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Onboarding Elders or a Board

Parker Manuel · Lead pastor, Pinewood Church, Boulder · 20+ years in ministry

Check every name, pronoun and detail before you use this.

Start here

This kit helps you bring a new person onto your elder team or board well: what the group is for, who belongs on it, how you ask, what their first meeting and first 90 days look like, and how the group works with the pastor, handles money and has hard conversations.

It does not tell you how your church should be governed. That is yours to settle from Scripture and your own tradition. Work through it in this order:

1. **Read Resource 1** and write down what your group is for.
2. **Use Resource 2** to decide who belongs and to write a one-page charter.
3. **Make the ask** and plan the first 90 days with Resource 3.
4. **Agree how the group and the pastor work together** using Resource 4, before you need it.
5. **Set your money and meeting rhythm** with Resource 5.

What the Group Is For

Say it in one line

Our church is staff led, elder guided, and body served.

That is one church's line. Write your own. A new elder or board member should be able to say in one sentence who leads, who guides and who is served.

Why have the group at all

- Provides doctrinal and spiritual accountability to Lead Pastor
- Supports the overall health and wellbeing of the Lead Pastor and family
- Works to establish trust in the Directional Leadership Team and vision
- Creates opportunity for Elders to disciple upcoming leaders
- Increases opportunities to build financial and prayer partnership

Notice what is on that list: accountability, care for the pastor's family, trust, discipleship, partnership. Decide which of these your group carries, and which belong to someone else.

Settle your model before you invite anyone

Churches answer these questions differently. Do not borrow an answer. Open your Bible, read your own tradition's teaching, and decide:

- Who holds final authority in your church, and over what?
- Are your elders inside the congregation, outside it, or both?
- Is your legal board the same group as your elders, or a different one?
- Who may serve as an elder?
- How do elders, pastors and deacons differ in your church?

Passages to read together: Acts 6:1-7, Acts 14:23, Acts 20:17-31, Ephesians 4:11-16, 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1:5-9, Hebrews 13:17, James 5:14, 1 Peter 5:1-4.

Five tests for any model

Every model we evaluate must be:

1. Biblically grounded. Does it come from Scripture?
2. Historically rooted. Has it stood the test of time?

3. Theologically coherent. Does it align with God's character and mission?
4. Practically effective. Does it produce disciples and fruit today?
5. Globally transferable. Could it work across cultures?

Questions to press on your own model

- Which specific passages prescribe your model versus merely describe it?
- How does your model handle church discipline and authority biblically?
- How do elders and deacons function distinctly in your structure?
- What system of accountability protects both leaders and members?
- How does your model equip every believer for ministry (Eph. 4:11-16)?
- How does your model guard sound doctrine and promote spiritual health?
- How do you make sure "first among equals" does not become "the only voice that matters"?
- If your elders are local, what outside accountability exists to prevent insularity or moral failure?
- What happens if there is disagreement among elders? Who decides?
- How do you keep the staff side from becoming a corporate hierarchy?

How one church put it

Our church operates with:

- an external elder board for accountability and oversight,
- a lead elder who shepherds the local house,
- a pastoral team that cares for and equips the flock,
- a lead team of ministry leaders who function as deacons.

Passages given: Acts 14:23, 1 Peter 5:1-4, Ephesians 4:11-12, Acts 6:1-7, 1 Timothy 3:8-13, Ephesians 1:22-23.

This is an example, not a recommendation. Run your own model through the five tests.

Keep it under Jesus

Every structure should serve Jesus' mission, not replace it.

Who Belongs and the One-Page Charter

Start with the qualifications

Abide by the biblical qualifications of an Elder: Acts 15; Acts 20:17, 28-31; 1 Timothy 3:2; 1 Timothy 5:17; 2 Timothy 4:2; Titus 1:7, 9; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1-2.

- Read these passages yourself before you think of a single name.
- Read them again with the person you are considering.
- Character comes first. Skill, money and connections do not make someone an elder.

What a member brings

Members of the MAC share their gifts in service to our mission and vision by providing our organization with their support and care; doctrinal beliefs, their diverse knowledge and perspectives; and their connections to local, national or international resources, colleagues or peers.

Size, terms and access

- The MAC will consist of 3-5 members that will rotate every 2-4 years. The Lead Pastor is considered a member of the MAC.
- Open invitation to attend all staff meetings and team huddles
- Full access to all financials in the church.

Decide ahead of time:

- How many people serve, and for how long.
- Whether terms are staggered so the whole group never turns over at once.
- Whether the pastor is a member, and whether the pastor votes.
- Whether a pastor's relatives or paid staff may serve.
- Who chooses new members, and who confirms them.
- How a member steps off early, and how one is removed.

Your bylaws may already answer some of these. Read them. If they do not match what you actually do, check with a lawyer or your denomination before you change either one.

What you ask of each member

- Act as an encourager to Lead Pastor

- Allow the organization to publicize their name and participation on the MAC
- Meet once a quarter on Zoom. Meet once a year in person.
- Commit to pray consistently for Pastor, his family, the church, and local community
- Permission to speak into doctrine, health, family, and leadership.

Before you ask someone

Work through this list for each person. Do it with at least one other leader.

- Do they meet the qualifications in the passages above? Who besides you can say so?
- Do they agree with your church's doctrine? Have they read it?
- Is their home in order? Ask their spouse, if they are married.
- Will they tell the pastor the truth when it costs them something?
- Can they keep a confidence?
- Do they have any business, family or money tie to the church that could pull on their judgment? Ask your lawyer or denomination what a conflict of interest policy should cover.
- Decide ahead of time whether you run a background check or call references.
- Have they got the time for what you are asking?

Write a one-page charter

One page. Hand it to every person you invite. Use these headings, which follow the shape of my own document:

1. **Purpose.** What the group is for, in two or three sentences.
2. **Reasons.** Why your church has it.
3. **Structure.** Size, terms, who is a member, what they can see, what they decide.
4. **Expectations.** Meetings, prayer, what they may speak into.
5. **Qualifications.** The passages.
6. **Your one line.** Who leads, who guides, who is served.
7. **A thank-you, signed by the pastor.**

The Invitation, the First Meeting and the First 90 Days

How to make the ask

- Ask in person. Not by text, and not in a hallway.
- Bring the charter. Walk through it line by line.
- Say why you thought of them. Be specific.
- Be honest about the hard parts: the time, the hard conversations, what they will know about the church that others will not.
- Tell them plainly what the group decides and what it does not.
- Give them time. Ask them to pray, read the passages and talk with their spouse.
- Set a date to hear their answer.

Questions to ask them

1. Tell me how you came to follow Jesus.
2. How are you and your family doing, really?
3. What do you believe about what our church teaches? Is there anything you disagree with?
4. When did you last tell a leader something they did not want to hear? What happened?
5. What would make it hard for you to serve well right now?
6. Is there anything in your life I should know before we go further?
7. What questions do you have for me?

If the answer is no, or not yet

Thank them. Do not push. A person who says no honestly has just shown you something good about them.

Before the first meeting

Send these a week ahead:

- The charter.
- Your statement of beliefs.

- Your bylaws. Ask your lawyer or denomination what a new board member is responsible for under them, and pass that on in writing.
- The current budget and the latest financial report.
- The dates for the year.
- Names and a short introduction for everyone else in the group.

The first meeting

A simple order:

1. **Pray.** Open your Bible to one of the qualification passages and read it together.
2. **Stories.** Each person shares how they came to Jesus and how they came to this church.
3. **The pastor's update.** Soul, family, church. Honest, not polished.
4. **The charter.** Read it out loud. Take questions.
5. **Money.** Walk through the budget and the latest report.
6. **How we handle hard conversations.** Read your agreed steps (Resource 4).
7. **Dates.** Confirm the year's meetings.
8. **Pray for the pastor's family and the church.**

The first 90 days

Days 1 to 30: learn the church.

- Read everything sent before the first meeting.
- Sit in on a staff meeting or a team huddle, if your charter gives that access.
- Have one unhurried conversation with the pastor, and one with the pastor's spouse if that fits your church.

Days 31 to 60: learn the people and the numbers.

- Meet one other member of the group one to one.
- Go through the financial report with whoever keeps the books. Ask every question you have.
- Start praying on a set day each week for the pastor, the pastor's family, the church and the city.

Days 61 to 90: start carrying weight.

- Attend your first regular meeting as a full member.
- Bring one honest observation and one encouragement.
- Sit down with the pastor and ask: "What do you need from me? What should I know that I do not?"

A rhythm that helps

- Healthy things grow.
- Play the long game.
- Start now, start small, stay faithful.

Working With the Pastor and Hard Conversations

The group is for the pastor before it is over the pastor

- Act as an encourager to Lead Pastor
- Commit to pray consistently for Pastor, his family, the church, and local community
- Permission to speak into doctrine, health, family, and leadership.

Permission is the word to notice. The pastor gives it out loud, in the room, before anything is wrong. Then the group uses it.

Ask about health, not only results

The ultimate goal of our church is not growth, it is health. True health creates strength that sustains real growth. The grass is greener where you water it.

Questions to ask your pastor at every meeting. Pick two or three.

- How is your time with God?
- How is your marriage? How are your kids?
- When did you last take a real day off?
- What is weighing on you that nobody else knows?
- Is there anything you are hiding from this group?
- What are you teaching next, and is there anything in it we should talk through?
- Where do you need our help?

Who does what

Most trouble between a pastor and a board comes from nobody having said who decides. Decide ahead of time, in writing, which of these belong to the pastor and staff, which belong to the group, and which you do together:

- Doctrine and what is taught.
- Vision and direction.
- Hiring and releasing staff.
- The annual budget.
- The pastor's pay.

- Spending above a set amount. Decide the amount.
- Debt, property and leases.
- Church discipline.
- Concerns about the pastor.

Then check that list against your bylaws. If they disagree, ask a lawyer or your denomination which one governs and fix the other.

When there is a concern about the pastor

The MAC will address areas of concern related to narcissistic behavior, unhealthy habits, and unorthodox doctrine pertaining to the Lead Pastor, if these conversations are not received well and the problems continue, then...

Finish that sentence for your own church before you ever need it. Decide ahead of time:

- Who raises a concern, and with whom first. Read Matthew 18:15-17 and 1 Timothy 5:19-20 together.
- How many members must agree before the group acts.
- What happens if the pastor does not receive it and the problem continues.
- Who outside your church you would call for help, such as your denomination or network.
- Who tells the church, and what is said.
- How the pastor's family is cared for through it.

An accusation that someone has been harmed or a law broken is different. Decide ahead of time who you call. Do not handle it in house. Ask a lawyer or your denomination now what the law requires of you.

When the group disagrees among itself

- Say it in the room, not in the parking lot.
- Decide ahead of time how a tie or a split is settled.
- Once a decision is made, everyone carries it out of the room as "ours."
- What is said in the room stays in the room. Ask your lawyer or denomination whether members should sign a confidentiality agreement.

Sayings that help in the room

- **Be a peacemaker.** You are not a pot stirrer.
- **Ask before you correct.** Listen to hear, do not listen to respond.

- **Discussions are for decision makers.**
- **Inspect what you expect.**
- **Leaders go first.**

Money, Meetings and the Year

Let them see everything

Full access to all financials in the church.

The annual budget

Affirm budget annually. The Directional Leadership Team will work with staff and team leads to build an annual budget outside of personnel. We will also work with our accountant to make sure our annual budget stays within the margins of potential projections.

Decide ahead of time:

- Who builds the budget, and who affirms or approves it.
- What "affirm" means in your church. Is it a vote?
- What the group sees at each meeting: income, spending against budget, cash on hand, debt.
- What happens when giving falls short partway through the year.

The pastor's pay

Set the Lead Pastor's salary. The primary responsibility is to make sure the family is well provided for and that they are able to sustain in the context in which they are reaching and not feel the burden of finances.

- The pastor leaves the room when pay is discussed and decided.
- Anyone related to the pastor, or paid by the church, does not take part in that decision.
- Write down what you decided and how you got there.
- Clergy pay has its own tax rules. Ask a qualified accountant or your denomination. This kit does not cover them.

Financial controls

A new board member should be able to get a plain answer to each of these:

- Who counts the offering? Is it always more than one person?
- Who can sign checks or move money? Is that a different person from the one who keeps the books?
- Who looks at the bank statements each month?
- Does anyone outside the church review the books, and how often?

- Who can take on debt in the church's name?

If you cannot answer one of them, that is your next agenda item.

Groups I would point you to: CapinCrouse for financial controls and audits, and the church lenders The Solomon Foundation, CFR and CDF. Talk with them directly about what they offer.

Keep minutes

For every decision, write four lines:

1. **Motion.** What was proposed, and by whom.
2. **Discussion.** A sentence or two.
3. **Second.** Who seconded.
4. **Vote.** The result.

Also record the date, who was present and who was absent. Ask your lawyer or denomination what your bylaws and your state require you to keep, and for how long.

A regular meeting agenda

1. Pray.
2. The pastor's update: soul, family, church.
3. Questions for the pastor (Resource 4).
4. Money: the report, and anything needing a decision.
5. One matter of doctrine, health or direction.
6. Decisions, recorded as above.
7. Pray for the pastor's family, the church and the city.

The year at a glance

Meet once a quarter on Zoom. Meet once a year in person.

Whatever your rhythm, put these on the calendar once a year so none of them is skipped:

- Affirm or approve the budget.
- Review the pastor's pay.
- Review the pastor's health and rest.
- Review who is rotating off and who you are considering.
- Ask the succession question: if the pastor could not lead tomorrow, who does what?

- Read the charter and your bylaws out loud and fix what no longer matches.

Thank them

Thank you for serving our congregation and supporting our leadership.