

# **THE ROLE OF ELDERS IN THE CHURCH OF CENTRAL AFRICA PRESBYTERIAN (CCAP)**

As Presented by  
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## INTRODUCTORY BACKGROUND (by Rev. Moses Chitawo)

The Blantyre mission, which took its name from Dr. David Livingstone's birthplace in Scotland, has its beginnings in 1875, when Henry Henderson, accompanied by Tom Bakwito, came seeking a suitable place for a mission, while further missionaries were recruited. The first party of missionaries arrived in Malawi in 1876, led by Dr. Macklin. On October 23, 1876, the Blantyre Mission station was established by Henry Henderson.

Some of the objectives of the mission included:

- Erecting a monument in a country where Dr. David Livingstone would be remembered
- Ending the slave trade; and introducing *legitimate* trade
- Introducing Christianity
- Assuming civil jurisdiction over Africans

Henry Henderson became the general director and a Christian magistrate. The first clergyman to join was Rev. Duff MacDonald in 1878. The mission encountered problems in combating the slave trade as well as assuming jurisdiction over Africans. Given these problems, it was necessary that the mission make a fresh start. Blantyre was re-founded in 1881 under the leadership of Rev. David Clement Scott. He was joined by Dr. Alexander Hetherwick in 1883. Dr. Scott was instructed to promote religious work *only*, and to ignore the previous objectives of commerce and jurisdiction.

In those days, the ministers often operated out of Scotland, and might only come to provide the sacraments once a year. During the rest of the year, the church was left in the hands of the African elders and evangelists. A number of mission stations were opened, including Domasi, Zomba, and Mulanje; and a school for training teachers and evangelists was opened.

Today, Blantyre Synod (alone) has an estimated membership of 1.2 million confirmed Christians (*excluding* children). It includes 18 presbyteries, with 600 congregations, and a membership of 195 ordained ministers (of which 15 are retired). In other words, there are 180 ministers for 600 congregations, creating approximately a 1:4 ratio. Domasi Presbytery's ratio is similar, as there are 10 active ministers for 43 congregations.

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<sup>1</sup> And edited for clarity, with their permission, by Rev. Dr. Matthew Camlin.

## PART I — MANAGEMENT OF THE CHURCH (by Rev. Moses Chitawo)

The ratio of pastors to congregations in the Synod of Blantyre is roughly 1:4, making nearly *all* pastors multi-church pastors. They are the rule, rather than the exception. But our church is Presbyterian: a word that comes from the Greek *presbuteros*, which means “elder.” This shows that our church administration relies upon the services of the church elders.

The church elders are comprised of three groups:

- Teaching elders (Pastors)
- Ruling Elders
- Retired Elders<sup>2</sup>

The pastor, who is a teaching elder, and other elders form the session, which runs the affairs of the church. But in order to manage well, the pastor (who, I remind you, is a multi-church pastor) must be adept at the following:

- Time Management.* The Multi-church pastor has great demands, so s/he must plan and guard her/his time well. Time management restricts outside commitments and activities, but should include the following:
  - Time with God
  - Time with family
  - Time for ministry
- Administration.* The Multi-church pastor has a number of churches where his care is needed. Each church will have its own internal organization requiring the pastor’s attention. The pastor needs wisdom, skill, and creativity to meet the needs of each church. “With God, all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26).

The Multi-church pastor has a number of sessions. The session administers the church; the session executive runs the daily affairs of the church. Its secretary is the Session Clerk, who works hand-in-hand with the pastor, and serves as the liaison between session and pastor between meetings.

Each congregation is divided into “zones” for easy administration. A zone has 15 to 20 Christians, being cared for by one church elder and one deacon. A collection of zones taken together comprise a “cottage,” which is led by a Cottage Chairman who reports to the Session Clerk, who reports to the church’s executive committee (including the Pastor).<sup>3</sup> The pastor is continuously updated of pastor concerns as the zonal leaders do their work.

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<sup>2</sup> Note, “Ruling Elder” denotes elders that are *currently* serving on the session, contrasted with “Retired Elders,” which are those whose terms on the session have expired. They are still elders of the church, but no longer *ruling*.

<sup>3</sup> More will be said about the church executive committee later in this presentation.

- C. *Work Delegation.* The pastor cannot be present in all of her/his churches every Sunday. Therefore, preaching, leadership, and pastoral care is delegated to the elders of those churches where the pastor will not be present. (Cf. Exodus 18, wherein Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, advises Moses to appoint elders to aid him in the administration of the Israelite camp.)
- D. *Movement between ministry settings.* Often the pastor will rotate between two churches on a given Sunday, as geography makes this possible.
- E. *Rotation from church to church.* On different Sundays of the month, the pastor will rotate from congregation to congregation. Teaching and pastoral care is also done *between* Sundays.

Because this is the reality—what is necessary in order for the Synod to provide pastoral care to all of its churches—healthy relationships between the pastor and her/his sessions is vital, including open communication 24/7, and a willingness (on the part of both parties) for delegation to take place. However, the sacraments of the church (Baptism and Holy Communion) are performed by the pastor alone.

- F. *Leadership development.* Also given this reality, the pastor must be a trainer of leadership. The elders will need to be disciplined in their work and sufficiently trained; both of these duties fall to the pastor. The pastor must know the church's constitution well, and must take time to be well-read in theology, because such things must also be taught to the elders, who take on such a large role in the spiritual leadership and administration of the church. (The Synod and Presbytery also serve as training resources.)
- G. *Planning.* The pastor, together with the Session Clerk, will prepare the programming for a congregation 3 to 4 months at a time.

It should also be noted that *visitation*, like preaching, is handled on a rotational basis. Pastoral visits, as they are needed, are provided to certain areas at certain times, unless an emergency is communicated to the pastor through a zone elder or Cottage Chairman.

## PART II — THE ROLE OF THE ELDER (By Elder Margaret Mpachika)

A church elder is elected by the zone members that s/he will represent and care for. Such a person must have had their marriage officiated at the church.<sup>4</sup> Her/his name is submitted to the Session Clerk; if found acceptable by the Session, her/his name is announced to the

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<sup>4</sup> In Malawi, it is common for a couple to be married by an agent of the state, and to later have their marriage blessed by the church. In the even that a person's marriage has *not* been blessed by the church, he or she is ineligible to serve as an elder or deacon. An elder or deacon may also be single, if he/she is deemed capable and active in the life of the church.

congregation, so that their manner of life may be observed for a period of three weeks. Church elders should exhibit the following, in addition to those qualities listed in 1 Tim. 3:2-5, in order to run her/his zone smoothly:

- Impartiality – s/he must be fair in judgment
- Integrity and frankness – s/he must be frank and honest in dealing with others
- Cooperative – s/he must be a good listener in dealing with zone members
- Friendliness – s/he should be friendly and interested in the welfare and problems of other members
- Personality – s/he should be a person who can be a good example to others
- Moral courage – s/he must be courageous, truthful in judgment, and possessing self-control, not losing her/his temper easily.

The church elders serve for a period of three years (and may be reelected once); afterward, they remain an elder of the church, but are “retired.” They may continue to lead church activities as assigned.

Elders serve as the leaders of their zones (each of which includes 15-20 Christians), organizing prayer services, and arranging for visitation of the elderly. Such a visitation will include a prayer service, attended by all of the church members in the zone, choirs from the congregation, and, if the pastor is available, may include Holy Communion.

The elders collect data on the Christians in their zone, act as counselors and guides to those whose attendance at church meetings has been lacking, and are involved in disciplinary cases within their zones.

If the pastor is unavailable, elders may find themselves responsible for conducting funeral services. They may also be asked to carry home communion to the elderly in their zones, after it has been consecrated by the Pastor, and with the sanction of the Session Clerk.

Elders are expected to participate as fully as possible in *all* activities of the church.

Among the duties that a church elder is *not* permitted to perform are:

- Officiating at marriages
- Conducting Holy Communion
- Baptisms
- Ordination of elders/deacons, the dedication of women’s guild members, etc.

The eldership provides opportunities for interaction and ministry with people, including learning about Christians’ problems; keeping track of who is contributing to the church financially and who is not; identifying Christians who are sick, weak, or too elderly to attend church; keeping track of Christian’s attendance records, particularly for Holy Communion; assisting Christians within her/his zone with spiritual matters; keeping track of people moving into or out of their zone. They communicate pastoral or disciplinary issues to the pastor through

the Session Clerk, including the loss of a Christian to another denomination; those seeking membership; funeral arrangements at a time of loss. And they often organize Bible studies with Christians within their zones, instead of (or in addition to) Bible studies held at the church.

### PART III — STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE MALAWIAN SYSTEM (by Rev. Picklen Chafulumira)

The problem that the Upper Ohio Valley Presbytery faces is that there are many small churches who cannot afford a pastor. But should they be neglected because they do not have the capacity? This presentation will focus on strengths and weaknesses of the CCAP church system.

#### A. Strengths

1. Biblical Strength — The great commission of Jesus Christ (Matt. 28:18-20). Christ's disciples were instructed to *go* and do what they were trained to do. Those appointed to leadership were responsible for *leading*.

The sharing of God's work, as modeled in Exodus 18. Jethro advised Moses to appoint leaders from among the people to aid him in administration and discipline. The Malawian system of relying upon strong church elders has the biblical strength of *sharing* the responsibility of leadership. A pastor cannot do all things alone, nor should s/he be expected to do so.

Christ's choice, declared in John 15:16. "You did not choose me, but I have chosen you." The *will* of God is paramount. Elders and pastors are chosen by God, through the voice of the people. We are challenged by God's Word to fulfill the calling to which we were called.

2. Executive Strength — Administrative structure through the Administrative Committee, composed of the pastor, Session Clerk, treasurers, youth superintendent, Women's Guild leader, parish chairperson, etc.

The role of this Administrative Committee is to act as the governing body of the church,<sup>5</sup> implementing all decisions of the session and higher councils, managing church properties, and meeting regularly to review the work of the church's various committees. They must be strong and have good working relationships with one another, the pastor, and the committees they oversee. They liaise with the finance committee to prepare the congregation's proposed budget, and act in cases of emergency, reporting to the vestry or calling for emergency Session meetings as needs arise.

This Administrative Committee cannot take action without the pastor (who serves as moderator), though when the pastor is not present, they can meet to discuss *proposals*.

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<sup>5</sup> This is not to be confused with the Session; nor does it supersede the Session. Rather, it ensures that the decisions made by the Session, presbytery, synod, etc., are carried out.

Ultimately, the pastor is always the moderator, and is overall in charge of all church affairs.

3. Procedural Strength — The practices and procedures of this system encourage all elders and deacons in the following ways:
  - Church attendance at *all* times (and not only when one has specific duties)
  - Attendance at *all* Session meetings and all activities within their jurisdictions (and beyond) — otherwise, they are declared failing in their duties.<sup>6</sup>
  - Good personal discipline (a lack of which will result in disciplinary proceedings before the Session)

Ordination vows are the binding code of conduct for every elder, and they are encouraged at all times to *practice* the faith they profess, as we are instructed by James 1:22, “But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” Those who violate their ordination vows are held accountable by the Session. By and large, elders take great pride in their work for the church, and take their duties very seriously.

4. Practical Strength — Again, Exodus 18 provides a Biblical example of how this system has practical strengths, in that:
  - Elders are organized and share responsibilities at all levels, working together to accomplish tasks and programs.
  - Elders are encouraged and empowered to take the initiative to implement programs on their own! While pastors are present (as they are able) to strengthen and encourage, it is the *elders* who undertake church programs.
  - A “Parish Committee,” comprised of members of all of the congregations under a pastor’s charge, exists to lend support to the minister.
  - Elders are expected to be prepared to preach—and often do so, whether in the presence *or* the absence of their church pastor! At times, the pastor’s participation in a worship service may be limited to as little as the benediction!
  - Elders unite the congregation, caring for their zones and bringing the congregation together.

Pastors, as a result, have very little administrative issues, and are therefore able to concentrate on their sacramental, preaching, teaching, prayer, and pastoral duties.

And, of course, this system allocates pastors in such a way that *all congregations receive pastoral leadership and care*, regardless of their size, status, or finances.

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<sup>6</sup> If an elder is absent from a Session meeting more than once without excuse, they are counseled by the Pastor and the Session. If they miss three meetings, the Session summons her/him to be reprimanded and/or removed from office. Their attendance at worship, zone activities, etc., is likewise monitored for the good of the church.

B. Weaknesses — This system has its challenges, as in any organization:

1. Biblical Challenges

As we are reminded in Numbers 16, envy among elders can lead to finger-pointing and rebellion. Self-imposition (such as that of the Sons of Zebedee in Mark 10) without being *chosen* for leadership can occur.

There is also the common temptation to make the same comparison that Jesus' disciples made in Luke 22:23-30 — “Who is the greatest?” This manifests itself particularly in the relationships between “retired” elders and ruling elders, as retired elders, believing that their experience makes them greater, wiser elders, do not properly respect the current ruling elders.

2. Practical Challenges

Some elders do not accept change when a minister is transferred, and do not adapt well to the leadership of a new administration.

Fear leads to hiding the truth, such that elders may fail to discipline their own family members due to embarrassment.

If elders fail in their duties, it becomes a confusing challenge for the whole church to deal with (e.g., if the elder responsible for preaching on Sunday morning doesn't show up!)

## CONCLUSION

There is always something more to be learned (the Bible itself speaks to us in the present, and is not simply a relic of the past), and God has blessed us with the opportunity to learn from one another. Many of our challenges are the same, and perhaps we should look to our neighbors for Godly wisdom, as we seek to improve upon our ministries.