



# SIBURT INSTITUTE

*for Church Ministry*

## Elder Selection Process: A Guide to Developing an Elder Selection Process for Your Church

October 2022

### **Purpose of This Document**

This document describes the process by which members of the (*church*) select elders who will serve the church as spiritual leaders, overseers and shepherds. Early in the history of the church each congregation was under the leadership of a plurality of mature Christians usually designated as elders or shepherds (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Acts 15:2; Acts 20:28, I Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9).

Healthy leaders are persons who exhibit good character, spiritual maturity, are respected within the congregation, and have the capacity to do the work of an elder. Every church will vary on the specific qualifications of an elder, but evident in the texts above two broad frames which include spiritual maturity and character along with the gifts and capacities necessary to provide good leadership. Churches need to have a clear definition of what elders do and how they function, this would include descriptions noting character, spiritual maturity, giftings, and capacities. <sup>1</sup>

Although the process for elder selection is not specified in detail in scripture, New Testament examples of the appointment of church leaders and servants include participation of the entire congregation in the selection process (Acts 1:15,23; Acts 6:1-3; Acts 15:22-23). This document provides a process for congregational participation in the elder selection process that is in keeping with these New Testament examples.

Each selection process will begin with a congregational announcement by the existing elders of the need for reaffirmation of existing elders and the need for appointment of new leaders. This announcement will initiate a period of study, prayer and reflection in preparation for the selection process. Ideally, the selection process is an established rhythm within the congregation on a regular basis of every three or four years.

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<sup>1</sup> This prescribed process noted in this document does not seek to define the work of an elder in a congregation. Every church ought to have a written description of what elders do and how they function. This document will be indispensable throughout the elder selection process.

### **Elder Selection Facilitation Committee**

For the selection process, the existing elders will appoint an *ad hoc* Elder Selection Facilitation Committee (hereinafter referred to as the Facilitation Committee). This committee will consist of a chairman and 2 to 6 members of the (*church*), none of whom is a current elder or is willing to accept nomination for service as an elder. The committee should reflect the diversity within the congregation. The function of this committee is to assist the congregation in fulfilling its responsibilities in the elder selection process.

### **Facilitation Committee Responsibilities**

The elder selection process shall be administered by the Facilitation Committee under the oversight of the existing eldership. The committee will keep the current eldership informed of its progress throughout the process and will seek their advice and assistance as needed.

The Facilitation Committee shall have the responsibility for organizing and carrying out the work necessary for implementation of the processes and procedures specified in this Elder Selection Process document. Its responsibilities include communications, distributing forms, receiving and safeguarding completed forms, tallying the results, determining the willingness of nominees to enter into a discernment process, exercise confidentiality in performance with its duties, arranging the Discernment Process, and resolving scriptural objections to any nominee or candidate.

After tallying the nominations, the Committee shall develop an initial nomination list. This list will be reviewed by elders and then the leading names on the list will be asked to participate in a discernment process. The nominees who agree to the discernment process will then proceed through a discernment process. Upon conclusion of the Discernment Process, all nominees willing to proceed should then have their names placed on the Affirmation Form that will be distributed to the congregation. If the nominee declines further consideration, the Committee shall accept their decision and hold it in confidence.

The Facilitation Committee shall be responsible for receiving written objections to any nominee or candidate submitted at any time during the selection process. The process for resolving written objections is set out below.

The discernment process is managed by the Facilitation Committee in collaboration with the elders. The nominees who are willing to move forward after the discernment process with the standing elders who wish to be reaffirmed shall form the basis of the names placed on the Affirmation Form. The Facilitation Committee shall prepare an Affirmation Form with the names of persons that meet the nomination criteria and consent to being considered by the church, arrange for ample printing of the forms, and distribute the forms. The Committee shall make provisions for receiving completed affirmation forms and securely keeping them in a locked box. At the end of the time allotted for affirmation, the Committee shall open the box and tally the results.<sup>2</sup>

The Committee shall hold in confidence all information on submitted ballots. In

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<sup>2</sup> There is potential to distribute and complete the forms digitally.

particular, the Committee shall not disclose to others specific information on who submitted forms and what their ratings of candidates were. When a final determination has been made of which candidates have met the selection criteria both in character and giftings as noted at the beginning of the document and against whom no objection remains unresolved, the Facilitation Committee shall inform the eldership. Members of the Committee shall go to each person listed on the ballot and inform them of the church's decision on their candidacy. Not all churches practice the following, but a decision about whether or not to participate in the following practice needs to be decided before the process begins: In order to assist the candidates in evaluating themselves and making personal commitments to self-improvement, the Selection Committee will provide each candidate with a transcription of comments associated with their "NO" ratings without disclosing the member that submitted the comments.

Throughout the selection process, the Facilitation Committee may exercise discretion as necessary but may not make any decision that is not clearly within the intent of this document.

### **Periodic Identification of New Shepherds**

At three-year intervals or such time is determined, the church shall go through the process of evaluating and selecting qualified persons who have demonstrated elder/shepherd personal qualities and are willing and prepared to serve the church in the functions of an elder. In each selection process the church membership shall evaluate potential additional elders. Each candidate that meets the selection criteria both in character and giftings as noted at the beginning of the document will serve as an elder of the (*church*).

Besides the normal selection of new elders at established intervals, special selections may be held at some intermediate time if changing circumstances lead to general recognition of an immediate need for additional elders.

### **Reaffirmation of Existing Shepherds**

Many churches would practice the following – within the periodic process of selecting new elders, each standing elder shall determine whether they wish to step down from their role as an elder. If a person wishes to serve an additional term, they must ask for reaffirmation of the support of the congregation for an additional term. Their name will then be added to the ballot along with the qualified nominees for service as new elders and they shall be subject to the same selection criteria as the new elder candidates.

No limit is prescribed for the number of terms that an elder may serve, provided that they continue to exhibit character consistent with the qualities of the selection criteria and that they continue to be affirmed by the congregation as an elder.

Some churches maintain the practice which allows elders to step down for a cycle and would find themselves reaffirmed after a period of time away. Some churches practice a set of term limits – two or three terms, then an elder must set out for a cycle as a time of sabbatical. Then the person may reenter the process again.

### **Participation of the Congregation**

All members of (*church*) are eligible to nominate fellow members for the role of elder/overseer/shepherd of the church. (*Church*) members eligible to participate (i.e., nominate and vote) in the selection of new elders shall consist of those listed in the (*church*) member database as of (*the month prior to the start date of the elder selection*). That list shall be reviewed by the elders and given to the Facilitation Committee for their use.

Nomination forms will be distributed by the Facilitation Committee in a Sunday morning assembly of the church. After this general distribution, Nomination Forms can be obtained from any member of the Facilitation Committee. Every member of the church shall be encouraged to fill out a Nomination Form with the names of all persons who he or she believes meets the selection criteria both in character and giftings and is well suited for service as an elder. Completed Nomination Forms shall be submitted to the Facilitation Committee (normally by dropping them in a locked box that will be conveniently available for that purpose). The deadline for submission of nominations shall be the close of the Sunday morning assembly two weeks after the general distribution of forms.<sup>3</sup> All Nomination Forms must be signed by the member submitting the form.

In order for a member to be listed as a candidate on the Affirmation Form for consideration as elder by the full church, the member must have been nominated by at least 15 individual members, from at least 10 households (Congregations may choose different criteria here): whatever criteria the congregation chooses to use, it should be stated clearly to the congregation.

The leading names from the nomination process shall be identified and shown to the standing elders for a review. If a majority of elders acknowledge some clear reason why any person on that list may not possess the selection criteria both in character and giftings to serve in the role, then that name will be removed from the list. Most churches practice this step. This gives an opportunity for elders who may have an awareness of behaviors or actions of potential nominees not known by others an opportunity to address situations that may have a negative impact on the church. Some churches may choose not to enact this review step.

The Facilitation Committee will contact all the leading persons who have met the nomination criteria and determine their willingness to participate in a discernment process as to whether to be put before the congregation as candidates for services as elders. Those candidates that are willing to go forward in the selection process will be provided with documents summarizing the major currents, directions and issues that engage the current eldership, along with any other written covenants or commitments that govern the elders' work.

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<sup>3</sup> Churches may choose to develop a digitally secure system for nomination.

## **Discernment Process**

The Discernment Process has two significant movements. The first is a time of self-examination and the second is a time of orientation and communal learning.

### ***Self Examination Process***

Candidates are encouraged to have a few days of prayer and serious reflection before going forward with the process. The Facilitation Team may provide some reading material, scripture references, or other resources for this time. The Facilitation Team will foster persons to pray for the candidates during this time by using either the Facilitation Team and/or the standing elders.

Each candidate will be asked to complete and submit a written response of a brief Introspective Questionnaire, which will highlight the nominee's background, and other pertinent information. The questionnaire may include a few questions like:

- Describe your faith journey. Describe how God has prompted your life of faith.
- What are the motivations for saying yes to serve as an elder for this congregation?
- How has God prepared me for such service?
- What are your concerns that give you hesitation about serving as an elder?

The primary purpose of the questionnaire is to allow the nominee to examine themselves to determine whether they perceive God's call in the invitation of the church to consider serving as an elder. The secondary purpose is to allow the Facilitation Team to get better acquainted with the nominee. At this point candidates will be given an opportunity to decline continuing forward the process.

### ***Orientation and Training Process***

The second phase of discernment comes through a time of orientation and learning in the community of the standing elders and other elder candidates. The inclusion of spouses in parts of the orientation and training process acknowledges their role as significant while counting the cost.

Elder candidates and current elders participate in the following range of activities.

- Some training curriculum that addresses—1) the elder is first and foremost a disciple, 2) what are the primary tasks of leadership (attending to God's presence, the practice of pastoral care and teaching the Christian faith, and 3) providing stewardship and accountability for the church's life and mission.
- Review of existing documents that govern the collective work of the elders (Elder groups ought to have a written set of policies, often called Elder covenants or commitments)
- Review of ongoing or upcoming challenges that the elder body is facing or about to face.
- For elder candidates to hear from standing elders about their experiences and the experiences of their spouses about what being an elder might mean to them.

This season of orientation and learning may take place over several meetings or perhaps primarily be done with a Saturday all day gathering. The hopeful outcome is for a more

informed understanding of role and gifts, to develop a deeper sense of the church and its mission, create a unifying and supporting team environment, and value the necessity for continual growth and renewal.

### **Affirmation**

When the Facilitation Committee has determined the final list of the people who are willing to be candidates, the Committee shall prepare Affirmation Forms listing the names of the candidates for new elders and the names of the elders seeking reaffirmation. At the next Sunday morning assembly of the church following final determination of the list of elder candidates, the Facilitation Committee shall make Affirmation Forms available to all members of the congregation.

All members of (*church*) (as defined previously) should participate in the affirmation stage of the selection process by submitting completed forms to the Facilitation Committee (normally by dropping them in a locked box provided for that purpose). Forms may be submitted at any time during the period between the general distribution of Affirmation Forms and the termination of the affirmation process at the conclusion of the Sunday morning assembly at least two weeks after the general distribution of Affirmation Forms. All Affirmation Forms must be signed by the member submitting the form.

Affirmation Forms shall offer members the options of marking "YES", "NO" or "UNSURE" for each candidate.

Marking "YES" signifies conviction that the candidate should be selected to serve the church as an elder, that the person possesses the selection criteria both in character and giftings to make them suitable for effective service as a spiritual shepherd-overseer-leader. It implies the expectation of being able to support persons wholeheartedly by working under their leadership/oversight as an elder.

Marking "NO" signifies conviction that there are valid reasons why the candidate should not be selected to serve as an elder. The person submitting the ballot will be requested to describe, in writing on the back of the Ballot Form or on an attached sheet, his or her reasons for marking "NO."

Marking "UNSURE" signifies that the member is not willing to subscribe to either of the foregoing statements of convictions associated with a "YES" or a "NO." Marking "UNSURE" is appropriate if the voter feels that he or she does not know the candidate well enough to voice an opinion either way. An "UNSURE" marking would also be appropriate if the voter is acquainted with the candidate but holds no strong conviction about whether they should be asked to serve as an elder.

A principle of the affirmation process design is that any person appointed as an elder must have (a) received enough YES votes to support confidence that in his or her service as elder will receive support and acceptance by a majority of the congregation and (b) not so many NO or UNSURE votes that there is serious doubt of their ability to serve effectively as a shepherd and leader. To this end the Selection Committee shall apply the following "Standard Criteria".

For a candidate to be recognized as an elder: (Churches may choose to vary these percentages based on their size or context. Larger churches (500+ members) may need to use a smaller percentage of YES votes and a larger percentage of UNSURE votes. Smaller churches (125 members or less) may need to use a higher percentage of YES votes and a lower percentage of UNSURE votes. By adding the category UNSURE, experience suggests this will lower the percentage of YES votes that will occur.)

- (1) at least 60% of the ballots cast shall be marked “YES” for the candidate, and
- (2) no more than 15% of the ballots cast shall be marked “NO” for the candidate, and
- (3) no more than 40% of the ballots cast shall be marked “UNSURE” for the candidate.

The Facilitation Committee shall examine all ballots and tally the results as soon as practicable after the termination of the affirmation period. At all times the Committee shall treat the results as confidential information and shall take measures to prevent any unauthorized use of the information on the forms. The Committee shall securely preserve the forms and their information at least until after the installation of the selected elders. At any later time, whenever the Committee considers study of the balloting results is no longer useful, the Committee may destroy the ballots.

The Facilitation Committee may exercise limited discretion in its application of the foregoing “Standard Criteria” if specific circumstances warrant and if only small deviations of the “YES” and “UNSURE” percentages from the “Standard Criteria” exist. An example of such discretion might be where it is known from the current elders that additional elders are needed and a particular candidate barely failed to meet the “YES” and “UNSURE” criteria. The Facilitation Committee shall make no deviations regarding objections or application of the “NO” criteria from the “Standard Criteria” above.

Any member knowing of a scriptural reason that would disqualify an elder candidate from serving should submit in writing the nature of the disqualification to a member of the Facilitation Committee during the week immediately following distribution of the Affirmation Forms. The Facilitation Committee will notify the current elders of any objections submitted and proceed as prescribed below.

### **Resolution of Written Objections**

If a written objection to a candidate is received regarding the candidate’s character, gifts, or capacities to serve as outlined in the selection criteria, the Committee shall proceed in the following manner.

The Committee shall inform the person raising the objection that his or her identity will not be disclosed to anyone other than Committee members, that the Committee will investigate the matter, and will inform the person raising the objection of its final disposition. The Committee shall then attempt, insofar as practicable, to gather enough reliable information to either uphold or dismiss the objection. If the Committee is unable to reach a unanimous conclusion that the objection should be dismissed, members of the Committee shall discuss the matter with the person against whom the objection was made. If the outcome of this discussion is that the accused person maintains that the

objection is unjustifiable and therefore he/she will not voluntarily withdraw from further consideration, the Committee shall inform the eldership of the objection and denial. From that point onward, the eldership shall be responsible for any further investigation and for reaching a decision on whether the candidate would be permitted to serve if he/she meets the selection criteria both in character and giftings as noted at the beginning of the document. The eldership shall communicate and explain their decision to the person in question and to the Committee. The Committee will then inform the person who raised the objection of its ultimate disposition.

### **Appointment and Affirmation Day**

At the first regular Sunday morning assembly of the church after completion of the process of determining who the church has selected to begin or to resume service as elders, the newly selected elders and their spouses shall be set before the congregation for formal installation. After the selected elders are solemnly charged with their responsibilities, the church will be asked to express vocally their acceptance and support. The assembly should conclude with a special prayer, including thanksgiving and invocation of divine blessings for the elders and their spouses.

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### **Proposed Timeline**

#### **August**

Create Elder Facilitation Team

Introduce Facilitation Team to Elder Selection Process and invite them for discussion and reflection.

Elder Facilitation Team finalizes process

#### **September**

Announce the Elder selection process and introduce The Facilitation Team to the congregation.

Begin sermon series on “calling” and “affirming” (3 weeks)

Facilitation Team distributes ballots to church

    Nomination of candidates begins (2-3 weeks)

    Facilitation Team receives nominations and reviews candidates

    Current Elders go through a period of discernment over potential candidates.

#### **October**

Finalize list of elder candidates

The Discernment Process

Candidates are announced to the church.

#### **November**

Congregation Affirmation Process beings:

    Affirmation Forms distributed and the Facilitation Team resolves conflicts or concerns in consultation with standing elders.



Congregation Affirmation Process concludes.

**December**

The new slate of elders are named.

**January**

Induction of eldership

**February**

The Facilitation Team and newly appointed Shepherds assess and critically evaluate the Elder selection process. Reflect on strengths and weaknesses for the purpose of future processes.

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*This document reflects contributions from the Hardin Valley Church of Christ, Northlake Church of Christ, Highland Church of Christ, New Braunfels Church of Christ, and churches that have engaged with the Siburt Institute.*