

Elders at Brunswick UC (approved by BUC, Nov 2013)

Recommendations

In 2012 during the process for calling a new minister, it was identified that the current governance arrangement in our congregation with a Church Council but no Elders does not comply with the Constitution of the UCA. Presbytery gave us dispensation to proceed with a call on the understanding that we rectify the situation in 2013. In response, the following recommendations were adopted at a Congregational Meeting on Sunday November 24th:

1. That, since the members of the BUC Church Council as it is currently constituted fulfil all that the regulations of the UCA require of Elders, the congregation recognises our duly elected Church Councillors as Elders according to the regulations.
2. That the Discipleship and Education Committee is asked to schedule an education series reflecting on the theology and practice of leadership in the church.

This was a minimum change option – not introducing a new category of leader into our congregation, but recognising the members of our Church Council, as they already operate, to be Elders. For many of us, the change was in what we understand an Elder to be (hence the second recommendation).

What is an Elder?

The name “Elder” bears significant baggage (particularly for ex-Presbyterians and those influenced by them for good or ill!). For many, Elders were pastoral carers and worship assistants, “spiritual” leaders who would not have dealt with matters of finance and property. Others remember Elders as representatives of “patriarchal authority” – scary old men who came to visit to see why you hadn’t been at church!

The Basis of Union, the Constitution and the Regulations of the UCA, on which we will base our understanding of the ministry at BUC, instruct each Congregation to

“recognise and appoint confirmed members or members in association as Elders to share with the Minister in oversight and building up the Congregation in faith and love, sustaining its members in hope and leading them into a full participation in Christ’s mission in the world” (Constitution 19a – highlight added).

This ministry of “oversight” is fulfilled through the work of the Church Council (2012 Regs 3.1.2a-b). The Regulations do not distinguish between the ministry of Elder and Church Councillor (this will be a significant change in understanding for some since many Uniting churches have Church Councillors with responsibility for Property and Finance and Elders with responsibility for Pastoral Care and Worship).

Theological Reflections

1. Spiritual Gifts

The Uniting Church acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ’s Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ. (Basis of Union paragraph 13)

Every member of our church has a gift for ministry and a call to service from the Holy Spirit. In this we are all equal, but our gifts from the Holy Spirit are different. Are some gifts more spiritual than others? Not if by “spiritual” we mean “from the Holy Spirit”. In regard to the Church Council, it is the congregation’s task to discern who among our members have the particular gifts for “oversight” as articulated in the Basis of Union (see especially paragraph 15b).

2. Incarnation and Mission

God's mission among us in Christ is to inaugurate the reign of heaven on earth, not to take disembodied souls to heaven. At BUC we all are given opportunity to participate in this incarnational mission through the work of our various sub-committees (Worship; Pastoral Care; Children, Youth and Young Adults; Justice and Mission; Discipleship and Education; Property; Finance; Communications). The work done by all the committees is "missional" and "spiritual" in the sense that it contributes to manifesting the justice and peace of the Kingdom of God through the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The members of Church Council (each of whom is a member of one or more sub-committees) currently have the responsibility for the oversight and guidance of this missional work. Recognising them as Elders will not change this. In particular, the "enabling ministries" – Property, Finance and Communication – are no less a part of the Council's brief to provide "spiritual oversight" and therefore no less a part of the Elders' ministry (2012 Regs 3.1.2 b i-xiv).

3. Servant Leadership

Jesus said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:25-28)

We appoint Church Councillors (Elders if the recommendation is supported) not to have authority "over" us, but to model for us the servant ministry of Christ to which we are all called. This is why our Church Councillors had already been serving Holy Communion (a role taken by Elders in many places) – as a demonstration of servant leadership.

What's in a name?

Because of historical associations with the name "Elder" and the baggage that accrues to it for some, there may be members of our church who are not comfortable with the term. The Constitution and Regulations offer the alternative title "Leader". This, however, is a term that comes equally baggage laden from its use in the wider world, and is therefore just as likely to lead to misunderstanding about the ministry so named. "Elder" has the advantage of being a biblical term without associations with secular leadership models. It may be that we continue calling those elected to this ministry "Church Councillors" for day to day use, but with the understanding that they embody the ministry of Elder.

The Regulations

The relevant sections of the Basis of Union, Constitution and Regulations are as follows (NOTE a revision of the UCA Regulations was published in 2017 and is available online at <http://assembly.uca.org.au/regulations> – the reference numbers have all changed from previous editions).

- BASIS OF UNION Paragraph 15: "Government in the Church" – particularly section b: "The Elders' or Leaders' Meeting".
- CONSTITUTION Section 19: "Elders"
- REGULATIONS 3.1.2: "Responsibilities of the Church Council" (NOTE there is no longer a separate section dedicated to Elders in the revised regulations)

A Final Word for Elders from Peter

Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5:1-3)