen 36:40-41, 36:12, 22, 36:2,14,25; 1 Chron 1:5, 9:1-12; and; 1 Kings 10:1-13, 11:19, 15:13; 2 Kings 8:26; Neh 2:1,6; 2; Lk 11:31).

5. Spiritual Authority:

- a. Women were given spiritual religious authority over men and women throughout the Bible.
- b. Authority in writing Scripture The following sections of the bible came to us through women: (Hagar) Gen 16:7-13; Gen 25:23 (Rebekah – quoted by Paul in Rom. 9:11-12) Jdgs 13:3-5,7 (through the wife of Manoah while her husband was not with her) Jdgs 5:1-31 (Deborah); 1 Sam 2:1-10 (Hannah); Prov 31:1-31 (The mother of King Lemuel); Lk 1:41-45 (Elizabeth); Lk 1:46-55 (Virgin Mary); Mt 28:7,10 (Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James).
- c. God established women in the prophetic function as spiritual leaders of His people. Women called Prophetess: Miriam (Ex 15:20; Micah 6:4); Deborah (Judg 4:4); Huldah (2 Kings 22:14); Noadiah (Neh 6:14); Isaiah’s wife (Isa 8:3); Anna (Lk 2:36) and
- d. Other women were said to have prophesied: Hagar (Gen 16:7-13); Rebekah (Gen 25:23); The Mother of Samson (Jdgs 13:3-5); Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-10) ; Mary Magdalene (Mt 28:1-10) —your daughters (Acts 2:7) the four virgin daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9) and —every woman prophesying (1 Cor. 11:5).
- e. These women issued authoritative prophetic orders and commands (Deborah – Judges 4:6,14 and Huldah -2 Kings 22:15),
- f. They provided leadership which brought spiritual results on a national scale (Deborah Judg. 4:15,16; 5:11,31) and Huldah (2 Kings 22:13; 23:3) and
- g. They addressed God’s people in public gatherings (Miriam –Exod. 15:20-21; Anna – Luke 2:36-38).
- h. God gave women institutional authority in the religious life of his people. Miriam was sent as a leader in the same sense that Moses and Aaron were (Mic. 6:4) Deborah led Israel (Judg. 4:4) and we see the —sons of Israel || coming to her for judgments (Judg. 4:5). She directed Barak (Judg. 4:5ff who was a mighty warrior, see Heb. 11:32-34). Huldah was consulted by King Josiah’s officials (instead of Jeremiah and Zephaniah (2 Kings 22:23) and Esther instituted the religious feast of Purim (Esther 9:29-32).

6. Speaking for God (including teaching/preaching God’s word):

- a. Simply defined, prophesying is speaking for God to God’s people. Prophesying by women in public is described (Ex. 15:1, 20-21; 1 Cor. 11:5) commended (Luke 2:36-38; Acts 2:17-18, 33; 1 Cor. 14:24, 26,31) and encouraged (1 Cor. 14:1, 5, 39).
- b. Women of the Bible addressed large mixed gatherings: (Num. 27:1-2; Luke 2:36-38; Luke 13:13; John 4:5-7) Sarah taught Abraham (Gen. 21:8-12); Manoah’s wife taught her husband (Judg. 13:1-25) King Lemeual’s mother taught her grown son (Prov. 1:8-13; 31:1-9) The female witnesses of the resurrection taught the disciples (Matt. 28; Mark 16; Luke 23-24; and John 20) Priscilla taught Apollos (Acts 18:24-28). 1 Peter 2:9 describes the church as —a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. All believers are priests both men and women.
- c. There are over 20 Old Testament passages that shows teaching as one of the functions of priests (Lev. 10:11; Deut. 17:8-11, etc.). Note: If it was the biblical testimony that women could teach only women then we would expect to find

references in scripture to meetings that were exclusively female. The fact is there is no trace in either testament of a uniquely female gathering.

- d. Paul saw many women as crucial servants and leaders in the early church. Priscilla – a fellow worker (Rom. 16:3), Junias – outstanding among the apostles (Rom. 16:7) Persis, Tryphena and Tryphosa, Mary (All –hard workers Rom. 16), Lydia - church planter – Acts 16:14,40.

APPENDIX B: PASSAGES THAT SEEM TO RESTRICT WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

1. 1 Corinthians 14:33-35

“Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”

Any text must always be seen in light of its broader context. This is particularly true in the case of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. On the surface it appears that Paul is making a strong statement that women should not teach or prophesy in church. However, a look at the broader context changes this.

This passage is part of a larger section from chapters 11-14 about order (and disorder!) within a worship service. Interestingly, this section begins with a statement of fact that both men and women were prophesying in the church. This was acceptable and part of the church’s practice. Thus, the reader would know that Paul was not making a general prohibition against women teaching and prophesying in church.

So then, what was Paul addressing? Again the context shows us. Paul was addressing a broader issue of people disrupting the worship service. Thus, he makes three statements to different groups of people to stop talking during public worship.

1. In 14:27-28 he tells people who **speak in tongues** to **stay silent in church** if there is no interpreter.
2. In 14:29-30 he tells **prophets** to not all speak at once. Furthermore, if revelation comes to one and someone else is speaking, then the first speakers should be **silent in the church**.
3. In 14:33-35 **married women** with husbands who also attend were asking questions during worship and disrupting the service. Accordingly, Paul tells them to ask their husbands the questions at home and **stay silent in church**.

Thus, the context shows us that the issue at hand is not whether women should teach and prophesy in churches, they were already doing that. The issue was keeping the worship service orderly in that specific context and does not prohibit women from leading or teaching in the church.

2. 1 Timothy 2:11-15

11 A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. **12** I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. **13** For Adam was formed first, then Eve. **14** And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. **15** But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.

Again, this appears to be a straight forward prohibition against women teaching and leading in the church. Yet if this was a general prohibition against women teaching in church it would directly contradict the reality of Priscilla teaching Apollos, and women prophets in the church (1 Cor. 11:5 and Acts 21:9).

Instead we must consider the cultural context of this passage. Paul was writing to the church at Ephesus where there were significant problems with some of the women in the church. In 1 Timothy 5:15 Paul even mentions women who had “turned away to follow Satan” and later in 2 Timothy 3:6-7 he addresses “gullible women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires, always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth.” The reason this was happening is that Ephesus was the home to the temple of the goddess Diana. This temple was led by female virgins who oversaw thousands of female priestesses. In this context, male leadership was virtually non-existent. Thus, Paul was writing his protégé Timothy, who was trying to minister in this context where women came from a pagan background and sought to exercise complete authority over men.

Thus, when he writes, “Let a woman learn in quietness with all submissiveness” he is addressing a religious culture of Ephesus that was matriarchal. Now that these women were submitted to Christ they needed to learn a mutually submissive relationship with Christian men rather than immediately exercising authority over men and telling them what to do.

It is also no surprise that he continues by saying, “I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man”. It is again about protecting the church of Ephesus from false doctrine not a general prohibition against women teaching. We believe Pete Briscoe is right when he says that Paul’s instructions would best be read, “I permit none of these doctrinally ignorant women (in Ephesus) to teach, because they have brought their wrong beliefs into the church, and they need to know that women are not in any way superior to men as the temple of Diana has taught them, and now they are Christian they need to learn in quietness and submission to right doctrine.”

This, of course, is true of anyone who would teach and lead at Elmbrook. We would insist that they learn sound doctrine before teaching or leading anybody: men, women, kids, or students!!!

This historical context also helps explain Paul’s next statement in verses 13-14: “For Adam was formed first, then Even. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner.” This again was addressing false teachings of the cult of Diana which taught that women were created before men and that men were the ones who alone polluted the earth with sin. Paul is simply leveling the playing field and correcting false information. He is saying, “No, you sinned too!”

Finally, with this cultural context in mind, Paul’s words in verse 15 that “women will be saved through childbearing-if they continue in faith, love, and holiness with propriety” makes sense. Is Paul saying here that there is another way to salvation other than faith in Jesus Christ? Is he saying that if a woman were to have a baby then she could receive God’s gift of salvation? No, absolutely not! That, of course, would contradict the rest of Scripture. Instead Paul is correcting false teaching in the church at Ephesus that women should not marry or have children. The word “to save” (Greek, *sozo*) can also mean “to prosper”. So, Paul is saying “Childbearing is not an evil act! Get married, have kids, but if your house is not filled with faith, love, and holiness none of you will prosper.” It’s also interesting to note that Paul switches to the plural “they” in verse 15 which many believe means he is referring to both the husband and wife’s responsibility to have a house filled with faith, love and holiness.

We believe that 1 Timothy 2, while admittedly a complicated passage, when properly understood within the cultural context of the church of Ephesus does not generally prohibit from women teaching or leading in the church. Rather, it gives us an important principle that anybody who seeks to teach and lead should have sound doctrine before doing so.

3. Ephesians 5: 22-24

22 *Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.*

"The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church..." wrote Paul, therefore, since "the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything" (Ephesians 5:23-24). It seems straight-forward: Christ is the head of the church, and he has authority over the church. So, we conclude, Christ has *authority over* the church because he is the *head of* the church. By extension, we think, since the husband is the head of his wife, he will have authority over his wife. For her to exercise authority, for example, as a ruling elder, would contravene clear Bible teaching.

But we have already, at one and the same time, read too little out of the text, and too much into the text. In her carefully reasoned and personally articulated study of these issues, theologian Sarah Sumner reminds us that whereas the Bible says that the husband is the head of his wife, it does not anywhere say that he is her leader.ⁱ Nor is it obvious what it means when it uses the word *head* in this context. It is true that Christ is the head of the church. It is equally true that Christ has authority over the church; after all, he promised to build the church against any and all opposition, and then purchased it with his own blood.

Sometimes, but probably not often, *head* can mean *source*, as in the headwaters of a river. Clearly, and probably often, *head* can mean *to have authority over*, as in the head of an organization. But most frequently in the Scripture *head* refers to just what it is, that is, the head that is connected by the neck to the rest of the body. The bible certainly uses Christ as *head* in this way.ⁱ And, following the metaphor of body and head, then it would be natural to describe the husband as the head that is connected to his wife as the body, of the *husband-wife one-flesh being* that their marriage wrought. In fact, this is precisely the picture that Paul is drawing in Ephesians 5:28-31, where Paul talks about the church related to Christ. There is an integral wholeness in the union of husband and wife that should give us pause when suggesting a hierarchical relationship between them.

Metaphors are useful because they teach us something about that which we do not know by drawing analogies from that which we do know. But the cardinal rule of using metaphors is to not make them say more than they should, metaphors grow out of analogies, and analogies have both points of similarity and points of dissimilarity.

In any case, the Ephesians 5 passage says nothing about a woman's capacity to lead in the church, nor does it prohibit her from doing so. In point-of-fact, there is only one passage in Paul that uses the word *authority* to describe the relationship between husband and wife. In 1 Corinthians 7, in a famous passage on marriage, Paul says that both husband and wife exercise mutual authority over each other's bodies in their intimate sexual relationship.

Finally, and very strikingly, in ordering the three parallel relationships in Ephesians chapters 5 and 6 – wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and masters – Paul uses the word *obey* for the subordinate in the pair in the latter two cases, but emphatically does not do so when describing a wife's response to her husband. Instead he uses the word *submit*, borrowing it from the mutual submission between members of the church in ordered worship (5:19-22).

Of the three sets of relationships described – wives/husbands, children/parents, slaves/masters – we no longer talk about slavery but apply Paul's teaching to employees and employers. Yet our modern marketplace relationships are quite different socially than the ancient institution of slavery. May we not legitimately ask similar questions of application if the relational circumstances of wives and husbands are culturally conditioned?ⁱ In any case, Paul overturns the whole order of created

relationships when he says that “we regard no one from a worldly point of view···if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). What would our relationships in the home and in the church look like if we took this text seriously?

Paul also uses the *head* metaphor to describe men and women in 1 Corinthians 11.ⁱ Here he says that “the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God” (v. 3). Later he will remind his readers that “man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man” (vv. 8-9). Again, it must be noted that this is not teaching on church leadership, i.e., who may serve as an elder in the church, but on propriety in worship. Our questions in this paper are not about church worship but church leadership. In any case, as if to guard against a harsh reading of this text, Paul immediately qualifies it by adding that, “In the Lord···woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God” (vv. 11-12). All commentators on this text note that it is notoriously difficult to interpret; we must know the cultural circumstances that lie behind Paul’s words.

Regarding our question, there does not appear to be anything in these texts on headship between men and women, or between husbands and wives, that would, in and of itself, justify our limiting the leadership role of elder to men.

4. 1 Timothy 3:2

2 Now the overseer (elder) is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife (or “husband of one wife”)

On the surface this seems to clearly state that an elder must be male. However, this is not Paul’s point. Paul was addressing the issue of faithfulness and purity amongst men who sought to be elders. In particular, he was addressing the sin of polygamy in the church and saying that if someone was practicing polygamy he could not serve as an elder. If we were to say that Paul was prohibiting women from eldership from this text we would also have to conclude that he was prohibiting single men, and widowers. If this were the case neither Paul himself nor Jesus would have qualified to be an elder, as both were single men. Rather, we should conclude that Paul was simply refuting polygamy and upholding the values of marital fidelity and purity for anyone who seeks a leadership role in the church.

Note: We are indebted to the 2005 Elmbrook Church Council of Elder’s paper on Women as Elders, Bent Tree Bible Church’s “The Future of Leadership at Bent Tree” statement, and Westbrook Church’s position paper on women as elders for the content of Appendix A and B. The passages that encourage women to lead was adapted directly from Westbrook’s paper and the response to Ephesians 5:22-24 was adapted directly from the 2005 Elmbrook paper.