

**THE ROLE OF ELDERS IN
EVANGELICAL CHURCH OF WEST AFRICA
IN THE LIGHT OF NEW TESTAMENT TEACHINGS**

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ABSTRACT

This study will be divided into five chapters. In writing on this topic, chapter one is the background information. A concise definition of terms such as "elder," "ECWA," "Church," "SIM," is also done. The researcher will only discuss briefly an overview of the office of elders/deacons in selected Christian denominations such as Christ Apostolic Church, The Apostolic Church, and Nigerian Baptist Convention Church.

In chapter two, New Testament concept of elders/deacons shall be examined which shall include the recognition, the qualifications, role and election of elders in the New Testament time. In chapter three, the study looks at ECWA's concept of eldership, key passages as well as the related passages to bring out their meanings clearly.

Chapter four is based on the position of elders in the New Testament and ECWA Church. The researcher applies his personal knowledge and experience drawn from his active role as a pastor as well as a leader in ECWA, Nigeria, to explain the positions of elders in ECWA, elders and pastors' relationship, the relationship of the church members with the elders and the motivation or encouragement of the elders. Chapter five is a summary where the researcher gives recommendations and draws his conclusion.

B. Recommendations

The researcher would want to give some encouragement for the elders, because elders could meet unfair accusation from any quarters in the assembly. For this reason, they must be encouraged that they need to take heart knowing that God has placed them there and they must please God and not men. Their task is great and they must try as much as possible to do it satisfactorily to the glory of God.

The principal offices in ECWA were held by men. This is perfectly clear because the elder or deacon is expected to be the "husband of one wife."² The researcher will recommend that ECWA should not deviate from the instruction that only men could rise to the position of elder.

Considerable debate exists over the question of the number of elders each church had in New Testament times or should have today. The fact that the early Church met in homes (Romans 16:5; I Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15), makes it difficult to settle this debate conclusively. But the researcher will give a recommendation that the number of elders in each congregation should be determined by the population of the congregation as practised by ECWA.

The recommendation to the ministry of elders is that elders should have the right to oversee all facets of church works.

It is recommended that ECWA allots more veto powers to her pastors so that they can use their discretion in the final choice of elders. For example, if a church should have up to fifteen elders and only five exhibit godly attributes, then

²Ryrie, p. 4113.

the pastor should be able to veto the election on just these five. He should insist on blameless leaders.

It is recommended that ECWA through the District Church Council members should monitor the election of elders more closely with careful scrutiny. It is recommended that ECWA pastors should give lectures and seminars on all aspects of elders to their congregations some days to the nomination and election of elders.

The Bible is full of examples of leaders who trained other leaders to assume responsibility. The Apostle Paul had this in mind when he enjoined Timothy thus: “. . . and the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to reliable men who will be qualified to teach others” (II Timothy 2:2, NIV). Hence there is a solid backing to this researcher’s recommendation that would-be elders and other leaders are given sound biblical training. Guthrie’s remarks on II Timothy 2:2 is worthy of note. He says: “The transmission of Christian truth must never be left to chance, and is clearly not committed fortuitously to every Christian.”³ Rather, it should be committed to reliable men like elders. Williams is of the opinion that “a man will not become an elder over night, and the better his training, the more effective he will fulfill his ministry.”⁴ Fernando did suggest: “As seven year period of training after conversion be given to a person before he assumes a leadership role in the church.”⁵ Fernando’s advice may be a little of help here, but he advances his

³Donald Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles: Tyndale New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, n.d.).

⁴Williams, p. 89.

⁵Ajith Fernando, *Disciple Making in Leadership Lifestyle*, p. 72.

argument on the basis of Jesus as his role model. Jesus gave three years of training to His disciples to enable them lead well. The Bible confirmed what they did.

In ECWA today one expects good leaders to emerge in the churches. But these leaders (majority of them) pose one problem or the other to these churches. This can be attributed in part to their lack of sound biblical training. When in the long run they fail to perform well, nobody can complain because almost all elected elders fall into the same category.

It is also recommended that the elders in any church must be ready to help or to assist any pastor posted to their church by making him to know the area of his deficiency with humility and respect. Elders should realize that if they fail to perform well, "they will come under God's hand of heavy judgement" (Jeremiah 12:10-13; 22:22; Zechariah 10:13; 11:17).⁶

Elders should be honoured and respected by church members (I Peter 5:17; Philippians 2:25-30). Not that alone, elders should play their part towards their members and ministers. In this Sakpo comments thus: "It is reasonably binding duty for all church elders and members to show hospitality and kindness to their pastor because he is their minister in time of sickness, trouble, difficulties, needs and backsliding (Acts 28:9, 10; I Corinthians 9:7-14)."⁷

We should also disallow campaigning in choosing elders for things of the Lord should be different from the things of the world. God is a God of orderliness. If all these recommendations are put into consideration there will be

⁶Robert Frost, "Biblical Gifts," Acts of World Map Team, July-September 2001, p. 26.

⁷I. G. Sakpo, A Call Into Pastoral Ministry (Ilesa: Olufemi Printing Press, 1983), p. 50.

peace, joy and happiness in serving the Lord. A lot of cooperation among the pastors, church members and the elders in ECWA churches will boom the morale of the congregation at large and God will be lifted up, thereby bringing others to Christ and the Church of God will continue to march from strength to strength and the glory of Evangelical Church of West Africa's vision will continue to shine.