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It's Easier Together:

Christian Teamwork through the Eyes of Ruling Elders in Mid-Sized Reformed Churches

By
Matt Giesman

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry.

Saint Louis, Missouri

2020

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Graduation Date   May 15, 2020

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate how ruling elders from mid-sized Reformed churches describe their teamwork. The assumption of this study is that most pastors do not begin their ministry with a sufficient understanding of the need for teamwork amongst their lay leaders and that such teamwork is vital to their ministry success.

This study utilized a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews with eight elders at mid-sized churches (approximately 150-450 in attendance) in the Presbyterian Church in America. The literature review and analysis of the eight interviews focused on three key areas to understand the nature of teamwork in mid-sized Reformed churches: trust in teams, power dynamics in teams, and the parity of elders.

This study found that the following are the five most common descriptions of teamwork in mid-sized Reformed churches: fellowship beyond business hours builds trust and teamwork; healthy conflict and patient listening are hallmarks of healthy teamwork; power is used "judiciously" in healthy teams; consensus is sought and usually achieved in healthy teams; healthy teams are humble, with no MVP, with no head except Christ.

Therefore, the study concluded that these strategies should be implemented and modeled in mid-sized Reformed churches by elders.

TREN ABSTRACT (100 WORDS)

The purpose of this study is to investigate how ruling elders from mid-sized Reformed churches describe their teamwork.

This study utilized a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews with eight elders at mid-sized Reformed churches. The literature review and interview analysis focused on three areas: trust in teams, power in teams, and the parity of elders.

This study found the following five qualities to be marks or causes of teamwork: fellowship beyond business hours; healthy conflict and listening; power used "judiciously"; seeking and usually achieving consensus; humility.

The study concluded these strategies should be implemented by elders in mid-sized Reformed churches.

To my wonderful, Godly wife Liz, who encouraged me in this pursuit, who put your own grad school pursuits on hold so we could raise two kids and keep our sanity, and who believes in me when I don't always believe in myself. Thank you. I'm not sure how to repay you, so I'll just try to spend the rest of my life being the best husband I can be. I love you, Lizzy.

Not finance. Not strategy. Not technology. It is teamwork that remains the ultimate competitive advantage, both because it is so powerful and so rare.

— Patrick Lencioni, The Five Dysfunctions of a Team.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to my wife Liz, whom I can't thank enough. Thank you, Dad, for loaning me your Lencioni books. Thank you, Mom, for watching the kids while I wrote so many times. Thank you to the session of Forestgate Presbyterian Church, for embodying the ethos I have tried to study and for providing me (in so many ways) the opportunity to pursue this degree. Thank you to our Assistant Pastor Steve Stanton, who once said, "That sounds like your dissertation," and helped me brainstorm by scribbling thoughts about the plurality of elders, submission, and how it glorifies Christ. Thank you to my dog, Ty, who kept me company late at night while I wrote. Thank you to Jim Urish, my predecessor who left behind a great team of elders, even if you refused to take credit for it. I hope you and Bob Stuart are enjoying the golf in heaven. Thank you to my brother Nate, who told me "less is more" and helped me survive (and enjoy) college. I had to change approaches for this degree, but thanks for getting me this far. Thank you to many others who offered encouragement, help, or some other indispensable assistance without which this project would have never been completed.

Abbreviations

PCA   Presbyterian Church in America

BCO   Book of Church Order (of the PCA)

Chapter 1

Introduction

Healthy elder teamwork is a precious gift, but it is rarer than pastors initially realize. Healthy leadership dynamics are often assumed in seminary courses, maybe not by the instructors, but often by future pastors with limited experience. The unfortunate reality about the lack of health of lay leadership in the local church can be a rude awakening. Business leadership author Patrick Lencioni writes, "The fact remains that teams, because they are made up of imperfect human beings, are inherently dysfunctional."[1]

The lack of healthy teamwork might be due to unqualified leaders, but even churches with qualified leaders can experience poor interpersonal dynamics. Lencioni writes of his fictional team, "And yet, as bad as the team was, they all seemed like well-intentioned and reasonable people when considered individually."[2] Sadly, sometimes teams are less than the sum of their parts. Peter M. Senge, who studies organizational learning at MIT, echoes this unfortunate sentiment, asking rhetorically, "How can a team of committed mangers with individual IQs above 120 have a collective IQ of 63?"[3]

Lack of trust among leaders is one cause of teamwork breakdown or dysfunction. Lencioni says, "Trust is the foundation of real teamwork. And so the first dysfunction is a

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[1] Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), vii.

[2] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 19.

[3] Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 9.

failure on the part of team members to understand and open up to one another."[4] There

may be even more complex causes to this lack of teamwork amongst the leaders of God's

church. The sad reality is that inexperienced pastors assume they will have healthy

teamwork in their churches, but they often don't. If pastors don't have this indispensable

quality, they are forced to figure out how to develop it. And if a pastor is blessed enough

to have it, his challenge is to figure out how to keep it and integrate newer leaders into a

healthy team environment.

While there are many ways that teamwork among elders can be derailed, the study

of healthy teamwork requires more than a list of pitfalls to avoid. There also needs to be

greater understanding of the poetry and the plumbing of leadership that makes healthy

organizations run smoothly.[5] Because a team of elders is both a group of equals

collectively and a group of individual leaders elected by a congregation, a healthy team

of elders must exhibit strong leadership qualities and effective teamwork at the same

time. One key to do this is to build trust with one another.

Trust in Teams

Lencioni's fictional executive Kathryn tells her team at one point, "If we don't

trust one another, then we aren't going to engage in open, constructive, ideological

conflict. And we'll just continue to preserve a sense of artificial harmony."[6] If leaders

can't trust one another, they will not be able to submit their ideas and opinions to an open

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[4] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 43.

[5] Bob Burns, Tasha D. Chapman, and Donald C. Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us About Surviving and Thriving* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2013), 27.

[6] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 91.

debate and a fair exchange of ideas. They may resort to manipulation and dishonesty to get their way, not trusting that the other leaders will come to the same conclusions as them. Yet trust, while it may sound counterintuitive, will lead to a great deal of debate and conflict. Lencioni's Kathryn tells her team, "Every effective team I've ever observed had a substantial level of debate. Even the most trusting teams mixed it up a lot."[7] The absence of such debate is actually unhealthy. At one point, Kathryn even says, "Consensus is horrible." She clarifies that true consensus, when everyone happens to agree, is not a bad thing. But if not, forced consensus is "an attempt to please everyone, which usually just turns into displeasing everyone equally."[8]

Amy Edmondson, in her book *Teaming*, agrees that conflict in the context of trust is healthy for "teaming," her phrase for teamwork. She describes an environment where subordinates can voice opposition to ideas as one that is psychologically safe. She writes, "Psychological safety describes a climate in which raising a dissenting view is expected and welcomed."[9] Lencioni describes the trust that such a safe environment would require. "Trust is the confidence among team members that their peers' intentions are good, and that there is no reason to be protective or careful around the group."[10] One might think that such trust would lead to less conflict, but the reverse is true. Edmondson says, "Conflict is inevitable when teaming. … Psychological safety may lead to more conflict

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[7] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 46.

[8] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 95.

[9] Amy C. Edmondson, *Teaming: How Organizations Learn, Innovate, and Compete in the Knowledge Economy*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Pfeiffer, 2014), 119.

[10] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 195.

and disagreement than would happen in a less safe environment."[11] Lencioni agrees, "Great teams do not hold back with one another. … They are unafraid to air their dirty laundry. They admit their mistakes, their weaknesses, and their concerns without fear of reprisal."[12]

Lencioni and Edmondson would likely say that the goal is not less conflict but better conflict. Lencioni highlights the tension in teams that trust one another enough to have such conflict. He writes, "I don't think anyone ever gets completely used to conflict. If it's not a little uncomfortable, then it's not real. The key is to keep doing it anyway." Just a moment later, one of the characters in Lencioni's leadership fable who was previously very disengaged from the group, Martin, shows how much he has come to appreciate the team ethos. He says, "I don't think I could handle going back to the way things were before. And so if it comes down to a little interpersonal discomfort versus politics, I'm opting for the discomfort."[13] Pastors must play a key role in encouraging this type of conversation amongst elder teams. In their book, *Resilient Ministry*, Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, and Donald Guthrie write, "Eventually, if pastors want to raise the spiritual and emotional health of their leadership boards and congregations, they will need to create conversations in which hardships can be named and discussed."[14]

Teamwork requires trust, and that trust may look different than expected. Trust does not display itself in silent approval. Teams that trust one another are willing to say

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[11] Edmondson, *Teaming*, 127.

[12] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 43.

[13] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 175.

[14] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 205.

what they really think without fear of negative consequences. While that might result in

temporary discomfort, it likely will not result in unresolved tension amongst healthy

teams with established trust. Another key to teamwork is understanding the power

dynamics that are present in any team.

Power in Teams

The trust and safety that Edmondson and Lencioni describe are not a given in

every team. In fact, since most teams have some pre-existing hierarchies, there are natural

barriers to the psychological safety that fuels good teaming. For a team in any context to

overcome these, they must first be aware of these natural dynamics. Peter Scazzero wrote

the book *The Emotionally Healthy Leader* as a tale of his lessons learned through his

emotional failures as the founding pastor of a New York City megachurch. Those lessons

include a proper understanding of power in the church. "The problem is that so few

leaders have an awareness of, let alone reflect on, the nature of their God-given power."[15]

And this lack of awareness about power dynamics is not a benign problem. Scazzero

writes, "Almost every church, nonprofit organization, team, and Christian community I

know bears deep scars and hurt due to a failure to steward power and set wise boundaries.

Churches are fragile, complex, confusing systems."[16] Scazzero's defines power as "the

capacity to influence" and says "we all use that power – well or poorly, for good or ill."[17]

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[15] Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader: How Transforming Your Inner Life Will Deeply Transform Your Church, Team, and the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 243.

[16] Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 242.

[17] Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 242.

For the purposes of this research, this basic neutral definition will serve as the starting point.

One of the most basic forms of power is that which comes from superior positions within a hierarchy. Edmondson says that hierarchies can lead to fear which inhibits those on the lower end of the hierarchy from speaking up, one of her four components of teaming.[18] Most successful organizations, therefore, "have figured out how to manage the tension between hierarchy and psychological safety."[19] In addition to understanding hierarchy, teamwork requires a knowledge of organizational politics and some sacrifices of power. These other topics flow out of a proper knowledge of hierarchy and its impact on the power of each team member.

Hierarchy

Formal hierarchies exist in many organizations. Scazzero refers to this type of power as "positional power."[20] Edmondson traces the history of management structures in corporate America, which long relied on a "command and control", top-down structure. While this structure proved to be efficient for its time and its business goals, it had some unexamined assumptions, which still linger today. Edmondson writes, "Many managers believe that without fear people will not work hard enough."[21] Further research also discovered a previously-discussed effect on teams: hierarchies can inhibit

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[18] Edmondson, *Teaming*, 132–33.

[19] Edmondson, *Teaming*, 131.

[20] Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 245.

[21] Edmondson, *Teaming*, 19.

subordinates from speaking up.[22] In other words, the fear that many managers think is essential is alive and well and preventing subordinates from participating in the collaborative work at hand.

This may lead one to think that hierarchies need to be eliminated and that leadership is unimportant, but Edmondson claims the opposite. "Leadership is now more needed than ever before."[23] She says it is imperative for leaders to encourage psychological safety in their teams. Edmondson writes, "The most important influence on psychological safety is the nearest manager, supervisor, or boss."[24] Scazzero agrees that the superior bears greater responsibility in these areas. "Remember that the burden to set boundaries and keep them clearly falls on the person with greater power."[25] This goal that leaders would reduce fear, increase psychological safety in the name of more collaboration and teamwork is lofty but noble, and it hints at a further need for teams to properly navigate their power dynamics: leaders must be willing to sacrifice their power.

Sacrifice

Teamwork may sound good when everyone solves a problem, but it can be risky for a leader to initiate teamwork. Leaders who invite feedback and new ideas may be seen as less confident or competent. But if they truly want any wisdom beyond their own, they will have to invite it, no matter the risks. Edmondson writes, "The principal strategy for

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[22] Edmondson, *Teaming*, 132.

[23] Edmondson, *Teaming*, 4.

[24] Edmondson, *Teaming*, 137.

[25] Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 256.

developing the necessary level of collaboration, however, is leadership inclusiveness, in which higher-status individuals in a group actively invite and express appreciation for the views of others."[26] The fear that subordinates have will not be overcome unless someone with greater power and authority is willing to give them the "permission to speak freely," as the military commonly calls it.

In his book, *Strong and Weak*, Andy Crouch highlights the tension in these situations and the burden that the leader must bear to empower the powerless. He writes, "The most important thing we are called to do is help our communities meet their deepest vulnerability with appropriate authority. … The leader must bear the shared vulnerabilities that the community does not currently have the authority to address."[27] Will this come with risks? Of course. But, "This is what it is to be a leader: to bear the risks that only you can see, while continuing to exercise authority that everyone can see."[28] Max DePree, in his book *Leadership is an Art*, agrees, "Leaders don't inflict pain; they bear pain."[29] But if the team is going to function at its highest level, "the necessary level of collaboration," as Edmondson called it, then powerful leaders will have to bear the fear and the risk that lower-status individuals feel so acutely. To sacrifice and risk within an established hierarchy implies that one has some knowledge of organizational politics.

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[26] Edmondson, *Teaming*, 205.

[27] Andy Crouch, *Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk and True Flourishing* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2016), 122.

[28] Crouch, *Strong and Weak*, 117.

[29] Max DePree, *Leadership Is an Art* (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1990), 16.

Politics

Hierarchies are a given in most organizations, either formally or informally.

When those with power sacrifice their power, it will help overcome some of the fear of

the lower members of the hierarchy. It will also require those with power to understand

the reality of organizational politics. While that term can be loaded, Burns, Chapman, and

Guthrie – in a follow-up book focused particularly on this topic – define "politics" as a

neutral set of actions between people that can be used for good or ill.[30] They also identify

"negotiation" as the one of the key elements of church politics, saying, "Negotiation is a

consistent activity in the art of ministry leadership."[31] Lencioni takes a more negative

view of organizational politics, writing, "Politics is when people choose their words and

actions based on how they want others to react rather than based on what they really

think."[32] He also links "politics" with "ambiguity," which runs counter to his ideals of

trust and open communication in teams.[33]

Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie are aware of this side of politics, but their definition

(along with the concept of negotiation) encompasses a wider set of actions that they see

as inherently neutral. They write, "The ministry involves negotiating with others,

choosing among conflicting wants and interests, developing trust, locating support and

opposition, timing actions sensitively, and knowing the informal and formal

[30] Bob Burns, Tasha D. Chapman, and Donald C. Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry: Navigating Power Dynamics and Negotiating Interests* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2019), 17.

[31] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 28, 221.

[32] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 88.

[33] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 85.

organizational sources of influence and action."[34] In short, Lencioni uses the term

"politics" in only a negative way, showing how people use their capacities to undermine

organizational trust, whereas Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie define it neutrally. The latter

encourage honest conversations, "in which hardships can be named and discussed."[35]

Seeing politics as a neutral set of actions that can be used for good or ill, similar to what

Scazzero says about power, encourages pastors to navigate the political waters of the

church wisely and patiently. Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie write, "One of the most

important pastoral skills for helping further the maturity and growth of a church may be

the pastor's ability to remain calm."[36] This same advice could apply to the maturity of a

team of elders.

 To encourage the type of teamwork that is needed, pastors and other elders must

be aware of the political dynamics of their team and congregation. This will involve

regular negotiation, which may also involve sacrifice, a necessary component of

overcoming the negative effects that hierarchies can have on group dynamics and

teamwork. These sacrifices of power become more natural when one understands the

Biblical teaching on the parity of elders.

The Parity of Elders

 Trust within a hierarchy can be accomplished when a leader sacrifices some of his

power to empower those underneath him. But the structure of a Reformed church session,

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[34] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 28.

[35] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 205.

[36] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 126.

a board or team of elders, complicates ideas of hierarchy. While those elders on a session are elected leaders of the congregation, they are also supposed to be equals when they sit in session together. Teamwork amongst such a group requires that they recognize the potential for abuses of power, the need for mutual submission and unity, and the inherent parity of all elders.

Abuse of Power

Timothy Witmer, a PCA pastor who also served as a professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, highlights the shepherding nature of the Biblical office of elder, as well as "the ultimate inadequacy of human shepherds."[37] Witmer uses a form of the word "abuse" four times to describe King David's sin with Bathsheba. For example, he writes, "King David also fell short when he abused his power as shepherd-king of Israel."[38] Robert D. Stuart, who worked for Peacemaker Ministries and served as an interim pastor of seven different congregations in his final years of ministry, sees the team of elders as another potential place where abuses of power can occur. He writes, "When one seeks to exert influence over others negatively, a split in the elder board will surface, conflict will result, and the peace and unity of the church will be disrupted."[39] The fact that abuses occur underscores the need for servant leaders to protect Christ's sheep. Witmer says, "There will always be leaders – the issue is whether they are the leaders called and gifted by God to shepherd his flock or those who push themselves forward so that they can push

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[37] Timothy Z. Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader: Achieving Effective Shepherding in Your Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2010), 17.

[38] Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 18.

[39] Robert. D. Stuart, *Church Revitalization from the Inside Out* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2016), 21.

others around."[40] The church desires to have godly leaders who will shepherd the flock together in the spirit of mutual submission as an expression of the unity of Christ's church.

Mutual Submission and Unity

Stuart is careful to note what submission and unity are not. Unity is not a "what the pastor says goes" approach that banishes dissent and discussion; he calls that "uniformity." Rather, "Unity says, 'Let's trust one another by collaborating to promote the gospel and to enhance the kingdom of Christ in our local community.'"[41] He argues that "consensus voting" serves the goal of unity, encouraging delayed decisions until a greater consensus or even a unanimous decision is achieved. This is not a forced consensus that stifles debate, which Lencioni opposed, but a desire to delay non-urgent decisions to see if consensus can be achieved. Yet if unanimity cannot be achieved, "Consensus appeals to those who voted in the negative to submit to the decision of the majority without disgruntlement."[42] He clarifies that submission is "not necessarily agreement, but voluntarily placing one's will under another's when one's own preference would have been otherwise."[43] He urges those in the minority to have "solidarity with their brothers."[44] Also, "Once a decision is made, it is the elder board's decision, and

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[40] Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 22.

[41] Stuart, *Church Revitalization*, 49.

[42] Stuart, *Church Revitalization*, 40.

[43] Stuart, *Church Revitalization*, 41.

[44] Stuart, *Church Revitalization*, 55.

each elder is to present a unified front."[45] Stuart's approach reminds the researcher of a

late ruling elder who put it this way, "Once we leave that room, every vote was

unanimous." Submission and unity among elders does not stifle dissent, but it leaves the

particulars of that dissent in the session meeting room. Dirty laundry can be shared

willingly amongst fellow elders, but not with others. During session meetings, vigorous

debate can be encouraged; once the meetings are over, unity and submission to the will of

the body is the rule.

This expectation is based, in part, on the concept of equality, or parity, of elders.

Witmer writes, "With respect to authority and accountability, elders are on the same

'level' with one another."[46] Stuart agrees, pointing to this concept as a way to prevent the

abuses of power discussed earlier. He writes, "To prevent corruption, church leaders are

to recognize the parity of elders – all are equal in rule and ministry. No one is greater

than another."[47] The theologian John Murray, in his *Collected Writings*, agrees, "There is

not the slightest evidence in the New Testament that among the elders there was any

hierarchy; the elders exercise government in unison, and on a parity with one another."[48]

The parity of elders encourages submission and unity rather than abuses of power. It

undermines the idea of hierarchy, which discourages teamwork. It also fosters the

building of trust between fellow elders and encourages greater teamwork and

collaboration.

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[45] Stuart, *Church Revitalization*, 89.

[46] Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 41.

[47] Stuart, *Church Revitalization*, 21.

[48] John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 2:346.

Purpose Statement

Lencioni writes, "Not finance. Not strategy. Not technology. It is teamwork that remains the ultimate competitive advantage, both because it is so powerful and so rare."[49] Since pastors who lack a good team of elders often want a good team, and since pastors who have a good team want to maintain and even improve it, understanding the nature of good teams of elders is vital for the health of the church and her pastors. The purpose of this study is to investigate how ruling elders from mid-sized Reformed churches describe their teamwork. The researcher has identified three main areas that are central to this investigation: trust in teams, power in teams, and the parity of elders.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How do ruling elders experience teamwork?

    a. How do ruling elders experience trust in teamwork?

    b. How do ruling elders experience power in teamwork?

    c. How do ruling elders experience parity in teamwork?

2. How do ruling elders overcome challenges to teamwork?

3. How are ruling elders mentoring future leaders in teamwork?

Significance of the Study

This study has significance for any pastor, especially those who spend significant time working with church boards and lay ministry leaders. For pastors whose boards

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[49] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, vii.

display healthy teamwork amongst leaders, this study may help to identify, name, and reinforce existing best practices. For those without healthy teamwork in their board (or other leadership structures, official or unofficial), this study may help to name harmful practices and suggest alternatives.

This study also has significance particularly for Reformed pastors who serve as either a solo, associate or senior pastor, because such roles typically entail membership in a board of elders and because such men are often referred to as teaching elders.[50] Solo pastors and senior pastors have been called "the first among equals," in settings like this, and an integral part of their role is leading the board of elders. This leadership is seen in several ways: The pastor is typically charged with moderating session meetings.[51] He may also be expected to disciple and train the elders.[52] Since pastors need healthy elder teamwork for their churches to thrive, any pastor in such a role previously described could benefit from this study.

Others who may benefit from the study include ruling elders (or other lay ministry leaders) and future pastors, who may be able to better understand the role that pastors and lay leaders play in the church.

Definition of Terms

In the context of this study, the terms are defined as follows:

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[50] Presbyterian Church in America, *The Book of Church Order*, 2018 ed. (Lawrenceville, GA: Committee on Discipleship Ministries, 2018), 7–2.

[51] Presbyterian Church in America, *BCO*, 5–10.

[52] Presbyterian Church in America, *BCO*, 24–1.

Assistant Pastor – A pastor serving a local church under the leadership of a senior pastor who is elected by the session and therefore is not a member of the session.

Associate Pastor – A pastor serving a local church under the leadership of a senior pastor who is elected by the congregation and therefore is a member of the session.

Authority – Power and influence derived from a stated position.

BCO – The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America; a constitutional document that lays out the structure of the church's government or polity.

Elders/Ruling Elders – Lay leaders elected by the congregation in most Reformed churches.

Politics – A neutral set of actions between people that can be used for good or ill.[53]

Power – "The capacity to influence" used by anyone "well or poorly, for good or ill."[54]

Session – The body or board of elders of a local church; includes ruling elders and teaching elders who have been elected by the congregation.

Teaching Elders – Used interchangeably with "pastor" in most Reformed churches.

Teaming/Teamwork – The terms will be used interchangeably to describe the collaborative process of working together by any group, composed either of equals or of superiors, subordinates, and equals.

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[53] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 17.

[54] Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 242.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to investigate how ruling elders from mid-sized Reformed churches describe their teamwork. The assumption of this study is that most pastors do not begin their ministry with a sufficient understanding of the need for teamwork amongst their lay leaders and that such teamwork is vital to their ministry success.

The researcher has identified three main literature areas that are central to this investigation: trust in teams, power in teams, and the parity of elders. A variety of published sources that address these topics will be explored and compared in order to provide a foundation for the qualitative research.

Trust in Teams

Trust among teams does not manifest itself in silent agreement.[55] In fact, if there is no discussion among teams, then there may be a greater problem. Kathleen Eisenhardt, Jean Kahwajy, and L.J. Bourgeois III came to the same conclusion in their provocatively titled piece in the *Harvard Business Review*, "How Management Teams Can Have a Good Fight." They write, "We found that the alternative to conflict is usually not agreement but apathy and disengagement."[56] In other words, conflict is a sign of trust, and absence of conflict, though it may look like peace, may simply be the breeding

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[55] Edmondson, *Teaming*, 127.

[56] Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, Jean L. Kahwajy, and L. J. Bourgeois III, "How Management Teams Can Have a Good Fight," *Harvard Business Review* 75, no. 4 (August 7, 1997): 85.

ground for bigger problems. Therefore, this section will explore the necessity of conflict as an evidence of trust, and the impact of politics upon trust. Psychological safety, a key element of trust, and the benefits of trust will also be defined and explored.

The Necessity of Conflict

Lencioni calls absence of conflict an "artificial harmony," whereas Edmondson calls conflict "inevitable" in her ideal organization that actively practices "teaming." Lencioni acknowledges the discomfort that such conflict might cause, but he then writes, "If it's not a little uncomfortable, then it's not real."[57] Instead, it's merely an artificial harmony, not a real one that has been forged through frank, productive discussion. Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, and Bourgeois agree when they write, "Management teams whose members challenge one another's thinking develop a more complete understanding of the choices, create a richer range of options, and ultimately make the kinds of effective decisions necessary in today's competitive environments."[58] In the land of artificial harmony, choices may not be understood, so existing options may be narrow, and decisions may be less effective than they could be. Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie think pastors should avoid this land, as well, in favor of creating "conversations where hardships can be named and discussed."[59] A team who has mastered conflict might find those better decisions that Eisenhardt et al promised. Lencioni writes in *The Advantage*, his magnum opus on leadership, "When there is trust, conflict becomes nothing but the

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[57] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 175.

[58] Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, and Bourgeois III, "How Management Teams Can Have a Good Fight," 77.

[59] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 205.

pursuit of truth, an attempt to find the best possible answer."[60] All of the authors

surveyed agreed that some conflict is necessary for a healthy organization. In order to

flee the isle of artificial harmony and pursue truth, teams must understand the need for

openness in conflict, the difference between healthy and unhealthy consensus, and the

difference between healthy and unhealthy conflict.

Openness

In order to arrive at a place of trust and enter into conflict, teams must be willing

to get past artificial harmony and get uncomfortable. In short, they must be open about

their disagreements, struggles, and mistakes. Lencioni writes, "Great teams do not hold

back with one another … They are unafraid to air their dirty laundry. They admit their

mistakes, their weaknesses, and their concerns without fear of reprisal."[61] Authors Kerry

Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler, the cofounders of the

corporate training organization VitalSmarts, wrote the book on not holding back and

titled it *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*. They say that

the key to such conversations, especially "when it comes to risky, controversial, and

emotional conversations," is to "find a way to get all relevant information" on the table.[62]

Getting such information on the table may cause conflict, and that is the point, so that the

team can work through challenges together and find the best solutions. But in order to do

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[60] Patrick M. Lencioni, *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else In Business* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 38.

[61] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 43.

[62] Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switsler, *Crucial Conversations Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2011), 23.

that, several authors say the team should not seek consensus too early, especially when it does not naturally arise.

Consensus

Lencioni provocatively writes, "Consensus is horrible." But his meaning is more nuanced. Lencioni is primarily opposed to forced consensus that has not considered different options, as well as quick compromises where the parties could have worked harder towards collaboration. He names a better method "disagree and commit" and describes it as, "You can argue about something and disagree, but still commit to it as though everyone originally bought into the decision completely."[63] Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, and Bourgeois describe a similar outcome as "consensus with qualification." They write, "Most people want their opinions to be considered seriously but are willing to accept that those opinions cannot always prevail."[64] Both authors describe conditions where conflict is not bypassed in favor of artificial harmony but where the "fight" has a goal and end point. Members are free to disagree in a way that fosters an open exchange of ideas, but once a consensus is reached they are willing to commit to the decision, because they are confident that their views were considered.

While this is a consensus, it is not the horrible kind that Lencioni feared but one that was forged by not holding back, getting all the information and relevant opinions on the table. It may be a qualified consensus, because it was not an instant consensus, but it is a consensus, nonetheless. Such consensus does not appear suddenly, and it should not

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[63] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 95.

[64] Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, and Bourgeois III, "How Management Teams Can Have a Good Fight," 84.

be forced, either. Rather, the goal for teams working through complex issues should be to air their disagreements before they commit, to state their reservations or qualifications before they reach consensus. But even when teams do this, it does not mean there is no danger in conflict.

Healthy (and unhealthy conflict)

If silence and artificial harmony are negative, then one might conclude that all conflict is inherently productive, but this would be too simplistic. In *The Advantage*, Lencioni expands on the concept of artificial harmony, including it as one of several points on his conflict continuum.
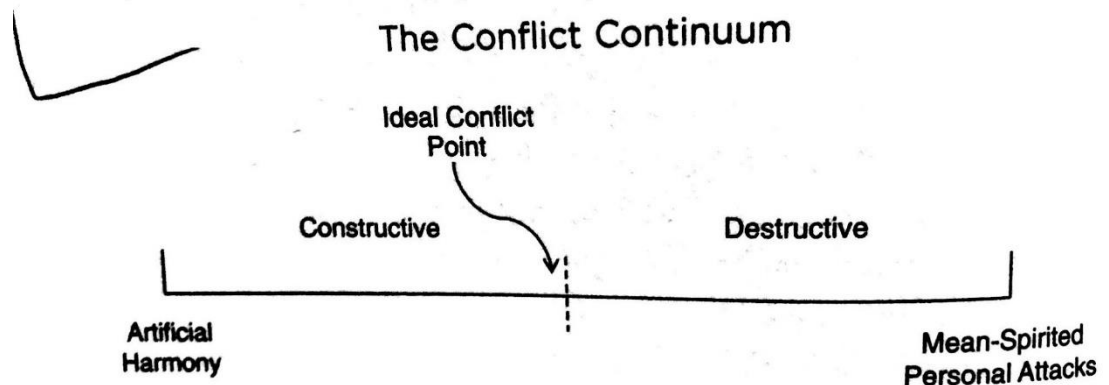
Figure 1. Conflict Continuum[65]

Lencioni's "Ideal Conflict POINT" is "the point where a team is engaged in all the constructive conflict they could possibly have, but never stepping over the line into destructive territory." [66] Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, and Bourgeois, the authors who wrote the

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[65] Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 42.

[66] Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 42.

article on having a good fight, recognize this same dynamic in different language. They write, "The challenge … is to keep constructive conflict over issues from degenerating into dysfunctional interpersonal conflict, to encourage managers to argue without destroying their ability to work as a team."[67] Based on their study of management teams, they recommended debating ideas based on facts, injecting humor, not forcing consensus, and maintaining a balanced power structure, the latter being described as "those in which the CEO is more powerful than the other members of the top-management team, but the members do wield substantial power, especially in their own well-defined areas of responsibility."[68] The alternatives to such balanced teams were autocratic leaders, who instigated a lot of "interpersonal friction," and weak leaders who encouraged "managers to jockey for position," resulting in similar levels of interpersonal conflict.

So how does a team maintain the proper level and type of conflict? Saj-Nicole A. Joni and Damon Beyer, writing about a decade after Eisenhardt et al's piece on fighting, submitted their wisdom to the *Harvard Business Review* in "How to Pick a Good Fight." They see good fights as focused on issues and not on personalities. "Fight only over issues with game-changing potential … if it creates lasting value, leads to a noticeable and sustainable improvement, and addresses a complex challenge that has no easy answers."[69] Joni and Beyer encourage these fights to take place within formal structures, but they note, "Often it's the informal processes – involving hallway conversations, personal favors, and relationships that cross official boundaries – that accomplish goals

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[67] Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, and Bourgeois III, "How Management Teams Can Have a Good Fight," 78.

[68] Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, and Bourgeois III, "How Management Teams Can Have a Good Fight," 82.

[69] Saj-nicole A. Joni and Damon Beyer, "How to Pick a Good Fight," *Harvard Business Review* 87, no. 12 (December 2009): 50.

the formal structure cannot."[70] Their findings are reminiscent of one pastor's reflection

that is captured by Burns, Chapman and Guthrie. The pastor, reflecting on the

relationships between his elders and the ensuing trust, appreciated this shared bond more

when he saw its antithesis playing out in divisive conflicts at his denominational

meetings. He recalled, "My first thought is, 'These folks have never played golf

together.' There is no relationship. They don't trust each other."[71]

Healthy relationships, often nurtured outside of official structures in informal

settings such as golf or other leisure activities, allow team members to keep arguments

focused on issues, so that they do not succumb to mean-spirited personal attacks. It

allows one to see those who disagree as disagreeing on principle and not for personal

reasons. Tod Bolsinger, in his transformative leadership book *Canoeing the Mountains*,

recommends viewing "opponents" this way. He says opponents are "nothing more and

nothing less than those who are against the particular change initiative."[72] Opponents are

the ones with whom you most need to play golf. As Bolsinger says of them, "The more

heated the situation, the closer I want to get."[73]

The more opposition, the more golf you need. No golf might lead to no conflict

and artificial harmony, and attacking someone else's golf game might be a mean-spirited

personal attack. But the right amount of golf might lead to an appreciation for the person,

the ability to see him before one sees his idea and the ability to critique the idea with

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[70] Joni and Beyer, "How to Pick a Good Fight," 55.

[71] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 214.

[72] Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory*, Expanded edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2018), 161.

[73] Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 168.

appropriate trust for the person, so that team members who start out on different sides are able to pursue truth together.

Trust

The literature seems to agree that trust does not result in silent agreement, so it may be helpful to re-examine the definition and nature of trust. Lencioni defines trust as "the confidence among team members that their peers' intentions are good, and that there is no reason to be protective or careful around the group."[74] This is why trust leads to more conflict and not less. The group is simply pursuing truth and best solutions together. Lencioni also says, "Trust is knowing that when a team member does push you, they're doing it because they care about the team."[75] But how might this differ in a non-profit environment, especially a church, where many of the decision-makers are volunteers, and the team (the congregation) is a mix of staff and lay leaders?

T.J. Addington touches on this sticky issue in *High Impact Church Boards*; he describes a cycle of distrust that can result if churches are not careful. Congregations, church boards, senior pastors and staff can all have a tendency to mistrust one another and vie for power. "Mistrust breeds control," Addington writes. "In turn, control feeds mistrust. It is an unhealthy cycle."[76] At times like this, it is best to not fear this unhealthy cycle, but to work against it. Edmondson, who does not appear to be writing from a Christian perspective, reminds us, "People have to learn to team; it doesn't come

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[74] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 195.

[75] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 148–49.

[76] T. J. Addington, *High-Impact Church Boards: How to Develop Healthy, Intentional, and Empowered Church Leaders* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010), 159.

naturally in most organizations."[77] What comes naturally is a sin nature, mistrust, and the

assumption that others' motives are impure.

To build trust, teams needs time to see one another's motives in action, to see the

purity of their motives, and to see the care (the opposite of apathy) and passion that their

teammates have for the organization. David Hubbard, the President of Fuller Theological

Seminary, describes the ideal board's feelings for its organization in an interview in Peter

Drucker's *Managing the Nonprofit Organization*. Hubbard says, "A board needs to know

that it owns the organization." While that may sound like the exact type of control that

Addington warned against, Hubbard clarifies, "But it owns an organization not for its

own sake – as a board – but for the sake of the mission which the organization is to

perform. Board members don't own it as though they were stockholders voting blocks of

stock. They own it because they care."[78] This type of deep concern for the mission of the

organization is what one hopes every team member can see in one another. One hopes

that board members care this much, as do the staff, as does the senior pastor, as does the

entire congregation.

However, as Edmondson said, this type of trust, and the teaming that results from

it, does not come naturally or quickly, in the business world or in the church. Gerry

Jeffers, sounding much like Edmondson in his "Teamwork in the Church," writes,

"Changing culture to one where real teamwork operates won't take place overnight."[79]

Such trust and teamwork takes work. In his *Overcoming the Five Dysfunctions of a Team*,

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[77] Edmondson, *Teaming*, 24.

[78] Peter F. Drucker, *Managing the Non-Profit Organization: Principles and Practices*, Reprint edition (New York: HarperBusiness, 2006), 171–2.

[79] Gerry Jeffers, "Teamwork in the Church," *The Furrow* 62, no. 12 (December 2011): 667.

Lencioni writes, "Like a good marriage, trust on a team is never complete; it must be maintained over time."[80] In order to build and maintain this kind of trust, time is needed. Time to see each other's motives, time to see each other's deep concern for the mission of the organization, the kind of ownership Hubbard describes that is not possessive but zealous for the health of the organization, zealous to see its goals accomplished.

Politics

The art of politics will be explored more under the next literature area, "Power in Teams," but some discussion is necessary to understand the nature of trust in teams, as well. Politics can be a loaded term, which Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie recognize. But in their book, *The Politics of Ministry*, they define "politics" as a neutral set of actions between people that can be used for good or ill.[81] Lencioni, conversely, uses the term in an exclusively negative sense, writing, "Politics is when people choose their words and actions based on how they want others to react rather than based on what they really think."[82] He links "politics" with "ambiguity," and contrasts it with the "interpersonal discomfort" that characterizes healthy, open conflict.[83] This view of politics is one that Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie are aware of, using words like "manipulate" and "subterfuge" to describe popular definitions of the term. But they clarify, "Every day, people are using their power to negotiate their interests in relationships with other people,

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[80] Patrick Lencioni, *Overcoming the Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Field Guide for Leaders, Managers, and Facilitators* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 35.

[81] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 17.

[82] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 88.

[83] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 85, 175.

always with ethical implications, in order to get things done."[84] Their acknowledgment of ethical implications in politics will be unpacked further in their book. It is a hint that they view politics as inherently neutral but with the capacity to be used positively or negatively. In other words, they see and acknowledge Lencioni's negative view of politics, but they see the potential for good in this arena, as well. Lencioni uses the term narrowly, to describe actions that always undermine trust. Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie use it neutrally, to describe actions that can build trust or erode it.

Interestingly, in another book, *The Ideal Team Player*, Lencioni describes something closer to Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie's neutral definition of politics. He describes his ideal team player as someone who is "humble, hungry, and smart." His description of smart sounds a lot like someone who is politically savvy, with the potential for good or harm. He says, "Being smart doesn't necessarily imply good intentions. Smart people use their talents for good or ill purposes. … Smart people just have good judgment and intuition around the subtleties of group dynamics and the impact of their words and actions."[85] In the end, even the author who views politics very negatively seems to understand that the same type of persuasion and charisma that can be used to undermine trust can also be used to bolster it. For the purposes of this study, the neutral definition of politics will be used, understanding its positive and negative potential upon trust in teams.

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[84] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 17.

[85] Patrick M. Lencioni, *The Ideal Team Player: How to Recognize and Cultivate The Three Essential Virtues*, (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 160–61.

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is another topic that may need more exploration under the heading of "Power in Teams," but it also has some bearing on trust in teams. Edmondson, who coined the term, writes, "Psychological safety describes a climate in which raising a dissenting view is expected and welcomed."[86] This behavior encourages "teaming," the title of Edmondson's book, by increasing healthy conflict.[87] But to encourage effective teaming, a team still needs a high level of accountability; on this point, Lencioni and Edmondson agree.[88] And while maintaining both might be difficult, it is also a key to organizational success and health. Edmondson writes, "Some of the most successful organizations today … have figured out how to manage the tension between hierarchy and psychological safety."[89] She explores that tension between hierarchy and psychological safety elsewhere, writing, "Fear of offending people above us in the hierarchy is both natural and widespread, and it means the speaking-up behavior upon which teaming depends must be cultivated rather than assumed to be present."[90] Acknowledging this fear in subordinates, and working to overcome it, is a major factor in successful teamwork.

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[86] Edmondson, *Teaming*, 119.

[87] Edmondson, *Teaming*, 127.

[88] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 97–98.

[89] Edmondson, *Teaming*, 131.

[90] Edmondson, *Teaming*, 54.

Overcoming Fear

Don Moruska has noticed the same fear paralyzing organizations. In his article, "Making Great Team Decisions," he asks and answers, "Why do typical decision processes produce ineffective and lackluster results? The answer is fear."[91] As Edmundson said, it is natural and widespread. Moruska notes one reason it is so widespread, saying, "Unfortunately, the primary reason that fear-driven group dynamics are so pervasive is that at some level they get results."[92] But does it get results? It is best for an organization? Or is this the result of faulty, short-sighted thinking? Edmondson agrees that this is what people think, saying, "Many managers believe that without fear people will not work hard enough."[93] The more Moruska writes, the more he seems to disagree with prevailing wisdom. "Although fear can provide near-term benefits, those benefits usually come at the cost of long-term consequences."[94] Moruska catalogues fear's consequences as follows: "negative thoughts … troubled feelings … disruptive behavior … frayed relationships. … Fear thwarts effective decision making and teamwork in any setting."[95] If fear is this destructive and this pervasive, then there is much to be done to overcome it.

Fear of this magnitude sounds exactly like a "crucial conversation," which Patterson et al. describe as "a discussion between two or more people where 1) stakes are

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[91] Don Moruska, "Making Great Team Decisions," *Leader to Leader* 2004, no. 33 (July 1, 2004): 38.

[92] Moruska, "Making Great Team Decisions," 39.

[93] Edmondson, *Teaming*, 19.

[94] Moruska, "Making Great Team Decisions," 39.

[95] Moruska, "Making Great Team Decisions," 40.

high, 2) opinions vary, and 3) emotions run strong."[96] One of the keys to overcoming

strong emotions, like fear, is to make the participants involved feel safe. They write,

"People who are skilled at dialogue do their best to make it safe for everyone to add their

meaning to the shared pool – even ideas that at first glance appear controversial, wrong,

or at odds with their own beliefs."[97] Patterson et al. do not use the same language of

psychological safety, but they seem to be describing the same concept as Edmondson.

Moruska says the key to overcome this fear is hope. Edmondson says it is psychological

safety, the freedom to speak up. And the person who must initiate such hope and safety is

clear. Edmondson writes, "The most important influence on psychological safety is the

nearest manager, supervisor, or boss."[98] The boss's job is not to wield the most power,

but to make the group feel the greatest degree of safety. To do that, the boss will have to

enter a territory that is something less than safe.

Vulnerability

Healthy conflict requires discussion rather than artificial harmony. But to

generate discussion, leaders need to be ready to hear an opinion besides their own. They

must be willing to have their initial thoughts challenged. Edmondson calls this

"leadership inclusiveness, in which higher-status individuals in a group actively invite

and express appreciation for the views of others."[99] Lencioni, in *Overcoming the Five*

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[96] Patterson, *Crucial Conversations*, 3.

[97] Patterson, *Crucial Conversations*, 24.

[98] Edmondson, *Teaming*, 137.

[99] Edmondson, *Teaming*, 205.

Dysfunctions of a Team, calls this vulnerability, the ability to "honestly say things like 'I was wrong' and 'I made a mistake' and 'I need help' and 'I'm not sure' and 'you're better than I am at that' and yes, even 'I'm sorry.'"[100] But, again, this is not natural behavior for most teams, especially not at first. Why is vulnerability like this so hard to find? Lencioni writes, "That's because human beings, especially the adult variety, have this crazy desire for self-preservation."[101] So how can this problem be overcome? How can a team get over its desire for self-preservation, its fear of embarrassment?

Edmondson said the boss has to be the one to solve this problem. Lencioni agrees, and while this may take time, "The key ingredient is not time. It is courage. For a team to establish real trust, team members, beginning with the leader, must be willing to take risks without a guarantee of success. They will have to be vulnerable without knowing whether that vulnerability will be respected and reciprocated."[102] There is no substitute for a boss being the most courageous, most vulnerable member of the team. After all, fear is rampant; fear is human. Self-preservation is the air we breathe. If the status quo is going to be challenged, then a leader needs to be the one to step up and show that he is willing to have it be challenged, that he is willing to admit that he is not perfect. In a later book, Lencioni writes, "At the heart of vulnerability lies the willingness of people to abandon their pride and their fear, to sacrifice their egos for the collective good of the team."[103] Such behavior sounds risky, but it also sounds like the kind of risk that will be

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[100] Lencioni, *Overcoming the Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 18.

[101] Lencioni, *Overcoming the Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 17.

[102] Lencioni, *Overcoming the Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 18.

[103] Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 27.

needed to overcome the fear that inhibits speaking up and effective teamwork. It sounds like the kind of behavior that might make an organization safe enough to work together, that might make it pursue truth and good solutions because of shared purpose and a healthy organization.

The Benefits of Trust

To fully understand the benefits of trust, it is also beneficial to understand the cost of its absence. Trust is not simply a nice add-on; it is essential. Without it, organizations will never achieve the goals they have set. Lencioni writes, "Teams that lack trust waste inordinate amounts of time and energy managing their behaviors and interactions."[104] John Purcell, who has built a website and consulting business by adapting Lencioni's "Five Dysfunctions" for an audience of church-based teams, notes the pervasive cost of trust's absence in his article "Overcoming the Five Dysfunctions of the Church." Purcell writes, "The first dysfunction is a leadership in distrust, discord, and ineffectiveness. … Having any of the dysfunctions will moderately to severely hinder your ability to overcome the others."[105] A lack of trust will drag down other areas of a team's interaction so much that it must be overcome before progress can be made in other areas. Stephen M.R. Covey, whose father wrote the best-selling *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, refers to this idea as "the low trust tax." Covey says, "This low-trust tax is not only on

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[104] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 196.

[105] John Purcell, "Overcoming the 5 Dysfunctions of the Church," website, accessed August 9, 2019, https://www.transform-coach.com/single-post/2018/03/17/OVERCOMING-THE-5-DYSFUNCTIONS-OF-THE-CHURCH.

economic activity, but on all activity – in every relationship, in every interaction, in every communication, in every decision, in every dimension of life."[106]

If this is true, then Covey implies that every organization (churches, non-profits, and business alike) should be clamoring to build trust. They should be spending more on it than any other line item in their budget. It's why Lencioni tells of a friend who once said, "If you could get all the people in an organization rowing in the same direction, you could dominate any industry, in any market, against any competition, at any time."[107] He also says in a follow-up book, of the broader concept of teamwork, "It impacts the outcome of an organization in such comprehensive and invasive ways that it's virtually impossible to isolate it as a single variable."[108] Time wasted and effectiveness drained from every dimension of life; this is the cost of low trust, according to many. And the benefits of high trust are just as dramatic. Its impact is comprehensive, as well. Covey says that trust is quantifiable, which is not at odds with Lencioni's contention that it is very hard to isolate, and Covey agrees that it has monumental impact. The influence of the high trust dividend is just as great as the low trust tax. Covey says, "When trust is high, the dividend you receive is like a performance multiplier, elevating and improving every dimension of your organization and your life."[109] Trust may be difficult to initiate and difficult to maintain, but it is well worth it when one considers the global impact that trust has on an organization of any kind.

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[106] Stephen M. R. Covey, Stephen R. Covey, and Rebecca R. Merrill, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 19.

[107] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, vii.

[108] Lencioni, *Overcoming the Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 4.

[109] Covey, Covey, and Merrill, *The Speed of Trust*, 19.

Summary of Trust in Teams

A lack of trust will drag down every aspect of a team's life, not just its work life. It can cause groups with individual IQs above 120 to have a collective IQ of 63. It may initially manifest itself in silent agreement, which is more likely to be apathy than agreement. Therefore, the goal for teams is an open discussion of ideas, which is not possible without trust, so that a consensus might develop slowly and naturally. This discussion or conflict, is not bad in itself, but it can easily turn mean-spirited if the conflict is not managed well or if there is not sufficient trust within the group. Building relationships during informal interactions can help build this needed trust, but even this will be built over time and not all at once. Building trust in relationships also requires individuals who are smart or savvy in group dynamics or politics, a neutral term for actions that could be used positively or negatively. But while politics might be neutral, it is their positive use that achieves the trust that fuels healthy teamwork. Organizational leaders initiating healthy teamwork by modeling proper vulnerability will make their teams psychologically safe enough for all team members to speak up. Lencioni says they must do this without knowing the effect of their behavior, but they must do it in the hope that their behavior will produce the team-wide trust that is so desperately needed. This act of leadership, while not easy, may produce team-wide, organization-wide benefits that counter and even exceed the costs that a lack of trust previously inflicted.

Power in Teams

Leaders are the key to organizational trust. They can display proper vulnerability and invite other voices to be heard to build trust within an organization. When they do that, leaders rightly use their power for the good of others, which requires them to

properly understand their power. Peter Scazzero made plenty of mistakes in this area before he wrote *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, but he notes that he was not alone in this. "Almost every church, nonprofit organization, team, and Christian community I know bears deep scars and hurt due to a failure to steward power and set wise boundaries. Churches are fragile, complex, confusing systems."[110] He notes that power is not benign and that it must be stewarded. And his definition of power sounds similar to the definition of "politics" (a neutral set of actions that can be used for good or ill) that Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie used. Scazzero calls power "the capacity to influence," and adds, "we all use power – well or poorly, for good or ill."[111] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie define power similarly, saying, "Power, in its most basic sense, is the capacity to act and to influence others."[112] Interestingly, this definition is largely echoed by two British authors, Niki Panteli and Robert Tucker, in a computing journal with no explicit mention of a Christian background. In "Power and Trust in Global Virtual Teams," Panteli and Tucker define power "as the capability of one party to exert influence on another to act in a prescribed manner."[113]

Power is the ability or capacity to influence others, and it may be used for positive or negative purposes. Each author implies this directly or indirectly. Scazzero says it directly; Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie imply it by setting power in the context of politics, the subject of their book; Panteli and Tucker discuss it later. They highlight how

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[110] Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 242.

[111] Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 242.

[112] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 19.

[113] Niki Panteli and Robert Tucker, "Power and Trust in Global Virtual Teams," *Communications of the ACM* 52, no. 12 (December 2009): 113, https://doi.org/10.1145/1610252.1610282.

teams that considered themselves successful "minimized the use of coercive power," particularly when it came those the group labeled as "the 'most powerful' parties.'"[114] They clearly label this as an unhealthy use of power, without speaking to the motives behind such actions. They also note an interesting connection between trust and power in these teams. They write, "The study found that in the high trust teams, power differentials do not disappear; rather power shifts from one member to another throughout the life cycle of the project depending on the stage and its requirements."[115] This shifting of power from one member to another may seem rare given some of the cautionary tales about lack of trust in organizations, but it is similar to the findings of others.

When Eisenhardt, Kahwajy and Bourgeouis wrote on how to have a good fight, they noted the destructive nature of "dysfunctional interpersonal conflict," as well as the ways that autocratic leaders and weak leaders both encouraged such conflict in different ways. Positively, they noted, "Interpersonal conflict is lowest in what we call balanced power structures, those in which the CEO is more powerful than the other members of the top-management team, but the members do wield substantial power, especially in their own well-defined areas of responsibility."[116] Power can be used for good or ill, and these authors collectively note several ways that seem to indicate positive uses of power – allowing that power to shift between team members, depending on the stage of a given project; and allowing team members to wield significant power in different areas, yet having a leader with enough power to enforce those boundaries and areas of

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[114] Panteli and Tucker, "Power and Trust in Global Virtual Teams," 114.

[115] Panteli and Tucker, "Power and Trust in Global Virtual Teams," 114.

[116] Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, and Bourgeois III, "How Management Teams Can Have a Good Fight," 78–82.

responsibility. But, as Scazzero notes, many churches have suffered because they have not properly stewarded their power or set wise boundaries. This requires an understanding of organizational power structures or power maps.

Power Structures

Scazzero, who observed that "churches are fragile, complex, confusing systems," later says, "Navigating the issue of power is a true test of both character and leadership. … The minefields surrounding the use of power are rarely acknowledged, much less openly discussed, in Christian circles."[117] Fragile? Complex? Minefields? Could this discussion of power come from the same author as the following: "As leaders we are stewards of delegated power gifted to us for a short time by God"?[118] Indeed, the first set of words are how Scazzero begins his discussion on power, and the sentence about the gift of delegated power is how he closes his chapter. Burns, Chapman and Guthrie echo Scazzero when they write, "Power is a gift from our Creator, granted to us as his image bearers for the stewardship and dominion of his creation."[119] Taken together thus far, power can be volatile or vivifying, depending upon how one stewards the divine gift of power within the fragile complexities of the confusing world known as the church. In this section, non-Christian systems (which are capable of fragility, complexity, and confusion, as well) will also be examined to better understand the dynamics of power and power structures.

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[117] Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 239.

[118] Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 254.

[119] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 19.

Jim Collins is well-known for books such as *Good to Great*, in which he examines the commonalities among successful companies.[120] But after many conversations with those in non-profit organizations, he wrote a follow-up monograph titled *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*. What Collins observed about non-profits in general matches what Scazzero observed about churches in particular. He writes, "Social sector leaders face a complex and diffuse power map."[121] The diffuse power structure that Collins sees is another vantage point on what Scazzero called a "confusing" system. While this is definitely a challenge, and Collins and Scazzero note it as such, David Hubbard cautions against coalescing the diffuse, scattered, and confusing sources of power into one body. Hubbard warns, "The more power is concentrated in a few people on a board, the more likely the situation will turn unhealthy."[122] Hubbard seems to allude to the famous Lord Acton saying, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," albeit indirectly. Hubbard may be indirectly advocating for what Eisenhardt, Kahwajy and Bourgeouis called a balanced power structure or even the organic shifting of power over time that Panteli and Tucker observed.

Power Inequality

Perhaps the larger point in this discussion of healthy power dynamics is that power is usually not equal amongst team members. Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie remind

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[120] Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001), 1-3.

[121] Jim Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: Why Business Thinking Is Not the Answer* (Boulder, CO: HarperCollins, 2005), 34.

[122] Drucker, *Managing the Non-Profit Organization*, 172.

us, "Power is rarely equal between people, and power is easily used for selfishness and evil."[123] This is not to imply that all in the church are always dastardly and that one should be cynical, but neither are all in the church pure as the driven snow. Burns, Chapman and Guthrie are calling their audience to cautious realism, not cynicism, but not naïve idealism, either. Earlier they write, "Our wishful thinking compels us to expect all the adults involved in our ministries to act with the same power for the same mission with the same compassion. That is, we hope to be playing on a level field and in a loving manner. Unfortunately, this is often not the case."[124] They are saying people hope for the best, but they should expect and be prepared for the worst, for people to wield their power in dishonorable ways. For that matter, one should question his own motives in how one uses his own power, too.[125] Without succumbing to cynicism, it is wise to always be prepared for impure motives to lurk beneath the surface (in oneself and in others) in teamwork.

One type of unequal power structure is a hierarchy, with superiors and subordinates. Edmondson notes that fear is "natural and widespread" for subordinates in a hierarchy, and that "fear in teams where status differences are prominent can hinder communication and sharing."[126] In some systems, this fear is an intentional feature, not a bug.[127]

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[123] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 47.

[124] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 47.

[125] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 131.

[126] Edmondson, *Teaming*, 54, 216.

[127] Edmondson, *Teaming*, 24.

Those in the superior position in such a hierarchy possess what Burns, Chapman and Guthrie call formal authority. They write, "Formal authority is the exercise of power that has been legitimated by recognized social structures. … The length of time one holds a formal position usually increases the amount of authority associated with it."[128] Scazzero recognizes six categories of power, including "positional power," which roughly corresponds to formal authority.[129] He also notes another type of power relevant to pastors because of "the sacred weight we carry when our role formally places us in a position to represent God."[130] The other types of power he lists may not be as relevant, but they underscore the varied nature of power.[131] One is not merely the sum total of his positional power and formal authority.

As Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie have already warned about using power for selfish motives, it is interesting to note Scazzero's words about such power. He writes, "A good test of a person's character is how they deal with adversity. But the best test of a leader's character is how they deal with power."[132] Scazzero confesses that he had a "woefully inadequate" understanding of his own power early in his ministry. In light of his better understanding, he recommends that leaders identify their power, so that they can steward it through personal accountability and acknowledge and monitor their dual

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[128] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 21.

[129] Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 245.

[130] Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 246.

[131] Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 245–47. In addition to positional power and relational power, Scazzero also lists personal power, God-factor power (the "sacred weight" described above), projected power, and cultural power.

[132] Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 248.

relationships.[133] Dual relationships, such as a friendship between those who are also co-workers, are a particular minefield that must be carefully monitored. He writes, "Remember that the burden to set boundaries and keep them carefully falls on the person with greater power."[134] How one navigates these relationships when one has lesser power will be discussed later.

Relational Authority

Our study has hinted at the varied nature of power in teams and the unequal or imbalanced power that usual exists between parties in teams. Even amongst fellow elders, differences in power can arise. Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie navigate the technicalities and the actualities when they write, "Technically, the elders all have the same formal authority." However, "the second type of authority is based on relationships. It is derived from the relational status one has in a community and perhaps even from the place one's subgroup holds within the broader community."[135] This helps to explain the diffuse power map that is found in non-profit organizations which Collins discussed. Churches have formal authority structures, which will be discussed at length in the third literature section, consisting of elders that all possess equal authority. But not all elders have equal relational capital. Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie write, "Every ministry context – whether in the family, a church, or another organization – has a complicated structure of relationships. The capacity to act and influence others is largely a result of the history,

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[133] Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 241, 248.

[134] Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 256.

[135] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 21.

strength, and health of these social webs."[136] Knowing the formal power map is one thing. Knowing the complicated structure of relationships (the diffuse, relational power map) is another. In fact, Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie suggest that using one's formal authority is less important than knowing how to use one's relational authority. They write, "We suggest that relational authority trumps formal authority much of the time."[137] Scazzero mentioned the importance of knowing one's power, and this study has suggested that knowing the power map in an organization is also important. However, part of knowing the power map is knowing how to use one's relational power. This might more fittingly be called politics.

Politics

Politics is a neutral set of actions concerning persuasion or negotiation that can be used for good or ill. Burns, Chapman and Guthrie write, "Whenever people actively advance their interests, they have entered the realm of politics. Politics is the art of getting things done with others."[138] This is simply life; trying to accomplish one's goals with the means (and power) at one's disposal. It is also life in the ministry. But this does not mean that politics is always seeking only your own betterment, or that advancing your interests does not benefit others. One's interest might be a more stable, healthy team environment, and one might decide to use one's power for that purpose. That might involve vulnerability without promise of reward or appreciation, as Lencioni noted. As

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[136] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 38.

[137] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 214.

[138] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 18.

Andy Crouch notes in his book *Strong and Weak*, "This is what it is to be a leader: to bear the risks that only you can see, while continuing to exercise authority that everyone can see."[139] Leaders may often have to enter the realm of politics for the sake of their team. They may have to use their authority to accomplish what only they (and not the rest of their team) can.

Politics for the Team's Sake

Crouch goes on to say, "The most important thing we are called to do is help our communities meet their deepest vulnerability with appropriate authority. … The leader must bear the shared vulnerabilities that the community does not currently have the authority to address."[140] Crouch calls leaders to do this for their communities, but in context, what he calls a community is simply a larger version of a team or organization. Moruska noted that fear can plague organizations and lead to "disruptive behavior: (Forget the team, I've got to protect my share)." She later says, "Yet it is exactly the willingness to let go of your own piece of the pie that is the first step in creating a more satisfying pie for all."[141] And she says the one who must create that more satisfying pie is the leader, the team member with the most power. That member may not be the one with the most formal authority, but it often is. Edmondson notes the importance of "leadership inclusiveness, in which higher-status individuals in a group actively invite and express

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139 Crouch, *Strong and Weak*, 117.

140 Crouch, *Strong and Weak*, 122.

141 Moruska, "Making Great Team Decisions," 40.

appreciation for the views of others."[142] This is needed if fear is to be overcome and psychological safety is to be established, so that "raising a dissenting view is welcomed and encouraged," and so that others can give "tough feedback and have difficult conversations without the need to tiptoe around the truth."[143] Burns, Chapman and Guthrie call these "conversations in which hardships can be named and discussed."[144] These ideas are similar, though they might go by different names among different authors. Yet all of them are ways in which leaders might need to use their formal and relational authority for the betterment of the team, not solely themselves. Understanding the art of leadership and persuasion will help leaders accomplish this in their organizations.

The Poetry and Plumbing of Leadership

Politics is not the only way to describe the persuasive skills of a leader. In Lan Liu's book *Conversations on Leadership*, he refers to James March as "a guru's guru," which may explain March's unorthodox phrasing when it comes to leadership. As he says in Liu's interview with him, "What I call 'plumbing' is what most people call 'management,' and what I call 'poetry' is what most people call 'leadership.'"[145] Another piece from March expands on the image, saying, "No organization works if the toilets

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[142] Edmondson, *Teaming*, 205.

[143] Edmondson, *Teaming*, 118, 119.

[144] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 205.

[145] Lan Liu, *Conversations on Leadership: Wisdom from Global Management Gurus* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 157, 159.

don't work. … Leadership is a mixture of poetry and plumbing."[146] Leadership is a

diverse skill set. It may involve mundane tasks like fixing the plumbing and making sure

the spreadsheet looks correct, but a team needs to understand why they want the

plumbing to work or the numbers to line up. This is the power and poetry to which March

refers. He tells Liu, "A leader should also be a poet who finds meaning in action and

renders life attractive. For this purpose, a leader is equipped with power and words.

Power is a means of encouraging other people to blossom, and with words a leader forges

vision and evokes devotion."[147] When leaders need to move beyond making sure the

plumbing works and the trains run on time, they enter the arena of poetry in leadership.

Collins speaks of something similar to March's notion of poetry in leadership

when he discusses the social sectors and their diffuse power map. Rather than relying on

executive leadership in a top-down environment, those in social sectors benefit most from

another style, legislative leadership. Collins says, "Legislative leadership relies more

upon persuasion, political currency, and shared interests to create the conditions for the

right decisions to happen."[148] This is why the social sectors, as well as their business

counterparts need what Collins calls "Level 5 leadership." Such a leader's "compelling

combination of personal humility and professional will is a key factor in creating

legitimacy and influence. After all, why should those over whom you have no direct

power give themselves over to a decision that is primarily about you?"[149] Collins'

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[146] "Too Much Efficiency Not Good for Higher Education, March Argues," News Release, Stanford University, June 7, 1995, https://news.stanford.edu/pr/95/950607Arc5193.html.

[147] Liu, *Conversations on Leadership*, 160.

[148] Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, 11.

[149] Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, 11.

mention of "those over whom you have no direct power" is an acknowledgement that while social sectors may have paid staff, they often rely on a much larger contingent of volunteers to further their mission. (He seems to be referring to a lack of formal authority, not a lack of relational authority.) And if one is to lead such a diffuse group, it will require poetry in the midst of the mundane and persuasion where the formal power comes to an end. In short, it will require the political tactic of negotiation.

Negotiation

The idea of negotiation is central to art of politics and persuasion. Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie write, "Politics – the negotiation of interests in relational contexts of power – is a constant activity in life and ministry."[150] These authors actually use the word negotiation to define what politics is. They later tease out the particulars of negotiation, saying, "Negotiation takes place when two or more persons with common or conflicting interests work toward reaching an agreement for future action."[151] Negotiation is what is happening when teams trust each other enough to have healthy conflict, when they reach a true consensus and not a superficial one that promotes apathy or disengagement. And in this healthy conflict, they are not merely using their formal or positional power but also their relational power or relational capital, because "power is essentially a relational dynamic," according to Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie. They write, "Relational capital is an organization's resources located within the relationships among

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[150] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 112.

[151] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 113.

employees, clients, constituents, providers, congregants, and other relevant people."[152]

Part of negotiation involves determining with whom one has relational capital, relational

deposits that can be withdrawn or used, for the sake of an initiative. Another part of

negotiation might be the building of additional relational capital. In an additional section,

negotiation with those who hold conflicting interests will also be discussed.

Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, Harvard University professors and authors on

leadership and government, wrote an entire chapter on the political aspect of leadership in

their book, *Leadership on the Line*. Their first recommendation in this arena is to "find

partners." They write, "With partners, you are not simply relying on the logical power of

your arguments and evidence, you are building political power as well."[153] Bolsinger

refers to partners as "allies," and quotes occasionally from Heifetz and Linsky. He says,

"An ally is anyone who is convinced of the mission and is committed to seeing it

fulfilled."[154] These partners or allies, Heifetz and Linsky remind, may have other

alliances, other loyalties and commitments. "Think of that as good news. After all, allies

from other factions within or outside the organization help enormously by working within

their faction on the issues you care about. … In order to use your allies effectively, you

need to be aware of those other commitments."[155] This hints at the real challenge in

negotiation. It is not negotiating with those most closely aligned to you. That is only part

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[152] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 19, 23.

[153] Martin Linsky and Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading*, (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review, 2002), 78.

[154] Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 158.

[155] Linsky and Heifetz, *Leadership on the Line*, 83.

of the challenge. The challenge is forging common ground with those who are not naturally aligned with you goals and interests.

Negotiating with Opponents

Negotiation may take place between those with "common or conflicting interests," as Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie said. One cannot merely find partners and allies and expect only to swim in friendly waters. As Heifetz and Linsky say, "To survive and succeed in exercising leadership, you must work as closely with your opponents as you do with your supporters."[156] Bolsinger, who had similar words about staying close to his opponents, also helpfully defines opponents, saying, "Opponents are nothing more and nothing less than those who are against the particular change initiative."[157] Opponents do not have to be vicious, malicious, or underhanded. They may be all of those things, and they may be none of those things. What makes them opponents, however, is the mere fact that they disagree with someone else's particular goals on a particular subject. At a basic level, their disagreement in on principles, not on a personal level. One can play a round of golf with an opponent, and, as was stated earlier, one has good reasons to do so.

Opponents differ from allies in ways beyond their particular opinions about an issue. Heifetz and Linsky explain, "People who oppose what you are trying to accomplish are usually those with the most to lose by your success. … To turn around will cost them dearly in terms of disloyalty to their own roots and constituency; for your allies to come

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[156] Linsky and Heifetz, *Leadership on the Line*, 87.

[157] Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 161.

along may cost nothing."[158] Bolsinger advises leaders to stay calm and stay connected

with their opponents, in the hopes that such persistence will win one's opponents in the

end. Such persistence is not easy. In fact, it will likely trigger a revolt from one's

constituents at some point. As Bolsinger says, "You can't go it alone, but you haven't

succeeded until you've survived the sabotage."[159] The second half of Bolsinger's advice

is based on a quote from another author that deserves more attention.

Surviving the Sabotage

In order to swim against the stream, interacting with allies (and their additional

commitments) and opponents (and their conflicting commitments), how does one

remember his most fundamental goals and commitments? Jim Herrington, Robert Creech,

and Trisha Taylor, as they write in their book *The Leader's Journey*, think the answer lies

in the concept of "differentiation of self … the ability to remain connected to important

people in our lives without having our behavior and reactions determined by them."[160]

But it is this very ability to not maintain the status quo that will unsettle people,

reinforcing the need for differentiation. As Jewish author Edwin Freidman says in his

posthumous *A Failure of Nerve*, "Self-differentiation always triggers sabotage."[161]

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[158] Linsky and Heifetz, *Leadership on the Line*, 89.

[159] Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 15.

[160] R. Robert Creech, Jim Herrington, and Trisha Taylor, *The Leader's Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016), 34.

[161] Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007), 247.

Changing something always unsettles people; the question is how much and how well it will be managed.

Heifetz and Linsky explain,

> People do not resist change, per se. People resist loss. You appear dangerous to people when you question their values, beliefs, or habits of a lifetime. You place yourself on the line when you tell people what they need to hear rather than what they want to hear. Although you may see with clarity and passion a promising future of progress and gain, people will see with equal passion the losses you are asking them to sustain.[162]

This is why sabotage happens. Opponents get unsettled. They see loss. They have a lot to lose. And responding to their fear of loss is not a matter of responding well enough to avoid sabotage, but a matter of expecting it and enduring it. Heifetz and Linsky continue, "The hope of leadership lies in the capacity to deliver disturbing news and raise difficult questions in a way that people can absorb, prodding them to take up the message rather than ignore it or kill the messenger."[163] Many pages later, they say, "Exercising leadership might be understood as disappointing people at a rate they can absorb."[164]

Bolsinger latches on to this definition and expounds on it.[165] He emphasizes that leadership is disappointing "your own people" at a rate they can absorb. "All the best literature makes it clear: to lead you must be able to disappoint *your own people*. But, even doing so well ('at a rate they can absorb') does *not* preclude them turning on you. In fact, when you disappoint your own people, they *will* turn on you."[166] They will turn.

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[162] Linsky and Heifetz, *Leadership on the Line*, 11.

[163] Linsky and Heifetz, *Leadership on the Line*, 11.

[164] Linsky and Heifetz, *Leadership on the Line*, 142.

[165] Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 123.

[166] Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 173. Emphasis original.

They will question if the change is necessary and why. They will long for the status quo, fearing change because they ultimately fear loss. They will express anger. And the leader's calm presence, his very differentiation that caused this heat, will be put to the test. Heifetz and Linsky explain, "If you can hold steady long enough, remaining respectful of their pains and defending your perspective without feeling you must defend yourself, you may find that in the ensuing calm, relationships become stronger."[167] This is why Bolsinger advocates a calm presence rather than a fist-pounding insistence on the superiority of one's ideas. He says, "Far more leadership requires a calm, confident presence in the middle of a highly anxious, instinctively reactive situation that threatens to burn everyone, because calm, like anxiety, is contagious."[168] As Friedman said, "Self-differentiation always triggers sabotage," but it is the same self-differentiation that will be necessary to survive the sabotage. This is why Friedman also says on the same page, "It is only after having first brought a change and then subsequently endured the resultant sabotage that the leader can feel truly successful."[169] The leader turns up the heat, endures others' heat, and hopefully finds himself in a better place, a place the organization needed to go, a place to which the organization didn't necessarily want to go at first. But it is where they needed to go and where they now want to be. It is hard-fought consensus, requiring all of a leader's power, calmness, and persuasion – all of his political know how. It is a work of poetry in the midst of a gloriously chaotic life.[170]

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[167] Linsky and Heifetz, *Leadership on the Line*, 145.

[168] Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 147.

[169] Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 247.

[170] James G. March, *Explorations in Organizations* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Business Books, 2008), 444.

Leaders establish trust in teams by using all the power, or ability to influence, at their disposal. This requires knowledge of their power and its effect on others, as well as the character to wield such power well, since power can be used for good or ill. Leaders benefit, therefore, from a greater understanding of the nature of power structures, which can be more confusing and diffuse in churches or non-profits that rely on considerable volunteers. In many circumstances, this requires the knowledge that power between parties is often unequal. Power is also complex, because it involves several dimensions, including positional power and relational power. Knowing how to navigate relational power dynamics is also called politics, an inherently neutral set of actions that can be used for good or ill, for oneself or for others. Variously described as poetry or persuasion, politics involves a considerable amount of negotiation, forging future agreements between among those with common or conflicting interests. Negotiation involves the finding and building of allies, as well as close connections with opponents whose interests may be threatened by one's own even if the relationship is not hostile. Anyone who attempts to negotiate with one's opponents should expect anger and resistance, even sabotage. Enduring or surviving this sabotage is the measure of a successful change. Knowing these dynamics can help individuals wield their power wisely and honorably.

The Parity of Elders

Trust within a hierarchy can be accomplished when a leader sacrifices some of his power to empower those underneath him. But the structure of a Reformed church session, a board or team of elders, complicates ideas of hierarchy. While those elders on a session are elected leaders of the congregation, they are also supposed to be equals when they sit

in session together. Teamwork amongst such a group requires that they recognize the potential for abuses of power, the need for mutual submission and unity, and the inherent parity of all elders.

Abuse of Power

Witmer has already noted the "the ultimate inadequacy of human shepherds."[171] Even King David does not escape his critique because of his sin with (or "abuse" of) Bathsheba. He writes, "King David also fell short when he abused his power as shepherd-king of Israel."[172] Stuart sees the team of elders as another potential place where abuses of power can occur. He writes, "When one seeks to exert influence over others negatively, a split in the elder board will surface, conflict will result, and the peace and unity of the church will be disrupted."[173] King David, as far as one can tell, never served on a team of elders. This fact may point to two ways in which abuse of power can occur, by ruling elders who are supposed to be equals and by teaching elders, who are sometimes termed "*primus inter pares* – first among equals."[174]

Stuart is speaking of abuse by ruling elders in context, but the literature surveyed also warns against abuse by teaching elders or pastors. Jung-Sook Lee laments the lack of collegiality among elders in his *Theology Today* article, "How Collegial Can They Be?" He writes, "Korean Presbyterian churches in general have difficulty practicing

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[171] Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 17.

[172] Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 18.

[173] Stuart, *Church Revitalization*, 21.

[174] Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 42–43.

collegiality among offices because the fourfold office in the Korean church is understood as more hierarchical than equal. In this hierarchical understanding, the pastor is the highest among all, followed by elder," followed by two classes of deacon unique to the Korean church.[175]

Thabiti Anyabwile, a disciple of Mark Dever's IX Marks of a Healthy Church ministry, wrote a series of online articles on "The Five A's of Building Healthy Elders Boards." In Anyabwile's article on "Atmosphere," he points out how Peter did not address the elders of the elect exiles as "apostle-to-elders, but as a 'fellow elder' (1 Pet. 5:1)." Anyabwile concludes, "His humility provides a model for 'senior pastors' who should also work to close the gap between themselves and their fellow elders."[176] Theologian John Murray, in his *Collected Writings*, also warns against abuses by dominant solo leaders by emphasizing the plurality of elders in the New Testament. "Plurality indicates the jealousy with which the New Testament guards against government by one man. … Plurality is the safeguard against the arrogance and tyranny to which man has the most characteristic proclivity."[177] Single elders dominating the church is a potential abuse of power that concerns many authors. This study will later examine the senior pastor's role as a *primus inter pares* or "first among equals" and whether this concept inherently undermines the parity of the elders. Numerous authors warn against the dangers of "domineering" (1 Pet. 5:3) leadership by ruling or teaching

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[175] Jung-Sook Lee, "How Collegial Can They Be?: Church Offices in the Korean Presbyterian Churches," *Theology Today* 66, no. 2 (July 2009): 181. https://doi.org/10.1177/004057360906600204.

[176] Thabiti Anaybwile, "The Five A's of Building Healthy Elder Boards: Atmosphere," The Front Porch, accessed August 8, 2019, https://thefrontporch.org/2018/08/the-five-as-of-building-healthy-elder-boards-atmosphere/.

[177] Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 2:345–46.

elders. But as Murray points out, the plurality of elders (and its coordinate teaching of the parity of elders) is the "safeguard" against such abuses.

The Parity and Plurality of Elders

While parity is a synonym of equality, the concept demands some further explanation. How are elders equals? In some ways? In every way? The PCA, to use one Reformed denomination as an example, does not possess numerical parity among elders in any of the church courts. At the session or local church level, ruling elders (REs) often outnumber teaching elders (TEs). At the presbytery (regional) or general assembly (national) level, teaching elders often outnumber ruling elders. In 2019, an overture was considered by the PCA's General Assembly that attempted to encourage more equal representation between teaching and ruling elders. Bryce Sullivan, who wrote against the overture because he did not believe it would achieve its stated goal, clarified the parity that does and does not exist in his blog "The Parity of Elders is a Great Idea; Overture 1 – Not So Much." He wrote, "The *BCO* adopted at the first PCA GA in 1973 guarantees a 'parity of authority' among elders but not a 'parity of number.'"[178] Teaching and ruling elders are equal in authority; individual elders (teaching or ruling) are also equal in authority and retain equal eligibility to positions within church courts. But this concept does not imply that there will always be an equal number of teaching elders (or pastors) and ruling elders (usually lay men) in each church court.[179] William Klempa, in a study

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[178] Bryce F. Sullivan, "The Parity of Elders Is a Great Idea: Overture 1—Not So Much," *Fpramsay.Org* (blog), June 10, 2019, https://fpramsay.org/2019/06/10/the-parity-of-elders-is-a-great-idea-overture-1-not-so-much/.

[179] William Klempa, "The Lay Eldership in Presbyterianism," *ARC* 33 (2005): 431.

on the history of lay eldership in Presbyterian, agrees that historically the parity of elders has consisted in an "equality of power."[180] Sullivan clarifies that parity of number is an "aspiration" of the PCA and its constitutional documents that remains "elusive", but "in all church courts of the PCA there is a constitutionally guaranteed parity of authority among TEs and REs."[181]

Plurality Implies Parity

If parity is a feature of the eldership, then there must also be a plurality of elders. If there were not multiple elders, or if there were different ranks of elders, then hierarchy would inevitably result. Murray explains,

> The principle of parity is co-ordinate with that of plurality. Strictly speaking, there can be no plurality if there is not parity. … There is not the slightest evidence in the New Testament that among the elders there was any hierarchy; the elders exercise government in unison, and on a parity with one another.[182]

If the Holy Spirit through Paul intended for the church to function as a hierarchy, then why did Paul appoint multiple elders on his first missionary journey? Theologian George Knight, writing for the journal *Presbyterion*, raises this point, saying that these first churches, "small and persecuted as they may have been, each have a plurality of elders appointed for them (Acts 14:23)."[183] Andrew Selby, who argues in his article for *Perspectives in Religious Studies* that the episcopate was a historical development and

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[180] Klempa, "The Lay Eldership in Presbyterianism," 436.

[181] Sullivan, "The Parity of Elders Is a Great Idea."

[182] Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 2:346.

[183] George W. Knight, "Two Offices (Elders or Bishops and Deacons) and Two Orders of Elders (Preaching or Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders): A New Testament Study," *Presbyterion* 11, no. 1 (1985): 5.

not a function of the New Testament church, says, "There were a plurality of leaders and not one particular bishop standing at the head of the congregation with other leaders subordinate to him."[184] Murray helpfully clarifies here, saying, "In the New Testament the term 'bishop' is identical in respect of office and function with that of elder."[185] Murray's insight backs up what we see in the New Testament, which Knight has highlighted. There is no hierarchy because there is no higher office than elder in the New Testament church. Elders have an equal rank and equal power, in principle.

Because elders are equal in power, Knight notes, they exercise "unified oversight" over the body of Christ.[186] Anyabwile says this is not only right because of Scripture's commands, but it is also beneficial in many ways. "Multiple elders means multiple gifted men" to share shepherding and teaching, to hold each other accountable, and to maintain leadership during transitions or difficulties. "In the multitude of elders there is safety and plans are established."[187] He seems to allude to Proverbs 11:14: "In an abundance of counselors there is safety." This abundance of counselors does not support notions of a hierarchy in the church.

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184 Andrew M Selby, "Bishops, Elders, and Deacons in the Philippian Church: Evidence of Plurality from Paul and Polycarp," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 39, no. 1 (2012): 84.

185 Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 2:348.

186 Knight, "Two Offices (Elders or Bishops and Deacons) and Two Orders of Elders (Preaching or Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders)," 5.

187 Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2012), 49.

Two Offices and Two Orders

Knight's article gives much of his conclusion about the Biblical offices of the church in his title: "Two Offices (Elders or Bishops and Deacons) and Two Orders of Elders (Preaching or Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders): A New Testament Study."[188] These distinctions ground the ideas of parity and plurality within the eldership as well as the notion of teaching elders as "first among equals." Guy Waters, a New Testament professor at Reformed Theological Seminary, supports the so-called "two-office view" in his *How Jesus Runs the Church*, saying, "The 'two-office' view further argues that within the one office of elder there are two orders, the teaching elder and the ruling elder. Both the teaching elder and the ruling elder are elders. They are distinct with respect to certain functions, but not with respect to office."[189] Waters and others acknowledge that there has been difference of interpretation regarding the nature and number of offices.

Three Offices? An Alternate View

The previous quote from Waters represents a classic two-office view of Presbyterianism, in which there are two offices, elder and deacon, the former of which can be distinguished and divided into two orders, teaching elders and ruling elders. Though terminology varies, two-office views see deacons and elders, with elders divided into the subsets of teaching and ruling elders. Three-office views typically see teaching elders, ruling elders and deacons as three distinct offices. Charles Hodge, the stalwart professor of Princeton Theological Seminary and the standard bearer for Northern

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[188] Knight, "Two Offices (Elders or Bishops and Deacons) and Two Orders of Elders (Preaching or Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders)," 1.

[189] Guy Prentiss Waters, *How Jesus Runs the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2011), 87.

Presbyterianism, was the most notable proponent of the three-office view of Presbyterianism. Hodge, in his *The Church and Its Polity*, claimed that his view was the traditional Presbyterian view and that the two-office view was a "new theory." He wrote, "This new theory makes all elders, bishops, pastors, and teachers, and rulers. … It therefore destroys all official distinctions between them. It reduces the two to one order, class, or office."[190] Another notable theologian from Hodge's era who embraced the three-office view was Thomas Smyth, one of the few Southern Presbyterians to do so. In his *Complete Works*, Smyth writes of the ruling elder, "Your office is second in dignity and importance *only* to that of the bishopric." On the same page, Smyth equates the term "bishop" with "pastor." While he claims to restore the office of ruling elder "to its true elevation," by these comments, Smyth essentially made pastors a first who was not quite an equal to the ruling elders, whom he said were "second in dignity and importance" to the pastor.[191] While Smyth's motives were laudable – to restore ruling elders to their proper elevation – he and Hodge were not the only voices to analyze the nature and number of the church's offices, especially that of elder.

'The Ruling Elder … my brother and peer.'

Smyth explicitly says that ruling elders are second in dignity to teaching elders; Hodge implies it. Meanwhile, James Henley Thornwell, one of the two most prominent Southern Presbyterians along with Robert Dabney, notably opposed the views of Hodge,

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[190] Charles Hodge, *The Church and Its Polity* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson, 1879), 128, http://archive.org/details/churchanditspol00hodggoog.

[191] Thomas Smyth, *Complete Works of Rev. Thomas Smyth, D. D.* ed. John William Flinn (repri., Columbia, S.C., R. L. Bryan company, 1908), 4:32, http://archive.org/details/completeworksofr02smyt, emphasis original. Additional editorial work provided by Jean Adger Flinn.

referring to him by name several times in his *Collected Writings*. On the same page in

which he disagreed with Hodge, Thornwell wrote, "I take my brother, the Ruling Elder

… by the hand as my brother and my *peer*." He also affirms the equal authority among

individual elders.[192] Thomas Bannerman, a Scottish theologian of the 1800s who wrote a

classic treatise on Ecclesiology titled, *The Church of Christ*, espoused a two-office view

with terminology that could be confused as three-office terminology. He discusses "three

sorts of office-bearers," but the context does not reveal a three-office view. He actually

discusses three sorts of elders – "a preaching elder," "the teaching elder," and "the ruling

elder" – within the "one common order of the eldership."[193] Bannerman does not use the

same terminology as a modern theologian like Knight or Waters, two offices and two

orders, but he does affirm one office of elder, a hallmark of the two-office view.

Some modern sources extol the benefits of the three-office view. For example,

Gregory Reynolds, writing for the Orthodox Presbyterian Church's website, says, "The

three-office view allows the minister to focus on the ministry of the Word."[194] However,

Witmer, who holds to a classic two-office view where the minister is the "first among

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[192] James Henley Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell* eds. John B. Adger and John L. Girardeau (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1873), 235, http://archive.org/details/collectedwriting04thor, emphasis original.

[193] James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ : A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church* (Edinburgh : T. T. Clark, 1868), 2:305, http://archive.org/details/churchofchristtr02bann.

[194] Gregory E. Reynolds, "Democracy and the Denigration of Office, Part 2," Ordained Servant Online, accessed November 27, 2019, https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=403&issue_id=92&pfriendly=Y&ret=L29zLmh0bWw%2FYXJ0aWNsZV9pZD00MDMmaXNzdWVfaWQ9OTI%3D#note8.

equals," extols these same benefits, so long as ruling elders embrace their ruling or shepherding role.[195]

Ruling Eldership is Lay Eldership

Both two-office views and three-office views, despite their differences, generally recognize that ruling elders are laymen, not trained clergy. Klempa's study traces a long history for the notion of lay eldership in Presbyterianism. He finds much historical support for two kinds, or two orders, of elder, and the notion that "this second sort of presbyter was a layman and not a priest."[196] Klempa further notes that the nature of lay eldership in Presbyterianism has sought to promote a collegiality among the elders – teaching and ruling elders, ministers and lay elders. He says, "Elders are not 'clergy' but they are an integral part of the ministry of the church."[197] Lee spends a great deal of his article lamenting the lack of collegiality in Korean Presbyterian churches that have turned the Biblical offices into a hierarchy (with pastors at the top) that was not intended. But Lee helpfully defines collegiality as "mutual respect," among elders; he concludes, "None of us, whether pastor, elder, or deacon, should preach, teach, rule, or serve with our own goals, but only with the grand objective God has corporately entrusted to us."[198]

If the benefits of Anyabwile's multitude of counselors and Lee and Klempa's collegiality are seen, then it would ideally result in unity among the elders. After all, if

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[195] Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 43.

[196] Klempa, "The Lay Eldership in Presbyterianism," 433–34.

[197] Klempa, "The Lay Eldership in Presbyterianism," 440.

[198] Jung-Sook Lee, "How Collegial Can They Be?," 183.

elders exist in plurality and parity, then why would they not be unified? Why would they not be humbled by the task that God has given them?

Parity Leading to Unity

The parity of elders encourages submission and unity rather than displays of power and a lust for control. Stuart writes extensively about unity and consensus among elders in their session meetings. He advocates for something similar to consensus with qualification – not an instant, forced consensus, but one that is sought after all opinions have been expressed even if there is not unanimity regarding a decision. He urges those in the minority to "voluntarily [place] one's will under another's when one's preference would have been otherwise."[199] This desire for consensus and unity is grounded in the one Spirit who calls all elders to serve. He says, "If elders are called by God to serve his church, then it is reasonable to assume that the Holy Spirit will lead a group of elders in the same direction."[200] Indeed, Witmer reminds, "The biblical picture of leadership is 'team' leadership."[201] If each member of a team has a sound view of mutual submission, they will be able to lead together, as Witmer describes.

Anyabwile notes the importance of submission for ruling elders in his book *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*. He writes, "Can he submit to … other biblically qualified, gifted, and Spirit-filled men who will, from time to time, see a matter differently. It's proud to think this will never happen, and it's proud to think the other

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[199] Stuart, *Church Revitalization*, 41.

[200] Stuart, *Church Revitalization*, 40.

[201] Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 43.

elders should always submit to you."[202] If someone cannot do this, he is not the type of

man who will display good teamwork. Harry Reeder, pastor of Briarwood Presbyterian

(PCA) Church in Birmingham, AL, strikes a similar chord in his book *The Leadership*

Dynamic, when he notes that "insubordination" will definitely disqualify a man from

church leadership. He writes, "If a leader cannot submit to others, he is unprepared to

lead anyone. … The privilege of leadership does not elevate the leader above submission;

instead, it calls the leader to be a model of submission."[203] This highlights the complex

nature of leadership in a Reformed church. Each leader is called by the Spirit and the

church body, but he is not the only leader or the highest-ranking leader, because no one

leader outranks the others. Therefore, this increases their need to understand leadership

and submission. This may become somewhat easier when elders realize that unity is not

merely their goal but also a key feature of their office.

Unified Oversight

      There are practical benefits to the plurality of elders, as Anyabwile noted, and

plurality is also a fact in Christ's church, something for her elders to note. Numerous

authors underscore how parity and plurality lead to the "unified oversight" of Christ's

body by the body of elders.[204] Witmer, a teaching elder, calls it a "shared responsibility"

between ruling and teaching elders, even arguing for teacher elders to have less

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[202] Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*, 102–3.

[203] Harry L. Reeder and Rod Gragg, *The Leadership Dynamic: A Biblical Model for Raising Effective Leaders* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 62.

[204] Knight, "Two Offices (Elders or Bishops and Deacons) and Two Orders of Elders (Preaching or Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders)," 5.

responsibility in this area to focus on preaching and teaching.[205] Waters discusses formal church discipline as one aspect of the elder's shepherding duty, but it is not a duty (in its formal sense) that anyone performs solo. He writes, "The apostolic pattern is that elders together take up and carry through the work of discipline in the church. The Bible never intended for this mantle to fall on the shoulders of a single man."[206] Whether it comes to formal discipline or the more mundane acts of shepherding, each undershepherd is called to watch over the flock together. God has given them this task as a unified group. One might ask, "Why should elders display unity in their shepherding work of the church?" Another might answer, "Because they already are unified. They have been given a task which they are to perform in unison and not as lone rangers." And when undershepherds display what they are called to do, the chief shepherd will receive the ultimate glory.

Unity and Submission Exalting Christ the Head

One might imagine a team of elders where the concept of parity and plurality have been embraced. Therefore, they display humility willingly. They do not lord themselves over other elders (or over the congregation), and they understand that they have one vote, and that they are equal in authority to all the other elders. But as Anyabwile points out, such a team will still need individual "assignments," and someone will have to help delineate who is assigned to what. He compares such a leader (by whatever title one chooses to give him) to a point guard in basketball. Not an autocrat or a dictator, but one who sets others up for success because he knows their strengths and their roles. He

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[205] Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 43.

[206] Waters, *How Jesus Runs the Church*, 75.

explains, "The point guard's role isn't so much to dictate the decisions but to call the team into a huddle for prayer, study, discussion and decision-making. It's safer and more effective that way – even if it's less efficient and sometimes more frustrating for autocrats and egomaniacs."[207] This point guard is the one of the primary members who must understand his role, leading but not dictating, leading yet doing so with humility.

A Safeguard against the Unsubmissive

But what happens when a church's point guard does not understand his role? What happens when he begins to exercise the arrogance and tyranny of an autocratic leader that Murray warned against? In theory, his fellow elders who are his equals, will call him to account, albeit gently, Anyabwile says.[208] But he does not address what happens if the leader still insists upon and gets his way. In a congregational church government, Anaybwile's context, the elders would have no means of appeal if the point guard decided to flex his muscles and emphasize his first-ness and not his equality. This is where a Presbyterian model of government, including graded church courts, can be helpful in guarding against autocratic leadership.[209] Waters discusses this concept, clarifying that graded church courts are not hierarchical, though the terms lower court and higher court are used.[210] One of the duties of a higher court is the review and control of

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[207] Thabiti Anaybwile, "The Five A's of Building Healthy Elder Boards: Assignments," The Front Porch, accessed August 8, 2019, https://thefrontporch.org/2018/08/the-five-as-of-building-healthy-elder-boards-assignments/.

[208] Anaybwile, "The Five A's of Building Healthy Elder Boards: Assignments."

[209] Presbyterian Church in America, *BCO*. The idea of multiple church courts, in a graded, but not hierarchical order is discussed in chapter 11-4.

[210] Waters, *How Jesus Runs the Church*, 142–43.

the lower courts.[211] Therefore, the actions of a church session (including those of an autocratic teaching elder) would be subject to the review and control of the presbytery, the next higher court, since lower courts are "not autonomous or independent."[212] Furthermore, the decision of a lower court can be overruled by a judicial decision of a higher court if a member of the lower court (one elder of a local session, for example) follows the constitutional guidelines for an appeal.[213] Anyabwile rightly stresses the mindset of a pastor as a point guard and not a dictator, but Waters shows how a Presbyterian system of government, with graded courts, can guard against the point guard who morphs into a dictator.

Submission Exalting and Modelling Christ

The leader must understand his role, Anyabwile explains, because part of his leadership will be setting a tone for the rest of the team, the rest of the elders, much as they will set the tone for the rest of the body of Christ whom they lead. John Hall Elliott, writing on the elders of 1 Peter, sees this as one of the elder's primary goals – to lead in the area of humility. He writes, "In contrast to Gentile rulers who 'domineer' or 'lord it over' (katakyrieuou-sin) their subjects, Jesus' disciples are to take Jesus their leader as their example and to serve as did the Human One who 'came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.'"[214] Elliott concludes, "In emulating the

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[211] Presbyterian Church in America, *BCO,* 11-4.

[212] Waters, *How Jesus Runs the Church*, 144.

[213] Presbyterian Church in America, *BCO,* 13-9.

[214] John Hall Elliott, "Elders as Leaders in 1 Peter and the Early Church," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 28, no. 6 (December 2001): 556.

humility of the Christ, they, in turn, would be an example of the humility that was to characterize and unite the entire community."[215] But Knight goes even farther. Humble elders will not only imitate Christ and lead to more Christ-like-ness throughout the body, but they, through that very humility, will exalt Christ, who came to serve yet had every right to call Himself King. Knight says, "The unity and parity within the one office of elder helps to foster the mutual submission to one another, which in turn helps to preserve the humble servant quality of the eldership, and, at the same time, the unique Lordship of Christ."[216] If elders refuse to take the reins that are not theirs, then their humility will serve as a picture that Christ is truly the only king of His church.

Sam Waldron, President of Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary and pastor of a Reformed Baptist church, sees the same exaltation of Christ in the parity of the elders. Waldron also emphasizes the diversity of the elders, a similar theme to what Anyabwile called "assignments." No one possesses every gift, which is why there is a need to work together as elders. After making this point, Waldron says, "The plurality of human pastors, the parity of human elders, and the diversity of human elders point up to the glory of the Chief Shepherd of the church. He alone can make us perfect in every good work to do His will working in us that which is well-pleasing in God's sight."[217] John Murray makes the same point very succinctly by saying that all elders are

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[215] Elliott, "Elders as Leaders," 557.

[216] Knight, "Two Offices (Elders or Bishops and Deacons) and Two Orders of Elders (Preaching or Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders)," 11.

[217] Sam Waldron, "Parity in the Eldership and the Need for Balance (Part 5 of 5) – Cbtseminary," accessed August 8, 2019, https://cbtseminary.org/parity-in-the-eldership-and-the-need-for-balance-part-5-of-5/.

"undershepherds under the arcshepherd."[218] Huddling together for prayer and decisions in a group of equals may not be efficient, as Anyabwile said. One dictator could solve some problems more quickly in the church. But this is not the example that Christ left his disciples, the leaders of the early church. And neither does such domineering leadership point to Christ as the head of the church. To the extent that elders display such domineering tendencies, they will detract from the humble, counter-cultural ways of Christ. If this is the case, should there be a leader in the church at all? Should all decisions be made by consensus? If all elders are equals, then is there a place for a "first among equals?"

The "First Among Equals"

Even though Presbyterian polity has resisted hierarchical notions for Biblical reasons, there still exists a strong doctrine of the pastor as the "first among equals." Witmer and others identify this as the pastor's role among the elders. Witmer appeals to 1 Timothy 5:17 – "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching." [219] Anyabwile makes the same point through a different route. He argues first, "Parity does not equal uniformity." Therefore, elders need assignments, and they need a leader, whether he is called senior pastor, lead pastor, or something else. "Whatever the title, effective teams must have a clear leader." Having established this, he then uses the phrase "first among equals" in passing. He also notes how this requires humility, especially in the leader, and how this

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[218] Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 2: 345.

[219] Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 42–43.

will be less efficient but better at preventing autocrats to rule the church.[220] Jonathan

Leeman, writing for the same IX Marks Ministries that mentored Anyabwile, also

embraces the "first among equals" language and appeals to 1 Timothy 5:17. Leeman

writes, "If [someone] … gives himself over to being the main teacher, he should be

accorded an extra measure of leadership and deference."[221] The large number of authors

who embrace the concept of a "first among equals" might seem to cut against the idea of

parity of the elders. Perhaps the reason so many embrace the terminology is not only the

emphasis on "first" but the similar emphasis on "equal."

Still an Equal

      Many of the same authors who embrace "first among equals" are quick to qualify

it, by stressing the equality that the leader has. Witmer, like Anyabwile, discusses the

"practical benefits in terms of providing initiative and direction in the local church" that a

pastor among elders has. But in the next sentence, he says, "However, we must not lose

sight of the fact that the biblical picture of leadership is 'team' leadership."[222] Anyabwile

begins his argument for the "first among equals" by stressing the diversity and the unique

assignments that exist within the parity of elders.[223] Likewise, Leeman begins by

stressing the "formal parity" within the elders, saying, "He really just has one vote among

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[220] Anaybwile, "The Five A's of Building Healthy Elder Boards: Assignments."

[221] Jonathan Leeman, "What Does 'First Among Equals' Mean on an Elder Board," 9Marks, August 28, 2014, https://www.9marks.org/article/what-does-first-among-equals-mean-on-an-elder-board/.

[222] Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 42–43.

[223] Anaybwile, "The Five A's of Building Healthy Elder Boards: Assignments."

the elders. He is an equal."[224] John Murray is not afraid to use the phrase "first among equals," either, but he stresses equality quite strongly. First, he discusses "the jealousy with which the New Testament guards against government by one man." Then Murray states the parity of ruling authority that the minister possesses.[225] Perhaps the phrase "first among equals" might be hard to understand, but that may be due to a particular reader emphasizing either "first" or "equals" when they read this phrase. The New Testament and various interpreters of it have sought a strong balance between both concepts, retaining the parity that exists among elders and the practical leadership that benefits the group. Leeman refers to this as "intentionally vague," allowing different churches to explore the meaning of a group of equals, among whom one is first. Waters walks a fine line, as many do on this topic, when he says, "This description [first among equals] is proper insofar as it describes the minister's calling to provide leadership and direction to the session in their common efforts as elders. The minister, however, does not belong to a higher rank of office than the ruling elder. He is a 'fellow elder' (cf. 1 Peter 5:1)."[226] As Leeman suggests, maybe these concepts are somewhat vague for a reason, but there are firm boundaries in the Bible that guide the Church, nonetheless. Elders are equals; they rule the church as a joint effort. But among those equals, they may have different gifts and calling, and they may even have a leader. Such a leader is not an autocrat, but a humble servant leader who reflects the humility of Christ and points to the glory of Christ, the true head of the Church, the arcshepherd.

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[224] Leeman, "First Among Equals."

[225] Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 2: 345–47.

[226] Waters, *How Jesus Runs the Church*, 93.

Summary of The Parity of Elders

Elders are called to shepherd the flock as Christ called them to do. They are not called to domineer the sheep or bully one another, however. As equals with a joint task, they are called to exhibit the parity and unity which they possess. From the earliest New Testament churches, a plurality of elders were appointed, even in persecuted, weak churches. This plurality aligns with the parity of elders, for if elders are equals, it is fitting for there to be more than one to assist the church and to prevent the rule of one man over any individual body. The presence of multiple leaders challenges all elders to exhibit humility, which both reflects Christ and glorifies Christ. The presence of individual pastors in churches may seem to challenge the idea of parity, and the phrase "first among equals" (commonly used of pastors or teaching elders) may sound strange at first. Further study reveals that the one who is first has an important role to lead and coordinate the rest of the equals, but his leadership role does not elevate him or remove his equality among fellow elders. He remains one elder, with one vote, still called to reflect Christ's humility so that he might glorify Christ in His supremacy over the Church.

Summary of Literature Review

Teams are delicate groups that are difficult to understand at first, and teams of elders are no different. A lack of trust in teams can have a crippling effect. But trust may look different than one expects. Silent agreement may actually reflect apathy and disengagement instead of hard-earned trust. The goal, instead, is open discussion, a naming of hardships. Reaching this goal will likely require relationship building, which may be just as effective in informal settings as formal settings. Leaders can help this

process if they possess political savvy and integrity, since politics is inherently neutral but may be used for good or ill. They can also help by modeling the type of vulnerability, openness to correction, that they desire in the rest of their team. The risk for leaders is that there is no guarantee that their efforts, which are necessary for building trust, will be received favorably.

Understanding the importance of trust in teams overlaps with an understanding of power in teams. Power is ability to influence, and if leaders understand the sources of their power (positional and relational, to name two) then they will be able to use it for the benefit of their team. In addition to their own power, leaders benefit from understanding power structures. Navigating power structures and the relationships between those with unequal power throughout those structures requires a knowledge of politics and negotiation. This includes finding and building allies, and negotiating with those who have naturally competing interests, whether or not such opponents have malicious intent or not. Entering into any such negotiation, a common activity of life, with those with conflicting interests will likely result in backlash or sabotage. Surviving such a sabotage is the mark of success for a leader, the sign that he has earned sufficient trust and utilized his power well enough to navigate more such challenges.

One unique team setting is that of elders in a Reformed church. Elders exist in plurality, and they possess parity; they are equals, despite all being elected as leaders by their congregation. This parity extends to pastors or teaching elders. They still remain elders. They are called to the same office as ruling elders, even if they possess a role as the "first among equals." Both nouns deserve proper emphasis, but the first one does not destroy the equality that all elders possess. Pastors may exhibit practical leadership for

the sake of the team of elders, but this does not undermine the elders' unified oversight of Christ's church. A pastor's unique role does not change his call to Christ-like humility by which the reflect Christ and glorify Christ. As pastors and elders alike display humility and work together, they show that none of them are the head of the church. They are merely undershepherds serving the arcshepherd.

These themes explored in the literature review will form the foundation for the qualitative research. In the next chapter, the methodology for the qualitative research will be laid out.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to investigate how ruling elders from mid-sized Reformed churches describe their teamwork. The assumption of this study is that teamwork among elders is vital to the ministry effectiveness of a pastor and the health of the church. Therefore, pastors whose churches do not have teamwork among elders will seek it, and pastors whose churches do have it will seek to perpetuate it.

In order to address this purpose, the researcher has identified three main areas that are central to this investigation: trust in teams, power in teams, and the parity of elders. To examine these areas more closely, the following research questions served as the intended focus of the qualitative research:

Research Questions

The following questions guided the qualitative research:

1. How do ruling elders experience teamwork?

    a. How do ruling elders experience trust in teamwork?

    b. How do ruling elders experience power in teamwork?

    c. How do ruling elders experience parity in teamwork?

2. How do ruling elders overcome challenges to teamwork?

3. How are ruling elders mentoring future leaders in teamwork?

Design of the Study

Sharan B. Merriam, in her book *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, discusses a general, basic qualitative study, saying, "All qualitative research is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives and their worlds. The *primary* goal of a basic qualitative study is to uncover and interpret these meanings."[227] Merriam identifies four characteristics of qualitative research: a focus on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher as primary instrument of data collection and analysis; an inductive process; and richly descriptive product.[228]

This study employed a qualitative research design and conducted semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data gathering. This qualitative method provided for the discovery of the most comprehensive and descriptive data from participant perspectives in the narrow phenomena of ruling elders in mid-sized Reformed churches describing their teamwork. This method was best because it involved the study of contextual, non-repeatable events interpreted by those participants who had to act or react in the moment. "The overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an *understanding* of how people make sense of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience."[229]

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[227] Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2015), 25, emphasis original.

[228] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 15.

[229] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 15, emphasis original.

The situational, non-repeatable nature of the data supporting this study required the researcher to serve as the primary data gatherer and interpreter. This allows the researcher to gain a more intimate knowledge of how elders described their teamwork. "Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them. It is also necessary to interview when we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate."[230]

The interviews in this study were conducted using the semi-structured interview protocol. This format allows the order and wording of questions to vary as the researcher sees fit, in order to allow the researcher "to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic."[231] This format allowed the researcher to gain rich descriptions of experiences, as well as eliciting opinions, evaluations, and reflections. As Merriam says, "Less-structured formats assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways."[232] Therefore, this format allowed the researcher to capture those unique descriptions.

Participant Sample Selection

This research required participants who are able to communicate in depth about the teamwork of ruling elders in mid-sized Reformed churches. Therefore, the purposeful study sample consisted of a selection of people from the population of ruling elders who have served in mid-sized Reformed churches and whose churches were described by

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[230] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 108.

[231] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 110–11.

[232] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 110.

others and by themselves as displaying good teamwork in leadership.[233] This allowed the researcher to gain data toward best practices.

Some of the initial selection of potential candidates was thus done by network sampling as the researcher polled his contacts for churches and candidates who might fit this profile.[234] The eventual participants were chosen for a maximum variation of geography within the United States and maximum variation of city size across rural and urban settings in order to highlight core experiences across different settings in the data collected.[235] No more than two participants attended the same church. They also varied in age and experience, which provides a broad spectrum of life perspectives for the study. The final study was conducted through personal interviews with eight ruling elders in the Presbyterian Church in America who are currently serving at mid-sized (approximately 150-450 in attendance) Reformed churches. This church size is most familiar to the researcher. The researcher also assumed that larger or smaller churches within otherwise similar contexts may exhibit different social dynamics. So in the criteria of church size, the searcher sought minimum variation to better understand the particular phenomenon (teamwork among ruling elders in mid-sized Reformed churches) without having to account for the dynamic of differing church size.[236] Choosing participants from the PCA limited the participants to males, in accordance with denominational polity structures.

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[233] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 96.

[234] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 98.

[235] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 98.

[236] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 98.

Additional criteria included elders from churches who self-reported having good teamwork, because the research was focused on best practices.

Additional criteria also included those whose philosophy of ministry included at least three of the following four characteristics: an emphasis on the ordinary means of grace, a confessional or creedal basis, a belief in the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, and elders focused on shepherding. This will strengthen the research by minimizing the variable (philosophy of ministry) that is not the focus of the study.

The participants represented seven different churches, with multiple elders from only one church. They all were invited to participate via an introductory letter, followed by a personal phone call. All expressed interest and gave written informed consent to participate in the form of a "Research Participant Consent Form" to respect and to protect the human rights of the participants.

Data Collection

This study utilized semi-structured interviews for primary data gathering. The open-ended nature of interview questions facilitates the ability to build upon participant responses to complex issues in order to explore them more thoroughly.[237] Ultimately, these methods enabled this study to look for common themes, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the variation of participants.[238]

The researcher performed a pilot test of the interview protocol to evaluate the questions for clarity and usefulness in eliciting relevant data. Initial interview protocol

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[237] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 110–11.

[238] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 196.

categories were derived from the literature but evolved around the explanations and descriptions that emerged from doing constant comparison work during the interviewing process. Coding and categorizing the data while continuing the process of interviewing also allowed for the emergence of new sources of data.[239]

The researcher interviewed eight ruling elders from mid-sized Reformed churches for one hour each. Before the interviews, the participants received an email stating the purpose of the study without giving the actual research questions. In order to accommodate participant schedules, the researcher traveled to them at a location of their choice as often as possible. When logistics would not allow in-person interviews, videoconferencing (and, on two occasions where said technology was unavailable, telephone conferencing) was used. These approaches were used to access the most-qualified participants across the required geographic distances. It may have negatively affected the study in the following ways: by minimizing the trust necessary for them to speak most openly and by reducing the researcher's ability to observe non-verbal communication. To access the most-qualified applicants, the researcher was willing to make that potential sacrifice.

The researcher audiotaped the interviews with a digital recorder. By conducting multiple interviews per week, the researcher completed the data gathering in the course of five weeks. Directly after each interview, the researcher wrote field notes with descriptive and reflective observations on the interview time.

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[239] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 197.

The interview protocol contained the following questions.

1. Tell me about one of your fellow elders who helped others work together as a team at one of your meetings.

2. Tell me about a time when one of your teams overcame a challenge that could have caused division among you.

3. What are some of the ways you try to embody teamwork?

4. What are some attitudes that help you to embody teamwork?

5. How are you trying to pass on a spirit of teamwork to rising leaders?

6. If you could tell a younger version of yourself how to embody teamwork better, what are some things you would tell him?

Data Analysis

As soon as possible and always within two days of each meeting, the researcher personally transcribed each interview by using computer software to play back the digital recording on a computer and typing out each transcript. The software allowed for color-coding and word-searching. This study utilized the constant comparison method of routinely analyzing the data throughout the interview process. This method provided for the ongoing revision, clarification, and evaluation of the resultant data categories.[240] When the interviews and observation notes were fully transcribed into computer files, they were coded and analyzed using a word processor and coding by hand on printed transcripts. The analysis focused on discovering and identifying (1) common themes and

[240] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 220.

patterns across the variation of participants; and (2) congruence or discrepancy between the different groups of participants.

Researcher Position

The researcher is an Evangelical Christian, committed to the inerrancy of Scripture. The researcher has been part of an Evangelical church since birth, a born-again Christian since age 13, and part of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) for over 20 years, starting at age 17, when he and his parents transferred membership to a PCA church. Since 2005, the researcher's primary employment has been on staff at a PCA church, including four years as a pastoral intern in seminary and over 10 years as an ordained pastor, the past four as a senior pastor. The researcher has seen teamwork dynamics among ruling elders in the past that he would consider to be unhealthy. He has also seen very fruitful dynamics in the elders at his current church, dynamics which existed prior to his arrival at that church.

For these reasons, this study may be limited in various ways. It is possible that the researcher's negative experiences with teams of ruling elders may color this study in a pessimistic direction. It is equally possible that his current positive experience may color this study in an overly optimistic direction.

The researcher also has only been a part of like-sized congregations, mid-sized churches (defined earlier as approximately 150-450 regular attenders). This may lead to an idealization that this is the best church size.

Overall, the researcher believes that these experiences will cause him to view the participants with empathy and understanding, as an insider who cherishes good teamwork and hopes to spur on more of it in Christ's church. In short, the researcher hopes that

more can be done in this area of study, while acknowledging these potential areas of bias in the current study and its researcher.

Study Limitations

As stated in the previous section, participants interviewed for this study were limited to men serving as ruling elders in mid-sized Reformed churches. Therefore, this study's findings may be quite different from teamwork patterns in churches with Congregational or Episcopal polity structures and from teamwork patterns in mixed-gender groups or all-female groups. It was also limited by the geography of the participants, who were located within the United States. Some of the study's findings may be generalized to other similar churches in different contexts or to non-Reformed churches. Readers who desire to apply some of the particular aspects of the findings and/or conclusions on teamwork should test those aspects in their particular context.[241] As with all qualitative studies, readers bear the responsibility to determine what can be appropriately applied to their context. The results of this study may also have implications for elders and pastors in other geographies, denominations, or churches of larger or smaller sizes than the purposeful sample described above.

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[241] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 256.

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate how ruling elders from mid-sized Reformed churches describe their teamwork. To that end, this chapter utilizes the findings of the eight elder interviews and reports on common themes and relevant insights pertaining to the research questions for this study. In order to address the purpose of this study, the following research questions served as the intended focus of the qualitative research.

1. How do ruling elders experience teamwork?

    a. How do ruling elders experience trust in teamwork?

    b. How do ruling elders experience power in teamwork?

    c. How do ruling elders experience parity in teamwork?

2. How do ruling elders overcome challenges to teamwork?

3. How are ruling elders mentoring future leaders in teamwork?

Introductions to Participants and Context

Eight subjects were selected to participate in this study. All of them were ruling elders in PCA churches, and by virtue of denominational standards requiring male eldership, all the participants were males. All participants live in the United States, but their hometowns, ages, and experience levels were varied. In the following section each participant will briefly be introduced. All names and identifiable information of participants have been changed to protect their identity.

Alan Alda

Alda has been a ruling elder for over 40 years at two different Reformed churches. He is currently retired from the military and a subsequent career as a university professor and resides in a large Western city where he serves as an elder at a PCA church of over 300.

Bob Buchanan

Buchanan has been a ruling elder at multiple churches in multiple areas of the country. He currently resides in a large Western city where he serves as an elder at PCA church of approximately 150. Currently retired, Buchanan took on a large administrative role during his church's recent pastoral transition and has now completed a sabbatical as an elder following the new pastor's installation.

Curt Cutter

Cutter has served multiple churches as an elder. He has also served extensively at the Presbytery and General Assembly levels of the PCA, as well as his local church. Curt resides in a small city in the Southeast, where he serves as a ruling elder of a church of over 200.

Doug Duncan

Duncan has been a part of the same PCA church of approximately 150 in a rural Western state for over 10 years, serving first as a deacon and now as a ruling elder. He is active with his local church and Presbytery.

Eddie Eagle

Eagle is a ruling elder and former missionary who serves as an elder and a staff member of a PCA church of approximately 150 in a rural Western state. He has served in various capacities in the local church, as well as at Presbytery and General Assembly.

Frankie Funke

Funke cannot remember when he first began serving as a ruling elder at his PCA church which is now over 400 in attendance, but conservative estimates place his longevity at 30 years and counting. His experience as a lawyer has given him a great appreciation for PCA church polity, and he has taught officer training courses at multiple churches within his Presbytery. He has served extensively at Presbytery and General Assembly levels, and he resides in a small Eastern city, where he still practices law.

George Gervin

Gervin is a federal agent with over 15 years experience as a ruling elder in a Western PCA church of approximately 400 in a city where he has lived for most of his adult life. George has seen multiple pastors serve there and retire on good terms. He also witnessed the church's transition from another denomination into the PCA.

Hank Underhill

Hank is a ruling elder at a PCA church of approximately 400 in a large Western city. A relatively new elder, Hank is very pleased with his session's current teamwork, which he largely credits to the church's long-time senior pastor and founder. Hank is also

a staff member who believes he has grown a lot since he first started working with the church.

Experiencing Teamwork

The first research question investigated "How ruling elders experience teamwork?" Three themes surfaced in the research as the participants described their experiences in teamwork with other elders in mid-sized Reformed churches: 1) their teamwork was dependent upon mutual trust; 2) their teamwork was dependent upon a recognition of and a right use of power; 3) their teamwork was dependent upon a working understanding of the parity of elders.

Trust in Teamwork

As the respondents described the way that they experienced trust among their elder teams, several subthemes emerged. The participants focused on their group camaraderie, their learning through negative past experiences, the need for communication, and the need to not second guess each other.

Group Camaraderie

Nearly every respondent described some aspect of their elder board's group camaraderie either as a key to their success or as a cherished asset to be preserved. Alda pointed to one particular elder who helped the group see this larger picture which helped preserve unity and trust among the other elders. According to Alda, this elder said, "Agreement and getting along is more important than this particular issue we're discussing." Alda said this helped the group get past their particular conflict at that

moment, which was significant. Alda noted this elder's past experience with the Peacemakers organization and how he effectively used those techniques to preserve the group's unity.

Three elders used the word "peacemaker" in describing key figures who had helped preserve or institute teamwork in their settings. Two of the elders, including Alda, were referring to the official organization Peacemakers, but one other respondent (Buchanan) used it merely as an adjective to describe a key figure in his teamwork experience. Buchanan also described his fellow elder Burt as an "ombudsman" who maintained an "emotional connection" with all the elders. Buchanan said of Burt, "He felt it was his calling because of his personality to try to get to know each of the elders individually. And then if something was a question or wasn't clear he would try to help present or interpret it, so that whoever was struggling could understand it." He also noted how Burt, during a budget discussion in a season where church giving had fallen off, was more concerned with "a well-rounded picture," or the human impact of those decisions. Buchanan said, "If the treasurer was presenting numbers, he didn't want more numbers; he wanted to know how it would affect people."

Cutter also noted that his fellow elders valued "our working relationship" and the solidarity that resulted from it. Funke, who also identified an experienced Peacemaker as a key figure on his board, remembered once working with that Peacemaker to resolve a dispute among two other elders. Funke, the only lawyer among the eight subjects, has seen the value of trust in resolving disputes in secular settings, as well. He noted how two lawyers could be on opposing sides of a case, representing clients with conflicting interests "but still have a good relationship with one another, which is how many legal

problems get solved." Alda noted something similar when his colleague Donald spoke to his fellow elders. He said, "Thus it refocuses the whole issue, not just the issue at hand but the broader perspective of working together over the long term on many many issues, not just one narrow little one." Funke observed, "If you don't have trust, everything breaks down." Gervin agreed that trust was important, saying, "Trust takes time to develop," and that "to really trust" one's fellow elders, one has to build up shared experiences. He concluded, "You have to slog through things with them." Whether through the work of one key individual or the work of a group, the respondents agreed that trust was vital to a team's functioning. Several elders had seen negative experiences in this area, as well.

Learning through Past Negative Experience

Half of the respondents recalled negative experiences in trust even though the research questions did not focus on this aspect. Alda recalled an experience where he was "betrayed," in a professional setting when a fellow member of a search committee later revealed his dissenting vote to the candidate who was hired. Alda said, "What was supposed to have been kept behind closed doors was not. And because I was the supervisor to this new individual, it completely destroyed any trust." When Alda learned of the violation of trust, he resigned from a subsequent search committee. Despite that negative experience, he has served on multiple pastoral search committees since then, and he describes his current work on the elder board as an "encouraging" experience.

Three other elders described negative experiences regarding trust in their past or current church situations. Two of the elders mentioned church splits that they had endured. One said, "Without a doubt, it was the most difficult experience that I've ever

had in the church." Yet the negative experience has not kept that elder from serving on

another session or serving at the Presbytery and General Assembly levels. Duncan said of

his experience after the church spilt, "There's some baggage that sits there. You have

some feelings. There needs to be some forgiveness." He was grateful for an interim

pastor that helped him work through that baggage and eventually become an elder. Eagle

described an on-going experience with a current fellow elder, whom he would only

identify as "Lightning Rod," or "LR," with whom he had frequent conflict. However,

Eagle noted LR's gracious demeanor in those conflicts and that Eagle's own people-

pleasing tendencies were likely the main source of his frustration. He also noted how LR

was highly regarded by the congregation and the rest of the session alike. He made sure

to highlight how pleased he was with his session's overall dynamics, as well. Several of

the elders also noted the importance of communication for building trust.

Communication

Nearly every participant mentioned the topic of communication in relation to

group trust. Buchanan said regular and clear communication was particularly important

for him when he filled an administrative role during his church's recent pastoral

transition. He wanted "to make sure this isn't an autocratic structure where you have a

super elder taking over." He also relinquished some of those responsibilities once the new

pastor arrived, and he noted that some "back and forth" was needed in any group. Duncan

said the "straightforward" demeanor of his fellow elders was an asset to their group.

Eagle described similar tendencies more strongly, noting his group's "blunt, in-your-face

guys," but also mentioning that they listened to each other well. Several subjects said

they thought they were opinionated and recognized their own need to listen better, a key

topic that will be discussed later on. Underhill, who also serves as a staff member at his church, makes a special effort to communicate with elders about notable events in the life of the church, such as baptisms, professions of faith, and engagements of staff members or interns. When not communicating on official business, he uses social media or "a team communication channel." He said, "I try to share a bunch of wins with them." While many mentioned the importance of social interaction outside of official business sessions, Underhill was the only one who mentioned that his elder team eats dinner (and shares a few laughs) before their official session meetings start. "That smooths out seventy-five percent of the conflicts we have," Underhill said. While the particular details varied, the participants noted the importance of clear and regular communication, both about official business and more mundane details, as a key to building trust within their boards. This leads to a related yet unique item that some noted – not second-guessing the work of the group or its individual parts.

Not Second-Guessing

Several elders noted the importance of working through committees as both an evidence of trust within a group and as a means of passing on the value of group trust. For this reason, the topic of "committee work," as one elder calls it, will be discussed further under the heading of the final research question. But Buchanan specifically equated group trust with "not trying to second guess people on the team" who have specific responsibilities. In addition, Cutter said, "Receiving the work of the committee without trying to do it over is emblematic of trusting the work and judgment of the committee members," who are usually fellow elders.

As these elders described their experience in teamwork with fellow elders, they noted their group camaraderie, the negative experiences that helped them to appreciate it more, the way that communication develops trust, and the lack of second-guessing that displays the trust that is already there. They also described their experience in how elders use their power or influence on the rest of the group.

Power in Teamwork

As the respondents described the way that they experienced power among their elder teams, several subthemes emerged. They said that power can be gained through a particular position or through experience, but they also noted that their elder boards did not primarily function through exercises of sheer power.

Power Gained through Position

The parity or equality of elders, which will be discussed in a later section, was something many respondents noted. For this reason, the respondents said relatively little regarding the power that individuals acquire through a particular position within the church. Some did mention ways that they had seen power develop through a particular position within the church. All the examples cited were of staff members, two of them senior pastors. Eagle mentioned how some church members had begun "to treat me like a TE [teaching elder]," even though he is a ruling elder, in addition to being a staff member. Underhill is also a staff member and ruling elder, and he noted how he tries to be more deferential in session meetings to the non-staff elders. Both Eagle and Underhill noted their increased knowledge of church business and activities and how this can and sometimes does lead to more influence among the group of elders.

While Cutter mostly noted positive experiences about the use of power among elders, especially with his current session, he did note a contrasting experience. He specifically mentioned a former senior pastor who attempted to get his session to "effectively delegate almost all of its authority to him and an executive director of the church. … And, um, subsequently, things didn't go very well." Cutter began that discussion by noting, "Wearing the badge of first among equals can be a show of power." He noted the way his current pastor wears the badge very humbly, before again mentioning the autocratic senior pastor who caused a painful church split "in large part" because of the "issue of the exercise of the first-among-equal's authority." While Cutter said that the power was abused by the senior pastor, he did not deny that there should be some measure of influence or leadership exhibited by the senior pastor. He also noted several healthy examples of his current senior pastor doing that.

Gervin also discussed the unique power that a former pastor of his displayed. He said, "Structurally, it's true," that there is a first among equals on a church session. He also said that while such power may be abused, it is not wholly inappropriate. He said, "They're [sic] a senior pastor for a reason. There should be a measure of deference to them, inherent in their position." Gervin did realize that some of his views may be due to his upbringing in the Dutch Reformed tradition. He said, "I grew up in the CRC [Christian Reformed Church]. That was back when you didn't even call the pastor by his first name, ever. It was always, 'Reverend so and so.' Maybe that is still with me to some degree." Gervin acknowledged that he was colored by his experience, but he did not say whether he thought that influence was right or wrong.

The respondents who did mention positional power did not say it was wholly inappropriate, though they did mention the potential for this power to be abused, as well as specific examples of that abuse. As will be discussed later, the examples of abuse of power were outnumbered by what respondents described as proper uses of power. In addition to positional power, many elders mentioned the power that some gained through particular experiences.

Power Gained through Experience

Unlike the responses regarding positional power, which focused partly on potential and actual abuses of power, the responses regarding experience-based power and influence were described more positively. Alda and Funke both mentioned fellow elders who had experience with the Peacemakers organization which they were able to leverage for positive uses in discussions with fellow elders. Both men were grateful that their colleagues could use their experience to bring about resolution and positive results. Buchanan and others mentioned the benefit of having elders who could use past experiences for the good of the church. Some mentioned those with business experience being helpful in budget discussions. Both Duncan and Eagle referred to elders who had knowledge of church discipline situations being able to lead the group in helpful ways. Duncan highlighted the "institutional wisdom" and history that one such elder possessed. Funke also mentioned how his legal background had both helped him appreciate the formal polity structure of the PCA and allowed him the credibility to lead officer training courses at his own church and other churches in his Presbytery. Underhill mentioned both the financial knowledge of an elder who was a CFO as well as the practical experience of an elder whose family had grown up in the church over many years. In addition, he

mentioned the "relational and power and influence dynamics" of his boss and mentor who is also the church's founding pastor. He said, "It's just unassailable. Dennis planted the church. He's been in ministry for 40 years. So you may be better at business than him, but …" While Underhill mentioned the position that his pastor held, he seemed to lay more stress on the experience and longevity that he had. All the respondents who noted the power that their fellow elders had gained through experience described this power as natural and healthy. Except for the examples in the previous section, which the respondents linked more to abuses of positional power, the respondents did not describe this power gained through experience as negative. They did not explicitly say that there was no potential for this experiential power to be abused, but, as will be described in the following section, they did go out of their way to note those who used their power (positional, experiential, or other forms of power) in positive ways.

'Judicious' Use of Power Is the Norm

Nearly every respondent highlighted positive and restrained uses of power by their fellow elders. Alda introduced the topic plainly by saying, "Positional power? Hierarchy? A church session doesn't work that way." He also contrasted it with his military experience saying it was "not a chain of command thing," but rather a group of equals. Alda did not deny the reality of experiential power, having noted how his Peacemaker friend Donald helped by using his experience. But Alda and others shared several examples of power being used to help and not to harm. As Cutter related how his pastor often encourages the group to delay decisions when discussions grow tense, he also reflected on the overall group dynamic. He said, "Although power, influence, experience – some of those indicators that might tend to give someone more voice than

others – I think that's present, but at least in my judgment, it's generally used pretty judiciously." Other elders noted similar restraint among their fellow elders. When Duncan was asked who the most influential member of the session was, he responded, "We don't have anyone like that." His group chooses not to be domineering and defers to one another. When Gervin described his role model of elder teamwork, he said Rick "certainly had the intellectual and theological ability to throw power around had he wanted to," laying stress on the final four words before clarifying that Rick did not want or choose to do so. When Underhill described his senior pastor with 40 years of "unassailable" experience and credibility, he also said, "Dennis uses [his power] very carefully. … Our RE's [ruling elders] rarely ever see him power up on anybody. … He leverages that in a very healthy way."

Cutter also noted how his senior pastor, in addition to his fellow elders, displays this type of restraint. He recalled a hiring situation when they were planning to bring their first assistant pastor on board. The senior pastor had his man in mind, but some members of the session, the group with the ultimate authority to hire an assistant pastor, had some reservations. Cutter said the senior pastor refused to "play the trump card," and demand his way. Instead, he led them through further discussion, which led to those with reservations calling the man's references and ultimately feeling that their original concerns were unfounded. Cutter said the man that they called as assistant pastor is still serving that church and recently helped them through a difficult decision, which will be mentioned later.

Underhill also pointed out how other staff members who participate in session meetings have the potential to overpower discussions. (He is one of the five regular

participants in their session meetings, three of whom happen to be staff members, though

two non-staff elders will soon be added.) However, he said there are good reasons for

staff elders not to do that. "By virtue of our education, we could overpower them. But if

you do that again, again, again, you're going to have a terrible session. You're going to

burn out good people. … That's not good for the church long-term, at all." Numerous

times, elders responded in similar ways to Underhill. They mentioned ways that certain

elders (including some teaching elders) could have "powered up" or insisted upon getting

their way with regularity. Instead, these powerful elders used their power judiciously,

rarely, or not at all, because they believed that would be better for the church. Another

way of saying that is that these elders prized parity above power.

Parity in Teamwork

As the respondents described the way that they experienced the parity of elders,

several subthemes emerged. The parity of elders manifested itself in elders recognizing

their equality, recognizing their individual gifts, respecting each other by listening, and

striving for consensus in their decision.

Recognizing Equality

Several elders said recognizing the equality of their fellow elders was a key to

them working together. Two elders said it was important that elders not function as "yes

men" to the senior pastor or any other leader. Funke said such actions were "nauseating"

in contrast to "our wonderful denomination," which he did not think was often

characterized by them. Cutter told a story about how his church's assistant pastor, the

very man whose hiring caused previous conflict, was able to make a simple suggestion to

help the elders through a difficult decision, despite the fact that, as an assistant pastor, "he was not actually a member of the session, per se."[242] Cutter reflected, "It would've been pretty easy for someone to say, 'Bobby, thank you very much for your perspective, but you're not a voting member.' But it would've been pretty gauche and inappropriate. The fact is we hold him in high regard." Whereas Cutter highlighted the equal voice given to elders regardless of their voting status on the session, Underhill mentioned two of his fellow elders who have an equal voice, regardless of their different professional credentials. One is a CFO, whose voice is highly respected in financial discussions; the other cleans carpets and has a great love for the church which has nurtured him and his family since his college days. Underhill concluded, his voice rising, "So George was a CFO; Dante cleans carpets. Parity of elders! Same board!" Underhill loved the apparent contrast between two men who are seen as equals by the official church polity structures, as well as the fellow elders on his board.

Funke became noticeably more passionate when the discussion turned to the parity of elders. He said,

> I think it's the heart of the Presbyterian polity if it's correctly
> implemented. It's the beauty of Presbyterianism because we're all subject
> to the headship of Jesus Christ. We're brothers in the work. … This is part
> and parcel of what we just said: we're all equal. You're a TE [teaching
> elder]; I'm an RE [ruling elder]. But that doesn't place either one of us
> above the other.

Funke, who extolled the "beauty" of Presbyterian teamwork often, appeals to the George Orwell novel *Animal Farm* when he leads officer training discussions of

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[242] In the PCA, assistant pastors are elected by the session but are not members of the session. Associate pastors, because they are elected by the congregation like ruling elders and senior pastors, are members of the session.

Presbyterian polity. "The great thing about *Animal Farm* is … we [Presbyterians] are not *Animal Farm*. In *Animal Farm*, the pigs started off, 'All animals are equal,' but they ended up with, 'All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others.' That's the downfall of any institution." He said an erosion of equality leads to hierarchies, which leads to de facto dictators, which leads to those "nauseating" yes men. Whereas, Funke noted, "The beauty of Presbyterian polity is the parity of elders, and in sharp contrast to *Animal Farm*." CFOs can be equals with carpet cleaners when they're both elders. That doesn't mean the CFO and the carpet cleaner have equal gifts and talents in every area, however. For within the parity of elders, there is still a place for the diversity of gifts.

Recognizing Individual Gifts

Several elders celebrated differing gifts within the church body as a whole, as well as within the body of elders. As Underhill noted the differences between his fellow elders, the CFO and the carpet cleaner, he also showed how their particular gifts helped them in individual situations. What many elders seemed to imply was that no gift was better or higher than another. For example, Buchanan said, "Knowing strengths and weaknesses of each individual makes it easier to think about parity, equality. Because, no, he doesn't get finance, but he understands this ten times better than I do." Cutter added, "I need to be very careful that I not allow my gifts and inclinations to drive my thinking in such a way that I overlook other gifts, other perspectives, other attitudes that need to be brought into the conversation." Duncan mentioned his great respect for the gifted teachers he serves alongside, while also noting his relative weakness in teaching and his wisdom in budgets. Eagle also noted that gifts should not only determine specialization within the body of elders, but they should also determine whether one is

called to be an elder in the first place. He noted a former elder whom he respected who "hated meetings and wanted to get through it as fast as possible" and was "a total behind-the-scenes servant guy." He concluded, "Ok, so what should he be? Should he be an elder?" He was clear that he thought this individual was probably better suited to the diaconate and that "there are particular giftings for session members that should be considered." While there are certain gifts that all elders should possess, like being "apt to teach" as 1 Timothy 3 says, there are additional gifts that enrich and diversify the body of elders to their mutual benefit. Recognizing these diverse gifts also benefits the body, according to the elders surveyed. And recognizing gifts such as these often leads elders to respect one another, as well.

Respecting One Another

Every elder noted the concepts of mutual respect and the need to listen to each other as a key aspect of the parity of elders. Alda was careful to point out that multiple strong leaders do not necessarily prevent such collaboration and mutual respect. He said, "There's some strongly held positions and thoughts [on our session]. It's not like everybody's milquetoast and we come together and make mush. But I think there's some good recognition that everybody is to be listened to carefully." Several men, including Alda, noted the need for humility or spiritual maturity in order to display mutual respect. Underhill said, "That's what you'd hope, that they would … not dig into their identity so strongly that they can't be wrong." Such respect is rooted in the fact that one's fellow elders, as Cutter noted, "are men of God and brothers in Christ." This respect should lead you to listen to others, even if they're younger than you, at least two elders said. After all,

"We've got to be very careful with how wedded we are to our point of view," Funke noted.

Multiple elders sketched the following portrait, in part or in full: Maturity in Christ will lead to humility, which will lead to respect for my fellow elders, which will lead me to listen to them, because my opinion might be wrong. Eagle mentioned how a particular elder listened to viewpoints with which he disagreed and therefore helped resolve a conflict in a recent session meeting. Eagle said the man noted areas where he understood the points that were made, voiced agreement on some points, then also calmly voiced areas of disagreement or confusion. "Because he acts humbly," Eagle said, "it makes it very easy to have disagreement and to work on it."

Gervin also said his elder friend Rick modeled good listening and "had a gift for gently drawing everybody out … never forcefully." He said the essence of such listening was "listening and not trying to think about the word that you're going to say next." Merely waiting for one's turn to talk is "half-listening," according to Gervin, which other people can sense. He thinks he is a good listener, too, but mostly because of the demands of his profession as a federal investigator, which relies upon asking good questions and searching for answers.

Eagle mentioned specific phrases that show respect for the group and reveal one's desire to listen and work together. Examples include: "This is what I believe," "Please correct me if I'm wrong," "I don't necessarily know all the details," "I don't know," "Maybe I don't know all the facts," and "This is what I understand." Eagle specifically recalled one group in his recent debate saying, "We don't know as much about [this] as you and Saul do." He said, "That immediately put us in a non-defensive posture. It's a

respect element." In the presence of strong opinions from strong leaders, there was enough respect, humility and listening among Eagle's session to come to an agreement. This leads to another common topic mentioned by these elders, the goal of consensus in decision making.

Striving for Consensus

The elders talked often about seeking a consensus as a session. At various times, some described consensus decisions as their goal, as a necessity, as a slow process, as a common result, and, if true consensus could not be achieved, as a qualified consensus.

The Goal of Consensus

Many elders explicitly said that their goal was a consensus among the elders for every decision. Several others implied it. As Gervin was discussing some larger session dynamics, he said in passing, "If we're going to tell people that we are unified or that a decision was unanimous – and that's what we always strive for." Eagle said that his session strives for the same thing and believes that they can achieve it. Underhill described his senior pastor as "a super collaborative leader" who would rather wait on a consensus decision, even if he "could" get a vote, if pushing for that vote would lead to "relational strife." While some elders did not speak specifically about the goal of consensus, they implied it by using the following language, which is even stronger: consensus is a "necessity" in their minds.

The Necessity of Consensus

Alda seemed to describe the same dynamic as Underhill in more detail. Alda said his fellow elders have "been around the block a bit" and "realize there's no point in falling on a sword." He continued, "We just realize that consensus is something we have to build. … We're not going to get things done if we're constantly voting 5-3 on issues." The relational strife that divided votes would cause is not worth it to anyone in the group. Funke said consensus is "something I strongly believe in and [something] I preach all the time with any group I'm part of." Alda says his group has to build consensus; Funke preaches it to every group he's part of. Gervin says, "It's essential on a board." Because the goal of consensus is so necessary to them, they and others also said that they were willing to wait for it, if they had to do so.

The Slow Process of Consensus

What happens when consensus doesn't come quickly? When Alda discussed the conflict that his Peacemaker friend helped resolve, he noted how long it took to come to a consensus. He said, "All that time was needed. If it takes time, do it. Don't force it. After the first comments, you don't take a vote." Funke said something similar; if necessary, he sometimes tells his brother elders, "We're divided here. That suggests that we need to step back for a period, and let's see what we can do here." As Underhill said, if his group doesn't "have to have a decision that night, we almost always put it off." When Cutter's session was faced with difficult concerns about hiring their assistant pastor, he credited the senior pastor with calmly leading them, not insisting upon his way, nor insisting upon speedy resolution. Cutter described the tenor of discussion as, "What are some ways we might clarify how we're thinking and either validate these concerns or set them aside?"

Cutter was very pleased with the outcome, saying of their decision to hire their assistant pastor, "We've really been delighted to have the man on board." Funke said that in his experience if "we can't really get a firm consensus, then the Holy Spirit is saying, 'Slow down this process. Slow down the train. It's not time to move forward yet.' Let's step back, let this percolate a bit longer, and revisit this at the next meeting or whatever." These comments do not mean that consensus is rare; rather, most of the elders said that consensus is the norm, not just the goal, even if it occasionally takes some time.

The Common Result of Consensus

Most elders said that their sessions are usually able to come to a consensus that leaves the body pleased. None of them described their current sessions as contentious or unable to make decisions together. Cutter said of his current session, "I can't think of a single instance in which we've had an issue [where] we left the room with one or more members being distressed." Duncan said, "I'm trying to think back where we didn't have a unanimous decision … when we had a split vote." Eagle noted, "Most of the time, when we reach that point, we truly agree." Underhill said his group was almost always able to reach consensus or near consensus. Funke was very grateful that his group is as unified as it is. He said of his session, as well as other denominational teams of elders, "So often, there's unanimity. There may be some nuanced differences, but we can all get there almost always with something that's unanimous or almost unanimous. And even where they're some dissent, it's respectful dissent. We may not bridge the gap entirely, but we almost do." Funke later said he thinks it's sad when Christians can't come together. He realizes that Christians are sinners, and that our remaining sin can easily divide us, but he also hopes that Godly leaders can spot such sinful tendencies "and deal

with it." As these many elders attest, they often do. And even when they don't bridge the gap of their differences entirely, these elders said that they're still able to support their fellow elders and their mutual decisions.

The (Occasional) Qualified Consensus

A few elders noted that there are occasional decisions where they have to agree to disagree. Eagle acknowledged that his session had technically unanimous votes where some parties remained unconvinced of the majority but voted with them anyway. While Underhill lauded his session's ability and tendency to wait for consensus and ward off relational strife, he did say, "If we're all clear, and we've all spoken our mind, that's ok. We try to encourage the ones who vote no, [and] thank them for voting their conscience on those issues. That's been key to the relational dynamic of our session." Gervin also added that there are times where "I can not be 100 percent persuaded, but I can communicate that I respect their position and respect it enough to not feel like I have to take my marbles and go home." Several elders noted that even when divided opinions remained divided after a long discussion, the group's overall unity and respect for one another had not been damaged.

Summary of Experiencing Teamwork

While some negative experiences were noted, the elders surveyed were largely positive when they described their experiences of teamwork with other elders at their mid-sized Reformed churches. They said that their teamwork was dependent upon a mutual trust that was characterized by group camaraderie, enhanced through learned experiences as well as through clear and regular communication, and was further

characterized by a lack of second-guessing one another. Their trust was also deepened by a recognition of and a right use of power. They noted ways that power could be gained by individuals through positions or experiences. And while they noted potential for abuses of power and specific examples of it, the group of respondents focused much more on the ways their fellow elders used their power in respectful, judicious, and largely helpful ways. In short, the elders surveyed described more experiences of parity in action than of overt power in action. They described parity as recognizing the equality of fellow elders, recognizing diverse individual gifts, respecting each other through active listening, and striving for consensus in their decisions. Consensus decisions were described as goals and necessities, which were often achieved, though sometimes slowly. Even when full consensus was not achieved, most elders said the decision-making process allowed the group to retain its overall unity and mutual respect.

Overcoming Challenges to Teamwork

The second research question investigated "How do ruling elders overcome challenges to teamwork?" Several themes surfaced in the research as the participants described their experiences in teamwork with other elders in mid-sized Reformed churches: 1) specific turning points in overcoming particular challenges were identified; 2) listening and encouraging input from teammates was the most common theme mentioned; 3) better vs. best rather than right vs. wrong is how most session choices were described; 4) they said past success strengthens teams for future conflict; 5) they believed their group wanted resolution more than conflict.

Specific Turning Points

Most participants were able to identify specific turning points when their team could have become divided (or was divided for a time) but were ultimately able to overcome a conflict or a challenge to their teamwork. Alda described the circumstances that preceded Donald's intervention as the most "divided" the session had been in his six years of service. Cutter was able to identify at least two such turning points, the hiring decision for their assistant pastor and a situation where the assistant pastor later helped them resolve a pastoral situation with members who were delinquent in their attendance. Underhill identified hiring decisions as frequent causes for potential conflict, but he didn't identify any particular situation as overly contentious. Two participants mentioned the decision to grant a pastor a sabbatical as potentially divisive. In addition, Underhill also mentioned facility issues for churches being potentially divisive, including one specific instance at his church. In every instance, the participants thought a good decision was reached. The one possible exception was mentioned by Underhill, who described the outcome of his session's decision regarding a large anonymous gift as "a good compromise leaves everyone frustrated." He spoke partly in jest, and he also noted how that situation led to a multi-year process of clarifying session priorities and overall church strategy. In all, the participants spoke positively about these turnings points, and they identified the ability to listen to their fellow elders, not simply as a sign of healthy teamwork, as described in a previous section, but also as a key to preserving their teamwork and overcoming challenges to it.

As the participants described the process of listening, several subthemes emerged. Some of these keys to overcoming challenges to teamwork overlapped with previous responses regarding their experience of teamwork or the evidences of teamwork. The participants said that the process of listening to overcome challenges includes the humility to listen, the active encouragement of input from others, the creation of a safe environment to share, and respect for others.

The Humility to Listen

Humility was a major theme mentioned by the participants. It was summed up well by Alda, who said the reason he does not always have to get his way during session discussions is because "I don't have all the answers." At one level, he said he knew that early on, but he also grew in awareness of it. He described his early years as an elder as a time when he said, "Yes," to any task that presented itself and ended up being overloaded and stretched thin when it came to family responsibilities. He said part of the problem was "I was raised in a merit-oriented culture, where you do your best. Always do your best." Years of that led him to think "I was raised on doing better than everybody else, so y'all better listen to me." In other words, he was raised with pressure to do things better, so he began to think, "I am better," he said with a sigh. The process of realizing that he didn't have all the answers and that others were more gifted than him in certain areas took him "a long time, a couple decades" after he became a Christian in his early 20s. But once he realized it, he found himself saying, "No," more often, so that others could say, "Yes," and use their gifts. The ability to say, "No," corresponded with a willingness to hear the insights of others. Others described similar fruits from their maturation process.

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Gervin said, "I don't have to have my stamp on everything." Underhill, one of the

youngest elders surveyed, said, "I've grown a lot in seven years," dating back to his start

as a church staff member. Funke, one of the oldest and longest-serving elders,

paraphrased Proverbs 16 and said, "You can do better with a group of advisers than

yourself." He specifically mentioned his long-time work with a committee of General

Assembly, in which he often submits preliminary reports that are edited by a larger

group. "Once it's seen by somebody else, there's going to be perspective brought to it

that's going to improve the product." Funke then chuckled as he mentioned the oft-cited

proverb about "practicing" law, never mastering it. The participants said this humility

underscores the need to listen and leads to the following theme, the desire to hear from

others that actually invites their input.

Actively Encouraging Input from Others

Gervin said one obstacle to teamwork is simply silence, especially from newer

members in the group. He said, "I don't think that's automatic," that newer members feel

free to share. "It has to be drawn out. The older members, longer-serving members, have

to want to hear from the new guys. It has to be a desire. I have to want to know what

Sean the new elder thinks." For Alda and Cutter, "letting others talk" and "encouraging"

others to talk were the first and main strategies they mentioned to encourage teamwork

and overcome challenges to it. Eagle furthered this thought by mentioning the insight of

"some leadership guru gal," later identified as Amy Edmondson, which he summarized as

follows:

> Even though you may try to develop teamwork with your managers – if
> you're the CEO or whatever – even though you may be open to their
> opinions and you want to hear their opinions and you respond well to their

opinion, if you present a strong opinion at the very beginning of the process, you can guarantee that they will not feel safe sharing their [opinion] if they're in conflict with your [opinion]. That hit me to the core because of my opinionated-ness.

In other words, Eagle's interpretation of Edmondson is that good intentions (if you are "open" to other opinions and "you want to hear" other opinions) are not enough; some good actions ("you respond well to their opinion") are not enough. Neither of those actions just mentioned are bad, but their usefulness can be undone by one false start: sharing a strong opinion at the beginning can silence dissenting opinions (and possibly better opinions, as Funke said). While Eagle's scenario mentioned a CEO and subordinates, Eagle recognized that he was not in an equivalent position with the rest of his session. He is a staff member but not a senior pastor, who joked at one point about occasionally being treated like "a second among equals" because of his staff position at the church. His main takeaway is that his strong opinions might be silencing the valuable input of others. Just a moment after paraphrasing Edmondson, Eagle said, "I need to shut up and listen … and ask them, 'What do you think?'"

Underhill, the other staff member ruling elder of the participants, also said he consciously tried to not dominate session discussions, in deference to his non-staff ruling elders. He described those actions as "collaborative" and "gracious." He also said, "It's part of their leadership development, part of them maturing. We could do things faster probably. But they wouldn't grow because of that." The participants said that newer members do not naturally share in groups, and that they need to be encouraged to do so. And Eagle's previous comments mentioned one particular way that such input needs to be encouraged: the group must create a safe environment for others to share.

Creating a Safe Environment to Share

As Eagle stated, if a leader (by virtue of official position or by respect gained through experience) states a strong opinion at the beginning of a discussion, he will silence any dissenting voices. In his words, "You can guarantee that they will not feel safe sharing their [opinion]." Eagle was the only participant to highlight Edmondson's terminology, but at least one other participant pointed to a similar idea. As Gervin described Rick's ability to "gently draw others out," he mentioned one benefit of such an approach. He said, "It's easier for people to express themselves, because they know they're going to be heard, and not be ridiculed or put down." Later, Gervin described one reason that his fellow elders might be hesitant to speak up, saying, "One of the big ones about being not willing to speak is fear of man. 'Am I just going to come across as an idiot?' None of us want to look bad."

Eagle said that when he is presented with an argument he disagrees with, he tries to make a connection with the speaker, either because he previously held a similar view or because he had a similar passion for another view. He does this because he knows it will allow "a more relaxed discussion." He added, "And that's going to create teamwork when you trust each other. You trust each other not to beat up on you. … There is a safety there. If you don't have the safety, then you're not going to have teamwork." But both Gervin and Eagle said that knowing these pitfalls has helped them and their teams to avoid them, to actively encourage input from others and to create a safe environment where such opinions will not be ridiculed, not be preemptively silenced by their own strong opinions coming in too early. Alda and Cutter said they took similar steps, and the rest of the participants voiced a general desire to not dominate discussions, which many

said they could do if their strong opinions were left unchecked. One reason they said they were able to do this was their respect for their brother elders.

Respect for Others

Duncan said succinctly what others said repeatedly, "You have to have respect for the other individuals." This is the flip side and the fruit of humility. This is the attitude that several men said they must take into the session room. Cutter said, "They are men of God and brothers in Christ." Funke echoed, "We're brothers in Christ." Cutter also mentioned a particular voice on his session that carries a lot of weight with his brothers. He is neither the longest-serving elder nor the loudest voice. He is not necessarily feared but certainly respected. Due to his character, his integrity, and his self-deprecation, he is a voice that others say they "need" to hear before they proceed. On more than one occasion, his voice has settled a matter. Cutter felt the best description of his fellow elder Sam was an old commercial about a certain stockbroker. Cutter said his friend is like "E.F. Hutton: when he speaks, people listen." What multiple respondents described, however, is that even when someone does not command the same respect as Sam or E.F. Hutton, such respect should still be given. It should be given because of the brotherhood in Christ between elders, and because "you might be wrong," as Underhill said. Such respect should also be given even when it might be hard to do so with certain individuals. When Eagle reflected on his frequent, though civil, conflict with "Lightning Rod," he said:

> I believe him to be a very godly man. He loves the Word. That is a
> fundamental element that helps me. If I come back to 'I really believe he
> desires to help people and do the right thing,' if I look at it that way, it
> does mellow me in my conflict with him a lot.

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Eagle realized it was easy to respect LR when he thought about his long history of faithfulness to God and others. Cutter and others seemed to naturally respect Sam, but many participants said such respect was what all their fellow elders deserved. Showing that respect was one thing that helped them overcome their challenges to teamwork. Another key was realizing the stakes and the context of most of their discussions.

Better vs. Best instead of Right vs. Wrong

When pressed to clarify, most participants acknowledged that their sessions sometimes had to make decisions based on whether something was right or wrong. But often, the majority of their decisions and their hardest decisions were a matter of deciding what was better or best at any given time. Alda said, "We don't operate in too many right or wrong things where there's disagreement. … We're not arguing if adultery is right or wrong. I'd fall on my sword for that, but I don't think the session disagrees on that." Underhill mentioned how "theological unity" is "kind of baked in in the PCA," because of the denominational constitution. Buchanan agreed and described the type of dialogue that he often uses or hears from others at his meetings, "That's a good way, but should we look at this aspect of it? Do we really know all the ramifications? If something else was different, would it have a particular impact?" Cutter describes the situation where his assistant pastor helped them resolve a hard choice. They had a group of members who had been delinquent in their attendance and were probably going to leave the church. There was debate about timing, BCO requirements, and whether a dismissal from the rolls would soon be required. That's when Bobby, the assistant pastor, suggested that they invite the group to an upcoming anniversary service for the church, instead of taking what might be perceived as a harsher action. Cutter said, "Almost all of those people left

anyhow, but I think they left with a much better taste in their mouth." He credited Bobby's actions with bringing them "more to a shepherding perspective than a ruling perspective." He added, "When we act as shepherds we certainly utilize discipline but we do so in a manner that is more tender than what I'd characterize as a ruling perspective."

Eagle agreed that "there are some things that are a matter of straight out principle." But he was quick to add, "Most of the decisions we make are, 'You know, it could be either way. It's not a Biblical yes or no.'" Alda gave a specific example, "When you're talking about should we spend the money on this or on this – that's not a black and white issue. So I'm willing to bend my opinion on things if they're not black and white." Gervin described some of the hardest session decisions as understanding the difference between preference and theological conviction. When presented with a different phraseology (wisdom decisions instead of right-wrong decisions), he paused, then slowly clarified without agreeing to the new proposal, "Sometimes, I think there's a wise way to do the right thing." He again mentioned his friend Rick, saying, "A lot of times, he thought he knew what the right thing was, but he was wise about how he handled things like that with gentleness and respect and drawing people out and that kind of thing. The right thing might wisely take some time to get to." Most elders said their sessions were not in doubt about what was absolutely right and absolutely wrong. They were usually trying to determine the best way, the wise way, to go about making the best decisions. Knowing that humbled them and helped them respect their "brothers in the work" (as Funke said) who were seeking the best way forward.

Past Success Strengthens Teams

A few elders also mentioned how their past successes (which may have felt more like survivals in the moment) worked to strengthen their teams for present or future conflicts. Gervin said that real trust is developed when you "slog" through things together with your fellow elders. At the end of the interview, Underhill added, "We've been through the trenches with a lot of these elders, so there's a lot of trust. When things are going well, it's a lot easier than when things aren't going well." Others agreed with the general sentiment, noting that "trust takes times" and similar comments. Buchanan summed it up by saying, "Going through stressful situations with a team and getting through it always strengthens the team and their comradery." One way that these past successes strengthen the team is through clarifying intentions and motives.

Seeking Resolution instead of Seeking Conflict

Several participants said knowing that their group sought resolution instead of "their own way" or "constant" conflict helped them resolve things. Cutter acknowledged that elders could probably do a better job of this, of "knowing how to disagree without being disagreeable." While Eagle was self-critical of his people pleasing tendencies, he did see that there was a positive side to it, which helped his various teams of elders. "I get along with folks very well," he said. "The positive side to people pleasing is servanthood." Alda said his experiences with his current and past session were "pleasant" and that if it had been "constant bickering and arguing … I would've been pulling my hair out." He said that such a situation would have been "very discouraging," that he "would've just avoided it at all costs." By contrast, the reason he's able to deal with "the monthly debate" is because "we always get it resolved," even if it takes an extra meeting

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or a special committee. He said, "There's a sense of cooperation to do that. I think our session wants to find resolution and wants to find a cooperative way to proceed." In different words, the other elders agreed. Their groups wanted to forge a respectful consensus rather than having conflict for conflict's sake. This helped them persevere in their work and overcome whatever challenges might arise.

Summary of Overcoming Challenges to Teamwork

The participants described several specific challenges to teamwork which they had experienced, including specific turning points that allowed them to overcome those challenges. They also described other steps they had used to overcome those challenges. Listening was again a common response from the participants. They believed it was not only a hallmark of teamwork, as described in a previous section, but the means by which they overcame individual conflicts. They said the elements of such listening started with humility and the realization that they might be wrong. Such humility helped them to actually invite more input from others. A few participants realized that they also needed to be slow to share strong opinions so that they would not stifle alternate views from others. They described this as safety, or freedom from ridicule. They also described it as respect, the fruit and root of their efforts. In addition to their active listening, participants said the realization that their choices were a search for best solutions, rather than simply clarifying right and wrong, helped them work through their different opinions. Past success, which formed trust and clarified the purity of others' motives, was also a helpful part of the process. Some said it helped them to know that their group wanted resolution rather than bickering or other negative types of conflict.

Passing on Teamwork to Rising Leaders

The third research question investigated "How are ruling elders mentoring future leaders in teamwork?" The elder participants expressed a desire to do this, and several themes emerged as they described how they are attempting to do this, including the following: 1) various forms of group mentoring; 2) one-on-one mentoring; 3) encouraging judicious choices; 4) modeling humility; 5) modeling unity and trust, specifically for the work of committees; 6) encouraging relationships among fellow leaders; 7) encouraging patience with self and others.

Group Mentoring

Most participants mentioned some type of group mentoring that was going on at their church. The few who did not explicitly mention that their church was doing it wished their church was doing more. Gervin described why the process was important, saying, "One of the signs of a healthy church [is having] regular new officers coming forward." Three participants mentioned their church's formal officer training program for nominees and their leadership in parts of the curriculum. Two of those three mentioned their active encouragement of particular candidates, as well as their role in the formal nomination process for officers. Some others mentioned that the work of mentoring officers was at least partly a group responsibility. One participant said he thought more emphasis was needed, for his session and for elders in general, on the particular topic of teamwork. Funke mentioned that he regularly presses his *Animal Farm* analogy (no animal or elder is more equal than another) when he teaches officer training classes. He said, "The beauty of Presbyterian polity is the parity of elders, and in sharp contrast to *Animal Farm*. That's my underlying theme." In addition to leading some lessons of

officer training at his church, as well nominating and encouraging prospective officers, Alda also sees his regular teaching of adult Sunday School as a means of mentoring future leaders. As he said, "Anytime I'm teaching, I'm trying to help people become teachers or studiers, because I think rising leaders have to be in the Word. If they're not in the Word, they're not rising leaders." Their participation in or desire for more group mentoring did not prevent participants from also emphasizing the value of one-on-one mentoring.

One-on-one Mentoring

Alda mentioned at least one young man he was mentoring, as well as several other prospective officers whom he was encouraging to accept nominations and pursue officer training. Buchanan mentioned how he had mentored some in the past over early morning breakfasts. Underhill said the early hour of their church's training sessions had provided some bonding moments with individual candidates. Eagle told a story of how he had tried and initially failed in some of these efforts. When he tried to preemptively correct a mistake someone was making, it resulted in the gentlemen telling him, "You don't really need me." Eagle said it helped him realize the value of letting people learn from their mistakes, especially when those mistakes are not likely to be catastrophic. Underhill said he annually goes through the membership list at his church looking for potential officers to nominate. Gervin fondly remembered his former pastor "always" seeming to have someone whom he was discipling, even as the church (and the pastor's responsibilities) grew larger. Gervin recalled his friend Rick (the master of many teamwork trades) doing likewise. Funke related a story of how he had befriended another lawyer in the Presbytery. After years of working with him in various capacities, Funke

was able to encourage his younger colleague to accept a nomination to a certain General Assembly committee on which Funke had previously served. The participants related many ways in which they were mentoring future leaders – formally or informally, in groups or one-on-one – including more specific ways and particular traits of teamwork that they wanted to pass on.

Encouraging Judicious Choices

Many participants agreed that taking on a bigger burden for a time can be helpful to the team, but several cautioned against taking on too much. Alda's first piece of advice for rising leaders was, "Don't say, 'Yes,' to everything." In addition to some other lessons he learned, he credited providential circumstances for this insight. The military sent him overseas after his initial term as an elder, and by the time he returned to the same church to serve there again, "I had learned my lesson. I had limited what I could say, 'Yes,' to." Buchanan has recently practiced these lessons. He took on more responsibilities when his church was without a pastor, but about 18 months after the new pastor came aboard, he took a sabbatical from active service on the session. He said, "That was good for me and for the rest of the elders." It helped them "reset roles," and it made him mindful of the dangers of burnout, for himself and others. Funke's experience taught him to be cautious about taking on new responsibilities, and he thinks new elder nominees, particularly younger nominees with families, should take a similar course. Funke was already overloaded as a young lawyer at a big firm with a wife and children when he was first nominated, so "some things had to take a backseat. I don't really regret that." He said his wife helped him clarify his responsibilities until more time emerged. To any young gifted men, he cautioned, "Just because you've been nominated for this

position … doesn't mean you should necessarily accept that nomination the first or even second time around." He concluded, "You've got to consider your circumstances, consider where you're being led. … That's got to be a uniquely individual decision." Many elders acknowledged the shared nature of their work, and their gratitude for others who take on large roles. They also cautioned against ego and encouraged moderation in their duties as elders, since many elders also have professional and family responsibilities. Related to the idea of moderation in one's duties is humility in one's attitude.

Modeling Humility

Most of the participants named humility as a key in some part of the teamwork process. They said it was a trait to be sought in rising leaders as well one to be instilled in them and modeled before them. Eagle said, "I would say the *numero uno* thing that makes a difference in whether a person is a good leader or not is humility." Alda's second piece of advice to future leaders (after saying, 'No,' more often) was, "Your way is not always the best way." Underhill had similar advice, saying, "Sometimes, you're wrong, and you don't think it, but you are." He also said, "Check your ambition at the door." Buchanan and Duncan both noted how accountability can help keep ambitions, egos, and emotions in check among fellow elders. They described comments one might need to hear occasionally, such as, "You're a little heated. You're a little pushy." Another example was, "What do you mean by that?" Understanding your need to be questioned by your brothers can be helpful, they both said. Eagle, who trumpeted the need for humility in leaders, also described the way to groom it and encourage it. He said, "The possibility of them becoming humble is going to come, I would say, through gracious

disagreement," meaning others disagreeing with them in a gracious way. He then laughed

and shared a story of how a younger, less humble version of himself blasted a former

pastor for using choruses and not exclusively hymns in the worship service. That pastor

displayed the kind of gracious disagreement that Eagle hopes to pass on to anyone who

needs humility modeled for them. The elders also wanted to model a spirit of unity and

trust.

Modeling Unity and Trust

The participants said that unity might require humility, so that you can be content

to not have the spotlight on you. Alda said, "You want the whole session to be successful,

because you want the whole church to be successful. It's not a matter of you looking like

the MVP. There is no MVP in a church. It's a team effort to accomplish the church's

mission for Christ." Duncan said one way his session practices this is by sharing credit

for their work. When their elders present something to the congregation, they are all

careful to say, "the session" is bringing something to the congregation. Cutter credited his

pastor for doing this, noting the pastor's tendency to say, "He does not make decisions.

He works with the session, and the session makes decisions." Cutter said he tries to give

his tentative opinion on items within the church when the session has not yet discussed it,

trying to finish his remarks with, "But it's my view without having discussed it with the

other members of the session. And it's subject to change." After controversial

discussions, Cutter still feels the need to preserve the session's unity, though he agrees

some very limited detail of debate can be conveyed. He gave an example, saying, "'You

know, the session struggled with it quite a bit. And there were differing views expressed.

But in the end, the collective view was *X*.' And at that point, it's probably best to say no

more." Cutter and others believed that such a posture was best, especially if the messenger happened to be on the losing side of the debate.

Several elders also said that trusting the work of the session's committees or constituent parts was a main way that the session should model unity and trust. Cutter acknowledged that egos can be resistant to this idea, that it is easy to think, "Surely, they need my input." However, he thinks a better method is to listen to committee reports and recommendations, and "trust them unless we think there's significant error." Funke sees "dividing the labor" like this as essential to his work at the General Assembly level. He said, "You've got to get down to a small enough group where the real spade work can be done." Gervin agrees that it should also be done more frequently as a local church grows because "you can't have an eight-hour session meeting." He adds, "You just wouldn't get anything done if every elder felt like they had to have a complete and utter understanding of everything." Cutter offered an analogy to drive the point home, "If the committee can take a tough topic, break it down, and do the detailed work – chew the tough meat and soften it up – by the time it gets to the session, it should be pretty readily digestible." Cutter implied, but did not explicitly say, that sessions should not try to chew the tough meat all over again, once the committee has had their turn. (However, he did say earlier that a session shouldn't redo a committee's work "unless we think there's significant error.") Cutter's final comment on committees was, "Receiving the work of the committee without trying to do it over is emblematic of trusting the work and judgment of the committee members." He and others said it was not only a show of trust but also of respect. They also had more to say about passing on teamwork.

Encouraging Relationships among Fellow Leaders

While most elders either mentioned group mentoring or one-on-one mentoring as a goal, they also saw great value in fostering relationships with one's fellow leaders. They saw the latter as a help, not necessarily for individual development, but for the good of the group's development and functioning. Alda mentioned how Donald pointed the group to consider their long-term relationships. Buchanan specifically mentioned how valuable relationship-building had been for his current and previous teams of elders. It helped them "get beyond the assumptions" about one another. He and two other elders mentioned the benefit of including their wives in those social gatherings when possible. Duncan said that various small group gatherings at his church helped him bond with others by sharing victories and struggles. Among many similar comments, Cutter noted a desire to do more in this area. He also lamented the aftermath of a situation with his previous church. Some outside mediators from the Presbytery told them, "If you guys had been better friends, this situation would not have been so difficult." He has since resolved to get "pizza and beer" with his fellow elders more often. Underhill also noted the unifying force of food, specifically pre-meeting dinners at a nearby restaurant. "That smooths out 75% of conflicts that we have." No other magic formulas for such fellowship times were shared except for the commitment to actually meet with one another outside of the official session meetings and church functions. The group's final piece of advice was similarly simple.

Encouraging Patience with Self and Others.

The participants who extolled humility were also quick to extol patience, both with oneself and with others. As Eagle talked about the need for humility, he humorously

told a story of his past arrogance when he blasted a former pastor. He laughed at other

mistakes he had made, as well. Underhill, one of the youngest elders surveyed, was

nonetheless able to see some of his past mistakes. Some of his advice to future elders

included, "The speed you want to go is not the speed things will go." He also said, "A lot

of [this] is learned through negative experience." He specifically recalled another young

staff member that started working at the church around the same. He said, "We were very

zealous and very excited to be in a ministry role, and we made a lot of mistakes." He

concluded, "I used to get frustrated at the speed things were going. [Now], I say, 'Be

focused on the health and the dynamics of things, and the speed can come later. … Get

the foundation good." As was mentioned earlier, Funke also encouraged young men to

not be in a hurry to accept an elder nomination. In all this, Alda's advice about session

debates and seeking consensus are a fitting summary of the views of the group. "If it

takes time, do it. Don't force it." The group agreed that doing things right was better than

doing them quickly.

Summary of Passing on Teamwork to Rising Leaders

The participants described the ways they are trying to pass on teamwork to rising

leaders. They mentioned several methods of group mentoring, including formal officer

training classes. They also mentioned their efforts and those of others to conduct one-on-

one mentoring relationships. Some of the particular qualities and traits they were trying to

pass on included wisdom in decision making, specifically as it relates to taking on too

much responsibility as an elder in light of one's other commitments within and outside

the church. Included in this caution was whether or not the time was right for new

candidates to accept nominations to the office of elder. The participants also sought to

model humility through gracious disagreement and other methods. They also said they tried to model unity and trust in their comments regarding session actions and in their interactions with the committees of session. Receiving the work of committees without redoing it was described as "emblematic" of trusting the committee members. The participants also said that developing relationships outside of their official business meetings, for the primary purpose of fellowship and socializing, was a key to healthy functioning of their business together. Finally, the participants encouraged future leaders to be patient with themselves and others and described, with some laughter, their own past mistakes.

Summary of Findings

This chapter examined the experiences of eight ruling elders in mid-sized Reformed churches who described their teamwork. Interviews with each participant sought to investigate their experience of teamwork, particularly as it relates to the concepts of trust in teams, of power in teams, and of the parity of elders. The interviews also sought to investigate their description of how they overcame challenges to teamwork and of how they were trying to pass on the essence of teamwork. In the next chapter, the researcher will conclude his findings, bringing together the experiences of the participants, the findings of the literature reviewed, and his own personal experiences of teamwork among elders.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Recommendations

Long before I ever read about Lencioni's Kathryn and her team of good people who were less than the sum of their parts I knew the reality.[243] One of my now former elders (a friend to this day) once asked me about my new church and her elders and said, "Are they as cantankerous as your old session?" At the time he was still a member of that session. He and the other seven men were eight good men who didn't trust each other and couldn't make (or commit) to decisions together. I also once knew of a session that was controlled by groupthink; it seemed that other elders were afraid to challenge one particular individual. At times, both dynamics made for a difficult environment.

Should I study why those teams didn't work, or should I study why good teams work? That's what I wondered after I had the pleasure to come to a church with a healthy (though, of course, not perfect) session who knew how to work together. It crystallized when a seminary faculty member paraphrased Dostoevsky to me over lunch: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." So forget the unhappy teams. Let's study the good teams. Maybe someone who is where I was will appreciate it. And maybe I will appreciate it. After all, some of my best elders are contemplating when to take emeritus status, and we've had to work hard to find new ones. And even if my current elders were young, at some point someone would be faced with the challenge of creating or perpetuating a good team. In order to do that, it might be wise to study what makes a good team. For my own sake first, it has been a pleasure to

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[243] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 19.

study teamwork dynamics among ruling elders. I pray that some of this study might benefit others trying to answer the same questions.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how ruling elders from mid-sized Reformed churches describe their teamwork. The following research questions guided the research.

1. How do ruling elders experience teamwork?

    a. How do ruling elders experience trust in teamwork?

    b. How do ruling elders experience power in teamwork?

    c. How do ruling elders experience parity in teamwork?

2. How do ruling elders overcome challenges to teamwork?

3. How are ruling elders mentoring future leaders in teamwork?

Summary of the Study and Findings

This study reviewed relevant literature in three areas and analyzed interview data from eight ruling elders at mid-sized Reformed churches. The literature review focused on trust in teams, power in teams, and the parity of elders. Many authors agreed that trust must be forged through conflict that is focused on issues and not on personalities, and that consensus must not be forced upon a group. The authors also found that leaders play a very important role in the trust of their teams, using the various aspects of their power to make the environment safe for conflict, where true contrasting opinions can be heard. The discussion of parity focused in part on the topic of the first among equals, a delicate concept that can exalt the headship of Christ when it is understood and displayed according to the Bible's guidance.

Eight ruling elders in mid-sized Reformed churches were interviewed. The interviews focused on their description of various aspects of teamwork. Their descriptions included their experience of teamwork with other elders past and present, with a special focus on their experiences related to trust, power, and parity. They also described challenges to teamwork that they or others had overcome. Lastly, they described the qualities of teamwork that they were seeking to pass on to rising leaders and future elders.
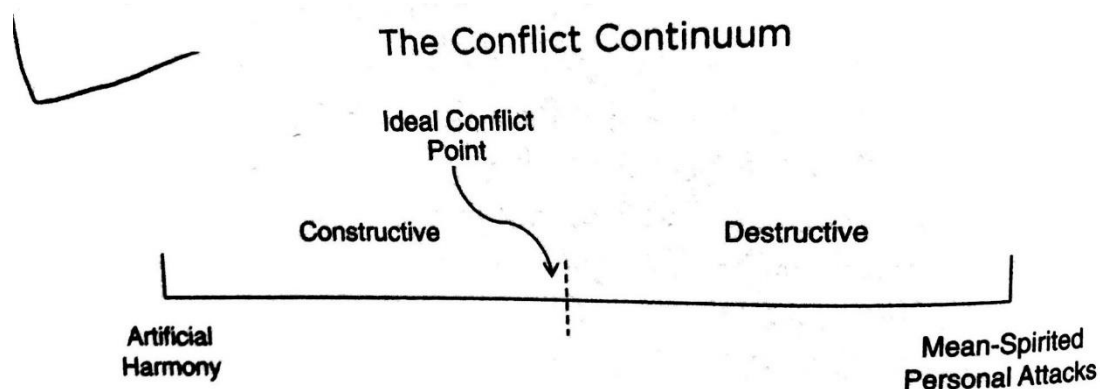
Discussion of Findings

Alan Alda, a long-time elder with a military background, said he was glad his session was not consumed by "constant conflict." Such an environment would have caused him to step down, "Because I can't deal with that. … I would've just avoided it at all costs. … I would've been pulling my hair out." But hadn't Alda described his session as a group with strong opinions who had recently worked through a difficult issue? What was the difference between that difficult conflict and the environment that he was describing? He said the difference was "a sense of cooperation." The conflict was not the goal; it was the means to an end. He closed the interview by saying, "In general, I think our session wants to find resolution and wants to find a cooperative way to proceed." In so doing, Alda described the goal and the attitude that the researcher hoped to understand in his research.

This section will discuss the findings of the interviews and the literature review, while also interacting with the researcher's previous experience, both positive and negative. It is my hope that lessons can be gleaned by pastors and elders who would like to see their leadership teams function better or continue to function well.

Ideal Conflict

Alda's first comments above might lead one to think that a lack of conflict is what sessions and teams should be seeking. If they could avoid the conflict, could they then get along? But what Alda and several authors describe is not a lack of conflict but the right kind of conflict. Lencioni talks about conflict in several books, but in *The Advantage*, he attempts to coalesce his lessons on leadership, and he shares his "Conflict Continuum" with readers.

The Conflict Continuum

Ideal Conflict
Point

Constructive   Destructive

Artificial   Mean-Spirited
Harmony   Personal Attacks

Figure 2. Conflict Continuum[244]

Lencioni does acknowledge that there is such a thing as bad conflict, "destructive" conflict, but he also shows that lack of conflict can lead to an artificial harmony, apathy or disengagement.[245] Ideally, groups can engage in a robust exchange of ideas, maximum constructive conflict, without spilling over into destructive conflict that tends toward personal attacks. In another book, Lencioni describes this as uncomfortable.[246] I have said similar things about the pastoral ministry, calling the job of a pastor (partly in jest) a

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[244] Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 42.

[245] Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 42.

[246] Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, 175.

series of awkward conversations. It might seem desirable to avoid this. But, again, lack of

conflict is not a sign that consensus has been reached but a sign that there is "artificial

harmony." Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, and Bourgeois III say, "The alternative to conflict is

usually not agreement but apathy and disengagement."[247] In other words, conflict is a

given. It may be silent, or it may be spoken. It may be healthy, or it may be destructive

and personal. In order to keep conflict at its best, Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, and Bourgeois III

recommend debates based on facts, not forcing consensus, and a "balanced power

structure," which involves a leader with real power, more than his subordinates, but not a

dictator nor an overly passive leader. Both of those alternatives lead to more in-fighting

amongst subordinates.[248]

In total, the authors surveyed and the elders interviewed describe a situation in

which conflict happens, robust ideas are exchanged, personal attacks are minimal, and

leaders with real power can reinforce this culture. I have found that powerful team

members who willingly play by such ideals are often better culture establishers than a

referee or moderator who carries a big stick, whether he speaks softly or loudly. When

this happens – when a group trusts each other not to attack one another, when they care

deeply about the organization – they can be freed to debate ideas, pursuing truth and the

best possible answers.[249] Conflict at its best is a mutual pursuit of truth, a search for

creative perspectives. If there is a corrective in these insights, it is not that conflict is

secretly good. The corrective is that there will be conflict, either at the beginning of the

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[247] Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, and Bourgeois III, "How Management Teams Can Have a Good Fight," 85

[248] Eisenhardt, Kahwajy, and Bourgeois III. "How Management Teams Can Have a Good Fight," 82.

[249] Lencioni, *The Advantage*, 38.

quest for truth and good answers, or in a silent disagreement that lasts too long. The

further corrective is that it is up to teams and their leaders to make the conflict as healthy

as they can – focused on ideas, free from personal attacks. If they want resolution, as

Alda said, groups can find it. Or, as Funke said, they can at least find something very

close to it. And when a group, or any of its individual members, has this perspective, it

will allow them to see conflict not as the enemy, but as a quest for creative, collaborative

solutions to their most difficult problems. For this reason, elders and pastor who are most

averse to conflict need to examine why they dislike it and whether they could engage in

conflict in a more positive way.

With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility

Being ignorant of one's power is not necessarily a mark of humility. Scazzero's

life and ministry are a cautionary tale for the naïve in this area. He and others catalogued

various types of power. The two most common ones mentioned and the two most

relevant types for this study are what some call positional power and relational power.

When I saw teamwork that I considered unhealthy in the past, I grew wary of most uses

of power. This study offered a corrective to that thinking. Scazzero described power as

influence that could be used for good or ill. [250] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie described

politics in a similar way, inherently neutral actions that could be used for good or ill.[251]

The elders I interviewed were intentionally selected because they self-identified as being

part of a session with good teamwork. While they described some abuses of power, their

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[250] Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 242.

[251] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 17.

descriptions of power and influence were overwhelmingly positive. It would be wrong to assume that this is the norm in churches, or even in mid-sized Reformed churches, since they identified their teams as healthy. A better conclusion would be that this is how more elders should act, especially among their fellow elders. For pastors or elders who are prone to dominate conversations, it would be wise for them to reflect on Eagle's comments in chapter 4 and ask if they are preventing others from speaking up by sharing their strong opinions too quickly. Furthermore, they should ask themselves, "Am I using my power to get my way or to create space for others to contribute? Am I acting like I believe that every elder on this session is here for a God-ordained reason? Have I determined how God has equipped each of these men to contribute to this team?"

As Scazzero reminds us, "The best test of a leader's character is how they deal with power."[252] This pertains to all types of power, including the positional power one has as an elder or pastor, and the relational power that one gains over his longevity in any setting. Earlier, I wrote that one is not merely the sum total of his positional power and formal authority. That is, in part, because of what Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie say, "We suggest that relational authority trumps formal authority much of the time."[253] When Underhill described his pastor's authority or influence at his church, which Underhill said he used very cautiously and sparingly, Underhill pointed to his longevity at the church, not his title or position. Nonetheless, I believe Underhill was pointing out something that is rare, which he acknowledged, a senior pastor who possesses more influence than any other individual on his board. In fact, I think that pastors will usually not be the most

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[252] Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 248

[253] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 214.

powerful elder on their board, even if they are the "first among equals," and I'm not sure

that's a bad thing. What is important is that pastors realize this and act accordingly.

Taking a long time to build relational capital and trust would be a wise step for pastors

before they stake out hills to die on. Because if they don't have 40 years of credibility

like Underhill's boss, they might find that they do indeed die on some of those hills,

possibly forfeiting their current level of influence and the chance to influence their

church in the future. In particular, pastors need to ask whether they are overestimating

what they can accomplish in six months (or a short period of time) and underestimating

what they can accomplish in six years or more, over the duration of their ministry at a

church? Do I, as a pastor, think I need to accomplish something soon because I am not

content to let Christ bless my long-term faithfulness? Do I resent other elders because

their relational power seems to exceed my positional power? Am I demanding, much too

soon, the kind of power that only comes when positional power is combined with

relational power over a long period of time?

Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie remind us, "Power is rarely equal between

people."[254] This statement does not undermine the parity of elders. In fact, they

acknowledge the technicalities of parity in their book.[255] They are merely combining the

technicalities of parity with the realities of relational capital and relational authority

within churches. Pastors should neither despise these realities nor dismiss them. Rather,

they should be aware of their power (no matter how great or small it might be) and seek

to use it well and wisely. I believe these insights could be a greater benefit to those in so-

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[254] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 47.

[255] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *The Politics of Ministry*, 21.

called kinship churches, where members of one family dominate formal and informal leadership, and other mid-size (150-450 regular attenders) churches.

Can There Be Insubordination within the Parity of Elders?

Surely most Christians would ask for their elders to be humble, rather than "quarrelsome," as 1 Tim. 3:3 outlines. Thankfully, the elders interviewed described their fellow elders as humble and not quarrelsome. Reeder and Anaybwile both described this quality as submission.[256] Anaybwile said of a prospective elder, "Can he submit to … other biblically qualified, gifted, and Spirit-filled men who will, from time to time, see a matter differently. It's proud to think this will never happen, and it's proud to think the other elders should always submit to you."[257] This led an early reader of this research to ask me, "What does insubordination look like within the parity of elders?" Insubordination becomes much easier to define within a strict hierarchy; it is simply the refusal to obey orders. Could that happen between an assistant pastor and a senior pastor? Possibly, but it might also be appropriate to examine the senior pastor's attitude in such a situation.

Where this question becomes more difficult is when it is placed within a team of elders, who are all technically equal in positional power or authority. As I consider the number of authors and elders who have extolled the benefits of consensus voting and slowly forming consensus through their discussions, I will offer some tentative ideas of what insubordination looks like within a team of elders or equals. Refusing to let Christ

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[256] Reeder and Gragg, *The Leadership Dynamic*, 62.

[257] Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*, 102–3.

speak through the multitude of other counselors might be a sign of insubordination, but even this cannot be absolute, because it is possible that a group might be wrong and you may be the only one who is right, standing upon Scriptural principle. Of course, even entertaining this possibility might lead you to pride, even if you are indeed right, so the multitude of counselors should always be given due weight by the voice crying in the wilderness. I feel more confident offering this suggestion: Insubordination to a team of elders is more likely to occur after a decision has been made by a session. That insubordination might look like one or more elders publicly criticizing a decision that was made with their input. Doing this might stir disunity within the group or the congregation. It also might imply that you were not a given a voice in a discussion, when, in fact, your voice was heard but not ultimately heeded. In short, criticizing a session decision that an elder was part of is not submitting to God's ordained decision-making structure, which is why it very well might be insubordination. Trying to define insubordination in the context of a team of elders is difficult, but whenever someone protests a group decision outside of that group, he seems to be treading on shaky ground.

I found Cutter's comments very instructive. Though he once felt compelled to resign his charge as elder at a previous church, he seemed to advocate against any public dissent of session decisions. He was even leery of saying too much on a topic if the session had not specifically discussed it and come to a decision. For years, the words of a now-departed elder have stuck with me: Once we leave that room, every vote was unanimous.

Leaders Prizing Safety and Inclusiveness

We live in an age where some extol the need for "safe spaces" on college

campuses which are free from contrary points of view. While I am not an expert on this

topic nor on free speech, I am aware that such spaces are controversial. But that idea is

far different than what some elders and authors recommended. Edmondson appears to

have coined the term, "psychological safety" to describe "a climate in which raising a

dissenting view is expected and welcomed."[258] By Edmondson's definition, safety is the

freedom to express contrary views, not freedom from contrary views. I can remember this

concept generating a great deal of discussion in one doctoral course. One student from an

Eastern, honor-based culture with a tendency toward hierarchy dismissed this notion as

wishful thinking, almost a myth, something too good to be true. His attitude seemed to be

that you put up with whatever your boss says. I was actually sympathetic to him, because

he had discussed some of the difficulties he had encountered in ministry; his cynicism

and pragmatism were at least understandable, given his circumstances. Indeed,

sometimes a stiff upper lip seems like the only course; psychological safety is probably

just a heavenly wish.

However, something about Edmondson's concept resonated with me and seemed

realistic, even if it sounded less masculine on the surface. I felt more justified when I

listened to Gervin, the federal agent, mention the need for safety, which he described as a

freedom from ridicule. Eagle went even farther, attributing some insights to Edmondson

that I had not previously remembered. In short, he said that it was best for leaders to be

cautious in their initial comments on a topic, if they wanted others, especially direct

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[258] Edmondson, *Teaming*, 119.

subordinates, to participate in the discussion. Eagle's comments were particularly about leaders and subordinates, focused on positional power. They likely also apply to those with unequal relational power, so all elders would be wise to moderate their hottest takes and not unleash them right off the bat, especially if they want to hear others participate and feel ownership in the group. As I said earlier, elders and pastors, especially vocal ones, should be asking themselves if they are using their power to encourage others to contribute.

The Importance of Parity

I came into this study believing I was a two-office Presbyterian, affirming that deacon and elder are the two offices of the church, while also understanding that the office of elder can be subdivided into ruling and teaching elders. I left the study more convinced of that view, partly based on the literature and its theological arguments and partly based on anecdotal evidence. Numerous elders seemed to take the parity of elders as a given, one of the keys to the success of their teams. In addition, two authors left me with lasting images. Thornwell memorably wrote, "I take my brother, the Ruling Elder … by the hand as my brother and my *peer*."[259] This seemed to encapsulate the parity of elders. Parity means equality, and it must manifest itself in brotherhood if it is truly parity. A first among equals must know that ruling elders are his equals. His position as the first is because someone has to lead, not because he is superior to his equals. Anaybwile uses the image of a point guard in basketball to drive this point home. He

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[259] James Henley Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, 235, http://archive.org/details/collectedwriting04thor, emphasis original.

pictures the pastor as one of the elders, one of the team members, who organizes the others, calls the plays or "assignments", and then sets the others up for success. He seems to be drawing on an older conception of the point guard as the player who passes more and shoots less. He acknowledges that this might slow things down in the church. But he also says, "It's safer and more effective that way – even if it's less efficient and sometimes more frustrating for autocrats and egomaniacs."[260] Though Anaybwile is a Baptist, I think he would agree with this common Presbyterian saying, "Nothing happens quickly in a Presbyterian church … for better or worse." It seems like Thornwell and Anaybwile are both aiming their comments at pastors with a tendency toward autocratic leadership, but their overall point – that elders are equal and exist in parity – is a good one for all elders to hear. At the risk of pressing Anaybwile's basketball analogy too far, whether an elder is a point guard or another position, whether he passes to set others up or shoots the ball to score a lot of points or performs a more mundane task (setting screens, for example), he needs to know that he's just one member of a larger team. Or, to use a Pauline analogy, each elder is simply one part in a larger body.

Just Be Friends

One insight that was shocking in its simplicity was the advice that elders simply need to be friends and form good relationships. It came out in numerous ways. Joni and Beyer used a playful title ("How to Pick a Good Fight") to write a serious article in a serious publication (*Harvard Business Review*), but one of their most interesting

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[260] Thabiti Anaybwile, "The Five A's of Building Healthy Elder Boards: Assignments," The Front Porch, accessed August 8, 2019, https://thefrontporch.org/2018/08/the-five-as-of-building-healthy-elder-boards-assignments/.

contributions was their scholarly description of "water cooler" chats and their benefit. They wrote, "Often it's the informal processes – involving hallway conversations, personal favors, and relationships that cross official boundaries – that accomplish goals the formal structure cannot."[261] That reminded me of a pastor Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie interviewed. He thought his denominational meeting was a big dysfunctional team because, "These folks have never played golf together." [262] I'm not a golfer, but I realize that you have to enjoy someone's company to spend upwards of three hours with them on a golf course. Cutter said something similar. His colleagues in Presbytery said that their group could've weathered some storms on their session if they had simply been better friends. Numerous other elders brought up similar insights, saying that socializing and spending time together outside of official meetings was a key to their success, something they wish they did more often, or something that they wanted to pass on to future leaders. I suppose I was looking for something more insightful, but the frequency with which I encountered this idea made a lasting impression upon me. Spend time together outside of your meetings; develop relationships with one another. One should not despise the day of small things; I suppose I should not despise the day of simple, obvious, oft-repeated advice, either. Furthermore, if any ruling elder or teaching elder is not actively building relational trust with his fellow elders and earning a high-trust dividend, then I believe he is sowing a low-trust tax and setting himself up for failure.

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[261] Joni and Beyer, "How to Pick a Good Fight," 55.

[262] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 214.

Recommendations for Practice

Chapter three features a section titled, "Study Limitations." As I now try to offer recommendations for best practices to elders and others, I am more keenly aware of the limitations of this study than I was when I wrote chapter three. Many voices have informed me, but I hope to be able to give my voice to ways that elders and pastors can practice healthy teamwork that edifies each other and glorifies Christ, the head of the Church, the arcshepherd.

Pass the Ball and Let Others Lead

Anaybwile's thoughts on the pastor as a point guard resonated with me, partially because of my love of sports, but I think the image also carries over for those who don't love sports as much. At the heart of his pastor as point guard ideal is that the pastor is not the one who dominates. He may lead. He may gives assignments or call the plays, but even then, he is setting others up for success more and dominating less. Point guards sometimes shoot a lot in modern basketball, but I still like the analogy. At the core, this is another way of guarding against the tyranny of government by one man, whether that one man is a teaching elder or a ruling elder. As Anaybwile says, this will intentionally slow things down. But in many ways, the slowness of decisions in an elder-led body is a feature of the system, not a bug. It reminds me of a time when a prominent pastor in my denomination borrowed an old quote about government and applied it to church government during a very slow and tedious debate at our General Assembly. Paraphrasing from memory, he said that Presbyterianism was the worst form of church government, except for all the others, and that a deliberative process with rules of order ensures that every voice can be heard. To draw upon another sports analogy from Alda,

"There is no MVP in a church." Pastors should not be afraid to embrace the slow process of shared leadership in the church, especially because of what it says about our Savior and Head of the church.

Exalt Christ not Self as You Shepherd His Flock

Much of this study was born through my appreciation of my current elder team, with whom I am proud to serve. As I was discussing them and their dynamics with our assistant pastor Steve Stanton one day, I said something about this topic, to which he remarked, "That sounds like your dissertation." That led to the first draft of my purpose statement, revised many times since; that led to a few scribbles from Steve on that draft, which read, "Plurality keeps Christ as the only head of [the] church. I.e., Submission to plurality glorifies Christ." That idea has kept coming up in the literature and in interviews with elders. When I interviewed Frankie Funke, I responded to his comment about consensus decisions by asking why his teams prized consensus. He replied, "I think it's the heart of Presbyterian polity if it's correctly implemented. The beauty of Presbyterianism is because we're all subject to the headship of Jesus Christ. We're brothers in the work." It was one of many times that Funke extolled the "beauty" of Presbyterian church polity. Numerous authors came back to this point in their discussions of polity, as well. Elliott highlighted how elders must imitate Christ's humility if they would lead a Christ-like community.[263] Knight built upon this point and showed how humility exalts Christ, who came to serve yet had every right to call Himself King. The parity of elders displays "mutual submission" and "in turn helps to preserve the humble

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[263] Elliott, "Elders as Leaders," 557.

servant quality of the eldership, and, at the same time, the unique Lordship of Christ."[264] Waldron also said that plurality, parity and diversity of gifts among elders "point up to the glory of the Chief Shepherd of the church. He alone can make us perfect in every good work to do His will working in us that which is well-pleasing in God's sight."[265] I still like the succinct statement of Murray most. He reminds us that we're "undershepherds under the arcshepherd."[266] It's been said that church government is an important but not essential doctrine to the church. But isn't it lovely how one form of church government intentionally places no one man as the head of the church, but instead places multiple men in a plurality of leadership, so that by their parity the moderator of the highest court technically has no more positional power than an elder in some small rural church? Isn't it beautiful how the doctrine of church government tries to intentionally exalt Christ? Pastors are wise to embrace the slow model of elder-led church government, because it embraces multiple leaders and it exalts Christ as the only Head of the church.

Seeing Healthy Teamwork as an Elder Qualification

Paul does not explicitly mention teamwork in 1 Timothy 3 or Titus 1, the two Biblical passages that touch on the qualifications of elders. But words like "sober-minded, self-controlled … not quarrelsome" do appear in those passages. Numerous authors surveyed and the elders interviewed highlighted similar qualities in good elders,

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[264] Knight, "Two Offices (Elders or Bishops and Deacons) and Two Orders of Elders (Preaching or Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders)," 11.

[265] Waldron, "Parity in the Eldership and the Need for Balance (Part 5 of 5) – Cbtseminary."

[266] Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 2:345

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such as disagreeing without being disagreeable, remaining calm, encouraging others to talk, and not dominating conversations, among other qualities. Many have noted how most fruits of the Spirit and most elder qualifications are qualities that specifically relate to one's relationship with others. Anaybwile specifically mentioned the ability to interact with the contrasting opinions of others and ultimately submitting to them. The PCA BCO requires elders and pastors to vow "submission to your brethren in the Lord."[267] In light of this, I would not advocate for any formal change to the PCA's BCO and its lists of elder qualifications. What I would recommend is that elders and congregations see common teamwork principles as an outgrowth of Christian character and the qualifications of an elder. If a man is known as a lone ranger who doesn't work well with others, one should question whether he is called to the office of elder, even if other qualifications might be present. This advice could benefit not only elders but also congregations who nominate their elders and other leaders. Additionally, if a body of elders is not exercising teamwork with each other, it would behoove one of their members to remind them of the vows of submission that they have taken. While I have not done an exhaustive study of comparable books of order and church government, it would seem wise for other churches to examine any of their official vows for church leaders for similar statements regarding mutual submission.

Naming, Discussing and Rooting Out Bad Teamwork

One of my hopes for this study was that good teamwork and bad teamwork could be identified and named, the former so that it could be practiced and the latter so that it

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[267] Presbyterian Church in America, *BCO*, 21-5 and 24-6.

could be mortified. It reminds me of Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie talking about the benefits of "conversations where hardships can be named and discussed." [268] Indeed, naming and discussing teamwork should be a regular practice for churches. Ignoring it is probably an instance of artificial harmony, assuming that everyone is fine. At my current church, we have an item on the agenda just before adjournment that says, "Review session meeting process & dynamics," thanks to one of our ruling elders who predates my tenure at the church, though this item can become abbreviated or omitted during long meetings. We also conduct a session self-evaluation at least once a year during one of our meetings. There may be better ways to discuss bad teamwork and instill good teamwork, but those are a few that I have seen. What follows are a few additional insights in this area.

Remaining Calm and Connected

Bolsinger was not the only author to talk about the benefits of remaining calm in the midst of conflict, but he was the one who did so with the most gusto. For someone who can tend to be emotional or take criticism personally, I needed to hear Bolsinger define "opponents" as neutrally as he did. They are, "nothing more and nothing less than those who are against the particular change initiative."[269] I think you could remove the word "change" from that quote and the advice would still be worthwhile. In addition, opponents are the very ones to whom you want to stay close. [270] Staying close in the

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[268] Burns, Chapman, and Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry*, 205.

[269] Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 161.

[270] Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 168.

midst of opposition can be one of the tools that helps to bridge the gap on any particular issue. Staying calm is the other. Because, as Bolsinger says, "Calm, like anxiety, is contagious."[271] Many other authors gave similar advice about staying connected to your opponents. In fact, many of them are authors that Bolsinger quotes. But if there was one book I would recommend to leaders who are called to lead amidst uncertainty and opposition, it would be Bolsinger's, primarily because of its tone of courageous, calm leadership that builds a coalition by relentlessly staying on mission. Even for those who do not see themselves as the leader of a group, his advice about staying on mission, staying calm and connected to your opponents is advice that could benefit any elder. Bolsinger quotes many secular sources, of course, but I think this is a reminder that leading a church is just as hard as leading a corporation, and because of God's common grace, there is much that pastors and elders can learn from secular leaders.

Being Better Friends

There are hints of the importance of social interaction for team dynamics in some of the literature previously mentioned. What stood out to me was the overwhelming number of elders who talked about the importance of social interaction for their team dynamics, despite very limited prompting from me when I interviewed them. It's not that I did not value friendship in team dynamics prior to this study, but it was not on my list of expected responses from the participants. I think I assumed that they wouldn't mention it, in lieu of splashier, more unexpected insights. But mention it they did, quite often. It was mentioned as a mark of their teamwork, a helpful preamble to their teamwork (in the case

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[271] Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 147.

of one session that eats dinner down the road from the church before the meeting), and a quality that they want to pass on to future team members. Again, I almost feared to mention this because of how simple it sounds, but the frequency with which my participants mentioned it prompts me to highlight it. Spend time together outside of your business meetings. There will always be more work to be done, but the work will go better if you're doing it with friends. As Cutter said, being better friends could have solved a lot of problems with one of his past churches and their session. Learn from their oversight, and don't neglect friendship-building and social interaction. It may be that such obvious actions will naturally help groups navigate the more challenging issues they encounter. Every elder should be building friendships with his fellow officers in the hopes of building trust; otherwise, you are building distrust and laying the ground for future discord.

Don't Take Humility and Submission Too Far

A few elders offered a brief corrective that I believe should not be overlooked. Numerous authors and elders are aware of the dangers of autocratic leadership, which is why many of them extol the benefits of humility. Eagle, perhaps sensing the tendency he noted to offer strong opinions, had just mentioned the importance of humility in leadership, when he briefly offered a counterpoint. "A lot of humble guys are crappy leaders because they don't actually take leadership. They don't act on things, being willing to make decisions." He moved on and discussed humility more, now in more positive terms, but his point was clear. Humble leaders are willing to act, but also willing to listen, and willing to yield, if needed. Alda, as well, made sure to note that his groups ability to make decisions together was not because they were a group of passive,

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unassertive men. "It's not like everybody's milquetoast and we come together and mush,"
he said. The consensus that these groups enjoyed was a hard-fought consensus, at times.
It was not wrought through passivity. Elders would do well to remember this and not
strive for silent agreement or artificial harmony. Being quick to listen and slow to speak
would be wise, but they should also be willing to speak, willing to let their God-given
voice be heard by other godly men.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study has investigated how ruling elders from mid-sized Reformed churches
describe their teamwork. As with any study, there are limitations as to how extensive the
focus can be. Therefore, pursuit of the following areas of study could be highly valuable
for the church, particularly for ruling and teaching elders.

Ethical Standards for Church Politics

I enjoyed my time researching the idea of organizational politics as it can be
applied to the organization of the church. Along the way, I began to wish I had more time
to delve into this area, specifically to spend more time in the ethical areas of church
politics. The following questions arose for me: Are there standards that have been
developed for ethics in church politics? Are written standards necessary? Would written
standards be more or less effective than having those standards reinforced by members of
the organization with large amounts of relational capital? How much transparency about
one's political commitments or alliances is demanded at any given time in the church?
All of these seem to be interesting questions that would benefit the church, but they were
sadly beyond the scope of this study.

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Guidelines and Statistics on Safe Conversations

Safety to disagree was something that participants and authors identified as a key to teamwork. This made me wonder how prevalent those conditions are within churches and their leadership structures. While some of these questions might lend themselves to a more quantitative study, the questions I was not able to answer included the following: How many elders feel safe to disagree with the rest of their session? How many pastors feel likewise? How do new pastors go about establishing the safety to disagree with long-held opinions and ideals, particularly ideals that might go against Scriptural principles? The need to establish safety in conversations for the sake of healthy teamwork seems to have good support from numerous sources. It seems that further investigation could be made as to whether this safety actually exists in churches. Furthermore, investigating whether safe churches, to the extent this can be measured, correspond to healthy, growing churches might also be a beneficial undertaking.

Do Healthy Teams Make Healthy Churches?

I wanted to study healthy teamwork dynamics because I have appreciated the experience of serving with a healthy team. This study has not focused on church health or church growth metrics and the Biblical basis for either, but I would very much be interested to see if healthy church leadership teams lead to healthy churches and growing churches. I hope and expect that this would be the case, but I think the church would benefit from more research in this area. After all, recent years have seen many evangelical megachurches stumble because of the fall of an autocratic, even abusive, leader. If those churches grew in spite of (or because of?) an autocratic leader, what observable effect does healthy teamwork have on the health and growth of the church?

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How Many Offices Make for the Most Parity?

I found great benefit from studying the parity of elders and the corollary doctrines

of the two-office (deacon and elder, subdivided into orders of teaching and ruling elder)

and three-office (deacon, ruling elder, and teaching elder as distinct offices) views of

church government. While I received help from several sources as to where I could find

literature on these topics, I felt that most of the literature on these ideas was found within

larger works on church government. It seems that there is enough literature to merit a

book-length examination of the two-office and three-office views, and I would enjoy

reading it if such a work exists or is written in the future. In addition, either as a separate

work or as part of the same, an examination of the strengths of each view and the actual

implications of those views might be helpful, as well. Perhaps a two-office denomination

and a three-office denomination could serve as dual case studies to examine whether the

proposed benefits of each view are well applied by those who hold them.

Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how ruling elders in mid-sized

Reformed churches describe their teamwork, and this study has been a joy to me. Some

of the themes that stick out to me as I conclude this study are as follows: fellowship

beyond business hours builds trust and teamwork; healthy conflict and patient listening

are hallmarks of good teamwork; power is used "judiciously" in healthy teams; consensus

is sought and usually achieved in healthy teams; healthy teams are humble, with no MVP,

with no head except Christ.

Furthermore, if any future researcher can further any of the insights of this study,

I commend them in their pursuit and encourage them to share their results with me. It is

my hope that pastors and elders will work well together, for the sake of their own mutual benefit and enjoyment, so that they might glorify Jesus Christ, the true head of the church, who called us to this great work of shepherding His people. We will never be perfect shepherds, but it is my prayer that we will be better shepherds and better teammates, better brothers in this great work.

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