Elders and Overseers

From even a casual reading of the New Testament you'll find that God seeks to carry out His mission of rescue and redemption through local churches. The New Testament contains letters written to local churches addressing local situations (as well as prescribing universal principles/commands). In addition, many of the commands in the New Testament imply a local context in order to be obeyed. Local churches are God's chosen ministry tool and local churches are comprised of people. With any gathering of people a certain level of organization is necessary in order to function. Leadership is an important part of the organizing process. God has given us in Scripture many texts that describe the relationship between those who are in the local church and their leadership.

The terms "elders" and "overseers" are interchangeable and designate the primary spiritual leaders of the local church (Titus 1:5; Acts 20:17, 28). The term "elder" connects the idea of maturity and the term "overseer" connects the idea of leadership responsibility to the office of elder. Ideally the local church has a plurality of elders (Acts 14:23, 20:17; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 5:17; James 5:14). Elders are equal in authority but not equal in influence. Their authority is to be expressed in loving servant-leadership and not selfish, domineering leadership (1 Peter 5:3; Hebrews 13:17). Though women may lead in the local church in many ways, God has limited the office of elder to men (see "Women in Ministry" position paper).

Elders are called to "shepherd the flock" (1 Peter 5:2) and "to serve as overseers" of the flock (1 Peter 5:2). They shepherd by caring, protecting and guarding the people and oversee by leading and directing the people. They actively serve the local church through prayer (James 5:14), ministry of the Word of God (Acts 6:4) including teaching and guarding the church's doctrine (Acts 20:27-31; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:9) and set theological and doctrinal boundaries (Acts 15).

The qualifications for elders are primarily set out in 1Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. Elders must be blameless in character, able to teach the Scriptures and defend against those who oppose the truth. An elder must be the "husband of one wife". We understand that this qualification does not exclude from the office of elder an unmarried man, remarried widowers, or necessarily one who has divorced and remarried. This qualification has been misunderstood to exclude men who have been divorced and remarried. The Greek text literally reads "one man woman" (note the absence of the definite article such that it does not say "the one wife") and all of the other qualifications listed by Paul speak to the present status of the man rather than the entirety of his past. Paul is not referring to a man's marital status but is prohibiting a polygamist and a husband who lacks the appropriate care and concern for and sexual fidelity to his wife. An elder must also manage his children well and not be a new Christ-follower.

Elders in the New Testament were selected by the original church planter (Acts 14:23) or by other elders (Titus 1:5) with recognition from the congregation for its leaders (Acts 6:3, 15:22-23). Scripture does not describe how elders should organize themselves, so this may be determined by church size, cultural context and specific needs of the church.