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the
Elder's
handbook



By Louis M. Tamminga

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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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The Elder's Handbook by Louis M. Tamminga. © 2009 by Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2850 Kalamazoo Ave. SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49560. This book is a revision of *Guiding God's People in a Changing World: A Handbook for Elders*, Faith Alive Christian Resources, 1998.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tamminga, Louis M.

The elder's handbook / by Louis M. Tamminga.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-59255-460-7 (alk. paper)

1. Christian Reformed Church—Government—Handbooks, manuals, etc. 2. Elders (Church officers)—Christian reformed Church—Handbooks, manuals, etc. I. Title.

BX6826.T35 2009

253—dc22

2008036838

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

to Jean
companion in caring

Contents

Preface 9

Part 1: The Office of Elder in Bible Times

1. Leaders among God’s Old Testament People 12

2. Leaders in Christ’s New Testament Church 14

3. Some Thoughts on “Office” 16

Part 2: The Well-Equipped Servant

4. The Nature of Divine Calling 22

5. A Person of Gifts 24

6. The Gift and Practice of Wisdom 26

7. Growing in Knowledge and Skills 28

8. Depending on the Bible 29

9. Devoted to Prayer 31

10. Managing Your Time 32

11. Feeling Inadequate 34

12. A Spiritual Vision for the Church 35

Part 3: Moving among God’s People

13. Districts 38

14. Getting to Know Your People 40

15. Record-Keeping 42

16. Forming a Spiritual Community 44

17. Spiritual Formation 47

18. Stewardship. 50

19. In the World 52

20. Making a Visit. 54

21. The Importance of Follow-Up Care	61
22. Chance Encounters as Ministry Opportunities	62
23. A Word About Boundaries	63
24. Visiting Single Members	65
25. Calling on People Who Are Ill	67
26. Ministry to the Elderly	70
27. Ministry to Youth	72
28. Ministry with People with Disabilities	75
29. Ministry to Those Who Suffer Abuse	77
30. Ministry to Homosexual Members	81
31. Ministry to Those Struggling with Addiction	83
32. Ministry to Those with Marriage Problems	85
33. Ministry to Those with Economic Problems	88
34. Ministry to the Bereaved	89
35. Ministry to the Dying	91
36. Ministry to the Suicidal	92
37. Caring for Those Who Leave Your Church	94

Part 4: Council and Consistory

38. The Council	100
39. Using the Church Order.	102
40. Structuring the Council.	103
41. Preparing the Agenda	106
42. Conducting the Church Council Meeting	108
43. Loyalty	110
44. Electing Council Members	111
45. Discretion and Confidentiality.	114
46. The Congregational Meeting	116

- 47. Searching for the Next Pastor118
- 48. Accountability and Encouragement122
- 49. Supporting the Pastor(s)127
- 50. Exercising Discipline129
- 51. Discipline of Officebearers134
- 52. Communication136
- 53. Visioning, Mission, Planning, Programming, and Goal Setting . . .138
- 54. Relating to Church Staff140
- 55. Dealing with Change141
- 56. Dealing with Conflict142
- 57. Overseeing Worship Services145
- 58. Overseeing the Administration of the Sacraments147
- 59. Using the Heidelberg Catechism in Preaching.151
- 60. Supporting Missions and Evangelism.152

Part 5: Beyond the Local Church

- 61. Being Part of Classis158
- 62. Welcoming Classical Church Visitors161
- 63. Being Part of Synod163
- 64. Being Part of the Worldwide Church166
- 65. In Support of Christian Schools168
- 66. Relating to Parachurch Organizations170

In Conclusion: Godspeed!172

Topical Index173

Appendix: Denominational Offices, Ministries and Agencies, and Publications179

Preface

This book is about elders and for elders. It reflects many years of working side by side with elders, not only as a pastor but as an elder myself. This is a how-to book of sorts, but I hope you will find it more than that.

The apostle Paul wrote, “Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task” (1 Tim. 3:1). When you were elected and ordained to be an elder (overseer) in your church, you probably felt more trepidation than Paul seems to admit. But if this handbook will help you to fulfill this noble task more effectively, both the church and you yourself will be the richer for it. In the end may God receive your thanks for having called you to serve in this special task.

This book contains five parts:

- ▶ Part 1 provides a brief biblical background to the office of elder and offers some general observations on the concept of “office.”
- ▶ Part 2 focuses on you, the person who has accepted God’s call to serve as elder. It discusses the nature of calling, how you can prepare yourself for the tasks ahead, what gifts are needed, how you can increase your skills, and so on.
- ▶ Part 3 considers your ministry to the individuals entrusted to your care.
- ▶ Part 4 explores the ministry of the consistory and council as they serve the congregation and oversee the programmatic part of church life.
- ▶ Part 5 consists of a brief survey of your church beyond the contours of denominational life.

Read this book to sharpen your skills as an elder, and reread certain sections as needs arise in your work (see the topical index). This book can also be used for group study in council meetings, elders’ conferences, or training sessions for new elders.

I want to thank the dozens of elders and pastors—too many to acknowledge individually here—who afforded me the benefit of their observations and suggestions, helping to shape the revised edition of this Elder’s Handbook.

—L.M.T.

The Office of Elder in the Bible

We'll begin by seeing what the Old and New Testaments have to teach us about the office of elder. Then we'll examine the kinds of activities elders did and make some general observations about the offices of the church. The office you hold in the church is a venerable one that comes with God's special promises.

Part
1

1. Leaders among God's Old Testament People

The Bible's earliest references to elders are found in the book of Exodus. When Israel was a small, struggling nation held in slavery in Egypt, God placed elders—leaders of families and tribes—among the people. Although we don't know if their office was specifically instituted, we do know that Moses relied on their wisdom and understanding.

Elders in the Old Testament were leaders among God's people in good times and in bad. They were not afraid to take risks. They accompanied Moses on his repeated trips to Pharaoh and helped Moses lead Israel through desert wanderings to the Promised Land. As the years went by, Moses increasingly depended on their help.

Here are just a few examples of some of the responsibilities elders assumed:

- ▶ Moses appointed some elders to be rulers in Israel (Ex. 18:24-25).
- ▶ Moses sought their advice before going to Pharaoh to negotiate the Israelites' exodus from Egypt (Ex. 4:29).
- ▶ Moses selected seventy elders to accompany him on special missions (Ex. 24:1-11; Num. 11:16).
- ▶ Elders were appointed as judges to dispense justice, sometimes in very complex situations (Deut. 21:1-9).
- ▶ Later, elders heard civil cases as they sat in the city gate (Josh. 20:4).
- ▶ They were liturgical leaders (Deut. 31:9).
- ▶ Elders were called upon to enforce the law (Deut. 27:1).
- ▶ Elders helped the people by settling disputes (Deut. 25:7-10).
- ▶ Some elders were called to participate in ceremonies celebrating the forgiveness of sins (Lev. 4:15).

During the chaotic years of the judges, the elders were the last resort of reason, protection, and stability for many people. Their absence from the city gate when their services were most needed was a chilling judgment on the city of Jerusalem

(Lam. 5:14). At the time of Jesus' birth, elders occupied a prominent place in the religious world. But because most of them lacked the spiritual foresight to celebrate his coming, God raised up other leaders such as Simeon and Anna to welcome the Savior.

The task of elders was not easy then; it is no easier now. Elders sometimes failed then; they sometimes fail now. But God used them then and continues to use them today. In the Old Testament, the elders kindled messianic hope in the hearts of God's people. Today elders encourage the people they shepherd to magnify the Messiah in their lives.