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Easing Tension on the Church Elders' Team

Dan has been the head elder in his local church for the past eight years. He knows his responsibilities and handles them well—perhaps even with a bit of pride. The entire church program has been running smoothly for quite some time. There are five other elders on the elders' team. Leadership duties have been shared among the team. Things have been running in a smooth and predictable rhythm.

Five months ago, one of the elders and his family moved to another city several hundred miles

away. To fill the vacancy in the elders' team, the church business meeting elected Fred as an elder. Fred became a Seventh-day Adventist about one year ago. Previously, there was little room in his life for spiritual things. But when his wife died suddenly, Fred began to think about life's big questions. A colleague at work offered to study the Bible with him and after several months Fred requested baptism. Everyone likes him. He is friendly, good humored, easygoing—a natural fit in this congregation. But he knows next to nothing about church

organization, church programs, and the traditional way of doing things.

Because of Fred's inexperience, other elders have had to take on more responsibilities and they have become somewhat critical of Fred's inability to step in and carry his share of the load. In Fred's absence the other elders comment among themselves about what they see as Fred's weaknesses and how he just does not seem to be fitting in. More and more they subconsciously exclude him from active engagement in planning and in caring for day-to-day duties.

Fred, on the other hand, is feeling overwhelmed. He is deeply honored that the church family elected him to a leadership role, but he feels rather lost among the complexity and intricacies of church life. He does not want to make any mistakes. His lack of knowledge and fear of failure make him very cautious about exercising any leadership role. Insecurity immobilizes him.

The head elder, Dan, is aware that not all is well on the elders' team. He can see that Fred is not really performing and that the rest of the elders essentially ignore Fred when it comes to performing any leadership functions. Dan is wondering what, if anything, can be done to improve the atmosphere among his team of elders.

Indeed, there are several things that can serve to build relationships among the elders while simultaneously helping Fred to gain valuable experience. Some initiatives can be taken by Dan and the other elders (see #1–3) and some steps can be initiated by Fred himself (see #4–5).

1 AFFIRM AND BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Dan and the other elders on the team need to understand that Fred is a relatively new church member. He has no background knowledge of how the church functions as an organization. He has limited awareness of Bible stories and the role of the church in God's mission through history. Yet he has become a member and the church has affirmed him by electing him to an important leadership role.

The other elders, people of experience and inside knowledge of

church life, need to affirm Fred, welcome him into their team, and recognize that many things will be new for him. They need to carefully consider how to encourage him in his spiritual journey as well as in his engagement in leadership roles.

Strengthening personal relationships with Fred can occur quickly by various elders inviting Fred to their homes, spending time together in social activities, or working on service projects with him. Getting to know Fred outside of his role as an elder will help Fred to know that he is valued and respected. Fred's fears about acceptance will diminish.

2 EQUIP FOR SERVICE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

Recognizing that Fred is relatively new to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, his fellow elders need to think about providing him with materials that will grow his understanding of the church—both the local church and its relation to the worldwide church. Fred should be given a copy of the *Seventh-day Adventist Elder's Handbook* and the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*.

One chapter at a time can become the focus for study and subsequent discussion at a meeting of the elders. Or, one of the elders may volunteer to meet on a regular basis with Fred and review the content of each chapter in these publications.

Encourage Fred to ask questions as he studies these two books. Let him know that everyone is a lifetime learner. Fred's fears from lack of knowledge will subside and he will become much more confident in embracing leadership tasks.

3 MENTOR AND TRAIN

A third way for the elders to build team strength is to offer mentoring for Fred. An elder who regularly visits in hospitals or conducts visitation to members who are confined to their homes due to illness or disability could invite Fred to join in several visits. Another elder might give a guided tour of the Sabbath School departments on a Sabbath morning. The elder who oversees the Pathfinder program might invite Fred to attend Pathfinder meetings for a while. The pastor would be wise to invite Fred to accompany the pastor on home visits and Bible studies.

As these activities are carried out, Fred will rapidly gain an understanding of church life and the ways in which elders serve to nurture members and advance church mission. Fred may have many natural abilities that become more evident in the exposure to the range of responsibilities borne by elders. His natural abilities need to be augmented by mentoring and training opportunities that broaden his experience and deepen his understanding of an elder's role.

4 ASK QUESTIONS—SEE YOURSELF AS A LEARNER

Fred also can take some initiative. Yes, he is fearful of failure and somewhat insecure due to his lack of knowledge and experience. But Fred is friendly and easygoing. He has good social skills. He need not be afraid of asking questions, of admitting his limited knowledge and experience.

In fact, his admission of inexperience and lack of knowledge will endear him to those whose counsel and advice he seeks. His openness to receive information and counsel will expose him to a wide variety of perspectives. In the process, he will not only learn much about what is expected from elders; he will also learn much about the members of the church, about what is important to them, about their personal lives and views, and about their needs and vulnerabilities. The insights he gains from asking questions will not only eliminate his insecurity, but will also equip him with a foundation for meaningful ministry to members.

5 OBSERVE ANALYTICALLY

Fred lacks know-how and this inhibits his ability to function on

par with others on the elders' team. But if he intentionally engages his powers of analytical observation, he will learn much and quickly. Watch carefully how the other elders perform their leadership roles. Observe not only how things are done, but consider thoughtfully why they might be done in this particular way. What are the advantages and disadvantages of these actions? How do others respond to this kind of leadership?

CONCLUSION


Fred's election as an elder in the local church presented Dan and the other elders with a few challenges. The situation could have deteriorated to one of dysfunctionality and alienation. Thoughtful and prayerful consideration of actions that could yield much better outcomes brought a new sense of belonging and synergy to the elders' team in Dan's church. Inac-

tion would never have resolved the situation. Deliberate and carefully designed behaviors restored harmony and set in place a legacy of influential leadership from Fred.

The dynamics among the elders may be different from one church to another. In one place the prevailing issue may be inexperience; in another it may be personal differences or theological convictions that bring stresses to the team. Perhaps some situations will need external intervention. In most cases, however, an attitude of thoughtful concern for each other, accompanied by mutual respect and a desire to grow in knowledge and service, will yield beneficial outcomes for all concerned. **ED**


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