

THE VALUE OF EXTRA-LOCAL LEADERSHIP

From the Working Group on Extra-Local Leadership

Editors' Note: In 2018, a Working Group of Sovereign Grace pastors was formed. They were tasked to study the issue of extra-local leadership and its expression in our Book of Church Order and to produce a report. In April of 2019, their report was sent to all Sovereign Grace pastors. The goal of the paper was to explain the design of our extra-local polity, giving particular emphasis to the role of extra-local leadership. Given the occasion of the paper, the focus is less a Biblical study and more a summary of how extra-local leadership finds expression in our polity. The following is an abridged and lightly edited version of that paper. We share it here to highlight the value of extra-local leadership in our family of churches.

Many of the blessings that have come to our churches have been the result of God working through extra-local leadership. The churches of Sovereign Grace have been shaped in our understanding of pastoral ministry, preaching, theological discernment, musical worship, pastoral counseling, and much more as a result of the gift of extra-local leadership. As we look to the future, we desire to continue to benefit from gifted pastors who provide specialized leadership in theological and pastoral instruction, church planting, global missions, conference planning, resource development, processing controversies, promoting our shared values and shaping virtues, and more.

We have learned this value from Scripture. One important aspect of the Biblical pattern of mission is found in the role of men who are set apart by the churches specifically for the broader mission of expansion and consolidation. Their work includes planting churches and initiating mission projects, cultivating relationships and interconnectedness among churches, strengthening and encouraging churches toward maturity, and serving churches in various other ways that transcend a single congregation.

We believe there is an apostolic gift, or a type of gifting that fulfills an apostolic function, which is distinct from the apostolic office of the New Testament and the unique role and authority of the twelve apostles and Paul. The ongoing apostolic gift or function refers to ministry that is engaged in church planting and in bringing leadership or influence that extends beyond a local congregation. Moreover, just as Paul had a large group of co-workers to assist in his broader mission and were commissioned for various extra-local tasks and ministries (as messengers, delegates, teachers, and church planters), churches today ought to follow the New Testament model and release gifted pastors to serve extra-locally, or beyond the local church.

What does this look like in Sovereign Grace? How is this value of extra-local leadership reflected in our polity? What protections are in place to guard against an unhealthy use of leadership? How ought pastors and churches relate to extra-local leadership? These are the questions this paper seeks to address.

A Polity That Values Extra-Local Leadership

The pastors of Sovereign Grace gave greater attention to defining our polity in 2011-2013. At that time, it was noted that the value of extra-local leadership is a doctrinal position upon which there is widespread unity within Sovereign Grace, and an area to be preserved in our polity.

During those years, the Polity Committee sought outside counsel on how to structure governance and leadership in a denomination. One prominent Presbyterian leader cautioned us regarding the historical tendency to have polity replace leadership. He observed that in the Presbyterian world there is a tendency to move toward the presbytery at the expense of leadership. Another Presbyterian minister observed that their system “was designed in several respects more to prevent the accumulation of influence than to accomplish mission effectively.”

As a result of extensive Biblical study, movement-wide philosophical conversations, the help and input of Sovereign Grace elders, and counsel from experts in other denominations, the Polity Committee proposed a polity that maintains a prominent place for those with outstanding leadership gifts to express that leadership in areas of extra-local ministry, as an important point of continuity with our past.

Serving Beyond the Local Church

In the Executive Summary of the original 2013 Polity Proposal, Regional Leaders (RLs) were presented as those “with outstanding gifting, ability, and experience.” Their leadership role is “wise and necessary.” “If the mission of the church is to move forward under the leadership of gifted men, then some local elders must be released, to some extent, to serve beyond their local church. The New Testament is replete with such men, and the same has been true throughout church history. They are a gift of God to the church.”

Likewise, Leadership Team (LT) members are presented as those who “play a critical role in extra-local leadership in the central aspects of Sovereign Grace in order to facilitate the pursuit of our mission together.” “As with Regional Leaders, we believe that the recognition and deployment of such men not only honors Scriptural teaching and precedent and church history, but is also vital for the fulfillment of the church’s broader mission. We also believe that a polity that does not recognize this category of spiritual gifting and does not deploy such men risks stifling an important aspect of leadership and becoming ‘polity heavy’ to the detriment of mission.”

Our polity is careful not to flatten out or democratize leadership, but is instead designed to give heightened influence to those leaders with exceptional leadership gifting and to amplify our most discerning and helpful voices. In our polity and *Book of Church Order* (BCO), the LT consists of men who are uniquely gifted by God and empowered by the Council of Elders (CoE) to truly lead Sovereign Grace Churches through their doctrinal discernment, strong teaching gifts, effective leadership, strategic wisdom, and evangelistic effectiveness. In certain aspects of their extra-local function and gifting they serve in continuity with first century apostolic ministry, but without their unique authority. As BCO-1.4.8 says, “Some of the non-authoritative functions of apostles are carried out by Regional Leaders and members of the Leadership Team.”¹

1. The Introduction to the 2013 Polity Proposal states, “You may ask what place does apostolic ministry have in our Revised Polity Proposal? It has a place but it is limited to gifting and function and does not include any office of apostle. It is most evident in the place we have made for gifted leaders to express that leadership in areas of extra-local ministry.”

Extra-local Leadership in the BCO

Our BCO was conceived to codify what has been described as a “modified Presbyterian” polity. It is “Presbyterian” in that it locates governance in elders rather than the congregation as a whole, contains no higher rank of office than that of elder, authorizes regional bodies (Regional Assemblies of Elders) to carry out designated functions, and creates a larger body comprised of local elders (the CoE), which is the highest extra-local authority in our union. Our representative government and the CoE is a crucial aspect of our polity and partnership, providing a valuable opportunity for every eldership to influence and experience ownership in the decisions, direction, mission, and faithfulness of Sovereign Grace.

However, what makes our polity a “modified Presbyterianism” is, in part, that we also preserved a place for gifted, godly, and dedicated extra-local leaders to exert pronounced influence in carrying out aspects of our common mission. Far from having all of our elders equally leading Sovereign Grace, or relegating the role of the LT to facilitating a representative leadership from the CoE, we install extra-local leaders and let them lead.

Significantly, leadership is viewed in the BCO primarily as a gift to be leveraged rather than a danger to be guarded against: “Leadership is a gift from the Lord and is to be honored and cultivated in our ecclesiastical union” (BCO-11.1). Therefore, “The Leadership Team is appointed and empowered from our Council of Elders and Executive Committee for the expressed purpose of providing leadership that is Biblical, humble, faith-filled, discerning, and gospel-centered.” According to the BCO, leadership is “honored and cultivated” in our union, not through the existence of the CoE and its committees, but through the LT.

BCO-11.4.1 makes the same point about the Executive Director: “The Executive Director is to inspire and impart vision to Sovereign Grace, resulting in joyful participation in its shared mission and appreciation of its shared doctrine and values. He is to encourage and exhort the churches of Sovereign Grace to fulfill their shared commitments and warn them against cultural temptations or internal inconsistencies with their doctrine and values.” BCO-7.1 similarly describes the leadership of RLs in terms of motivating, encouraging, exhorting, equipping, counseling, and warning.

The Gift of Leadership

What is the gift of leadership?² What the BCO says about local church polity is informative here. BCO-2.2.6 describes “The Gift of Leadership” as “having sufficient wisdom to make good decisions in small and large matters, the ability to communicate and implement those decisions, and biblical wisdom to speak to the affairs of the church.”

While all pastors must have a degree of leadership gifting (BCO-2.2.6) and each eldership has an important representative voice in the CoE (BCO-8), it is important to recognize that there are degrees of leadership gifting and that not all pastors are gifted for broader denominational leadership roles. Those who serve on the LT must be men “whose gifting for broader leadership is recognized by other elders” (BCO-11.1). Such individuals are commissioned precisely because of their recognized gifting, experience, and expertise.

The LT is not a self-defined group but is given a clear mandate within the BCO. It is “charged with leading the central aspects of Sovereign Grace’s shared mission according to its stated values” (BCO-11.3.1). Their responsibilities fall into the broad areas of “mission, doctrine and values, and partnership” (11.3.1). Yet, within this mandate is freedom to lead, so long as that leadership complies “with what the *Book of Church Order* explicitly mandates and refrain[s] from what it explicitly forbids, while operating in biblical wisdom in all other matters” (11.3.1).

2. We opted to not give detailed description of all that the Scriptures say about the nature, priorities, and expression of spiritual and pastoral leadership in general, given the expansive nature of the topic, the extra-local focus of our mandate, and the general agreement SG elders have on these things. For some interaction on the topic see (1) New Testament passages such as 1 Peter 5:1-5, Acts 20:17-38, and Matthew 20:25-28, (2) various works on eldership and leadership by Charles Bridges (*The Christian Ministry*), D.A. Carson (*The Cross and Christian Ministry; Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor ; Praying with Paul*), Tim Laniak (*Shepherds After my Own Heart; While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*), Alexander Strauch (*Biblical Eldership*), and John Piper (*The Marks of a Spiritual Leader; Brothers, We are Not Professionals; Why I Love the Apostle Paul*), and (3) the BCO’s statements on leadership.

Authority and Leadership

It is important to recognize the distinction between authority and leadership in how our extra-local polity works. The role of the LT is best understood in terms of leadership rather than exercising governing or ecclesiastical authority. According to BCO-11, this leadership includes taking initiative, imparting vision, training and equipping pastors, providing direction, promoting shared doctrines and values, providing movement-wide communication, initiating fundraising, executing our shared mission, and more.

The CoE exercises final authority (that is, the right and responsibility to make binding decisions on certain limited matters outlined in BCO-8.5), while the LT exercises significant denominational leadership (that is, they have a real impact on the direction and day-to-day operation of our union as they carry out the responsibilities outlined in BCO-11.3).

In our polity, God-given authority comes to elderships who then delegate certain responsibilities and prerogatives, thereby authorizing and empowering extra-local leaders (including the LT and RLs) to carry out various tasks. The CoE and regional assemblies have authority over who occupies these positions, and have means for removing or redirecting them, but we value, deploy, and follow the leadership of these men.

In summary, we value the oversight of local elderships and the CoE as well as the releasing of our most gifted leaders to carry out extra-local functions that advance our common mission. We need the flexibility and gifting of our LT to influence our churches, respond to crises, and explore and act on mission opportunities. And we need the wisdom and participation of our elders and elderships in their Regional Assemblies of Elders (RAEs), the CoE, and in various committees. It is only through the combined efforts of our LT and elders that SG will continue to thrive.

Boundaries for Extra-Local Leadership

While the Council of Elders has created a BCO that gives Leadership Team members and Regional Leaders wide latitude to lead, they have also wisely built in boundaries for these leaders. The structure of our polity places limits on the actions extra-local leaders can take, locates authority in bodies such

as the CoE and RAEs, places real responsibility and influence in the hands of various committees and in CoE delegates from each church, and provides accountability for extra-local leaders. These factors strengthen our union and create numerous protections from unhealthy leadership.

First, local elders govern their own affairs.

BCO-1.4 says “The elders of each local church have sole responsibility to govern its affairs under the Lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture.” Local elders rather than extra-local leaders are responsible to oversee the flock entrusted to their care (BCO-2.1). Extra-local leaders cannot make decisions on any matters of local governance, nor can they give binding mandates to a local church.

Second, significant authority and influence is invested in each RAE.

“After the local church, the entire Regional Assembly of Elders is the primary place of support, care, accountability, and cooperation in mission for each church” (BCO-6.1.2). Regional Leaders are appointed by the RAE, occupy no higher office, and are accountable to the entire regional assembly for their activities. Our polity includes decentralized authority, in which the RAE and its committees have responsibility within the region for church planting (and church adoptions), ordination, and adjudication. Regional elders also control their own budgets, thus determining things like RL expenditures, church plant support, and support for global initiatives. Members of the LT do not have the freedom to carry out those authoritative functions given to regional assemblies. They cannot direct regional funds, appoint RLs, affirm or deny ordinations, discipline elders, or censure churches.

Third, participation in SG is strictly voluntary.

Other than adherence to the SG *Statement of Faith* and BCO (including the Partnership Agreement), local churches and their elders are not required to and cannot be forced to participate in any SG activity or initiatives. Each SG church is independently constituted, its elders have the right to peacefully withdraw from our union, and the denomination and its leaders have no legal or ecclesiastical rights to the assets of any local church.

Fourth, our representative government gives each eldership a vote in the CoE.

This participation in the CoE gives SG churches and elders significant say in the overall affairs of the partnership. The *Statement of Faith*, the BCO, and the Partnership Agreement can only be amended by the CoE. Furthermore, CoE procedures assure that each council delegate has a voice in debate regarding any and every proposed amendment to the BCO.

The CoE votes to appoint members of key committees within SG including the Executive Committee (EC), the Polity Committee, and the Theology Committee. They also vote to appoint the Executive Director of the LT whose extra-local leadership, including the formation of the LT, has considerable influence on the day-to-day conduct of SG as well as the outworking of our partnership. The SG budget is approved by the CoE, and they could, if necessary, send the budget back to the LT and EC for desired changes. The BCO also provides for a specified minority of the CoE to call special meetings of the Council.

None of the decisions that require a vote of the CoE can be made by the LT. The LT cannot alter ordination standards, change the BCO or the *Statement of Faith*, appoint EC members, call a special meeting of the CoE, etc.

Fifth, the CoE is the highest extra-local authority in our union, and possesses unique authority.

The CoE is the only body in SG that can create binding mandates, prohibitions, and doctrines that must be followed by every church, leader, or elder in SGC. The LT does not possess this authority.

Sixth, those extra-local leaders who are elders are accountable in the ways described in Sections 2 and 11 of the BCO.

The Executive Director must be an elder in a local church (BCO-11.4.1), and the polity envisions most members of the LT being elders in a local church. As such, they are accountable first and foremost to God (BCO-2.7.1), and they perform their duties in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will return to judge and to commend. There is also accountability in the ordination process (BCO-2.7.2), a local plurality of elders who watch each

others' lives (BCO-2.7.3), and the local congregation (BCO-2.7.4). The BCO also specifies ways every SG elder is accountable to the other elders in their region and ultimately to all the elders in SG.

Seventh, the Executive Committee oversees the LT on behalf of the CoE.

Specifically, the EC is “to insure that the Leadership Team and its officers are acting in accordance with the mission and core values of the Sovereign Grace churches” (BCO-10.1.3.1), “to appoint and evaluate the Leadership Team” (BCO-10.1.3.2),³ and, “to determine the responsibilities of the Leadership Team” (BCO-10.1.3.5), giving direction to the job descriptions and decisions of the LT if necessary. Additionally, “Except for the Executive Director, any member of the Leadership Team for Director may be terminated from his position by a majority vote of the Executive Committee” (BCO-11.4.2).

In addition, the LT is directed to “provide leadership *in cooperation with* [emphasis added] the Executive Committee in situations when urgent communication or action is necessary to the local churches of Sovereign Grace” (BCO-11.3.4.8).

Eighth, the Leadership Team leads in plurality.

The BCO states that leadership involves genuine plurality, both locally and extra-locally. There is no one man calling the shots, to whom everyone else is expected to defer, and there are no important decisions made by individuals in isolation. BCO-11.4.1.6 requires the Executive Director to promote plurality on the LT. In summary, there are significant boundaries for extra-local leadership that are built into our polity. Their reach into churches is limited, their appointment and accountability is structured, and they cannot be “empowered with any authority already allocated in the *Book of Church Order*” (BCO-11.4.4.3).

Responses to Extra-local Leadership

An understanding of the value, responsibilities, boundaries, and accountability of extra-local leadership leads us to the important topic of how churches

3. This includes an annual evaluation and ongoing assessment of the Executive Director. The Executive Director also receives local eldership evaluation/affirmation for each LT member.

and pastors should respond to extra-local leadership within Sovereign Grace Churches. Though the LT and RLs do not have authority to require a church or elder to conform to a particular direction of ministry in their own church, they are charged and empowered to give direction to our partnership in the fulfillment of our joint mission, which depends on the active support of our individual churches. Thus, the long-term health and fruit of our ecclesiastical union depends upon a willingness to follow the direction of our chosen leaders whenever possible.

Followership is as essential to our mission as is leadership, since we cannot have one without the other, and we cannot have effective mission and spiritual health without both. Our churches and pastors should be willing to follow chosen and godly leadership, given the following:

1. Our shared conviction that God has gifted certain men to lead us extra-locally;
2. The effectiveness of pursuing our mission in unity rather than experiencing the gridlock of pursuing individual preferences;
3. The boundaries for extra-local leaders that limit authority, provide accountability, and create protections from unhealthy leadership;
4. Our trust in God's providence over decisions we feel are less than perfect.

This type of followership requires faith, patience, and humility, and does not allow for each elder or church to insist on their own way for our partnership, even in times of difficulty or when controversial decisions are necessary. This willingness to follow does distinguish our denomination from an alternative polity—a polity in which the governing body gives itself responsibility for both governance and leadership by representative council.

Sovereign Grace Churches practice a polity in which the body with ultimate governing authority limits the expression of that authority and instead authorizes gifted men to provide leadership which each member church intends to receive and follow in good faith, while protected by the structures and mandates of the BCO.

The godly response to leadership in this polity may be organized into three main categories: *active support, gracious deference, and peaceful separation.*

Active Support

The first category of response is active support. Every Sovereign Grace pastor, by virtue of their partnership agreement and their trust in the representative processes of selection and oversight of leaders, should intend to make this the normal response to leaders in Sovereign Grace. This support will be most effective if characterized by our historical pattern of celebrating evidences of grace and practicing gratefulness and encouragement. We are all strengthened in our mutual partnership when active support has a tone of joy in light of God's love for his people, of peace in light of God's sovereignty, and of appreciation in light of the fact that Sovereign Grace leaders serve for the good of churches and the advance of the gospel.

Active support will certainly include giving advice or counsel as we have opportunity and should not be understood as unanimity of perspective on any one issue or decision. It should also be noted that though voices of dissent are a normal part of a healthy partnership, dissent is not a value in and of itself, to be pursued for its own sake. Passive participation should likewise be rejected unless there are strong reasons of disagreement or conscience that require it. Active support finds its biblical basis in the New Testament churches which are commended for their humble sacrifice for the sake of the broader mission, their acknowledgement of their need for counsel from extra-local leaders, and their decision to send leaders and servants in order to plant and build other churches.

Gracious Deference

The second category of response is gracious deference. Disagreement with a particular decision is a normal aspect of life in any partnership. In most cases, these disagreements will not be in matters of conscience and will not result in incompatibility, but will require deferring to the decision or direction of those chosen to lead the partnership. Before and after a decision is made, there is a place for appeals both formally and informally. There are also additional recourses in the BCO in various situations. None of these should be viewed as divisive as long as they are practiced in good faith. However, once necessary

appeals have been made, churches should commit to communicating about the decision in a way that honors the character and intentions of those making it and those supporting it.

When a church or eldership strongly disagrees with the leadership direction of Sovereign Grace and when no additional informal or formal appeal can be made, those elders may even deem it necessary to inform their church of their disagreement, again showing care to describe others in the most gracious light and to lead their church in godly speech. Such a church announcement should not be considered divisive or slanderous, as long as the church demonstrates a gracious and respectful dissent from this particular decision or direction.

When a church or eldership strongly disagrees with the leadership direction of SG the elders may also find they need to refrain from certain activities within our union. This should be done carefully and soberly, taking pains to not diminish the strength of our union, to not insist on particular agendas, to not unwittingly create a partisan atmosphere, and to not fail to fulfill the requirements of our BCO. Those who graciously defer to decisions while appropriately expressing dissent should be affirmed by the Sovereign Grace family with all respect, grace, and affection.

Peaceful Separation

The final category of response is peaceful separation. As our BCO states, “We are an ecclesiastical union. No separation of such a union should be taken lightly or unadvisedly, but soberly, carefully, and only in light of strong reasons of conscience or compatibility, and then only after earnest efforts have been made to preserve our unity in the Spirit” (BCO-13.1.1; cf. BCO-1.10). When decisions are made that reveal substantial disagreement between a local eldership and the direction of Sovereign Grace, there may be a need for that church to peacefully withdraw their membership from Sovereign Grace Churches. Each church considering this course should ensure that this action is not taken due to a personal offense with another member church or individual within Sovereign Grace. They should also consider whether a course of gracious deference is a reasonable alternative to departure.

However, when a church finds that even passive participation in Sovereign Grace strikes at their conscience they may have no choice but to withdraw. Likewise, a church may notice over the course of some time that ongoing disagreements of direction or ministry priorities in Sovereign Grace reveal a fundamental incompatibility. In this case partnership can be more a source of debate than of joy, of disagreement than active support. When either conscience or incompatibility leads a church to the difficult but painful decision of separation, they should do so with faith, grace, and humility, entrusting their brother pastors to the grace of the Lord both privately and publicly, and committing to honor their character both during and after the departure.

According to the BCO, the region of a departing church has the responsibility to “commend, comment upon, or censure the local church’s departure” (BCO-13.2.8). Commendation should be freely given to those who depart in peace and honor, comment should be utilized when the ongoing health of the departing church or the region necessitate additional communication, and censure should be reserved for those who depart due to heterodoxy or scandalous sin, or who have actively slandered or divided the health of the partnership.

Honorable departures will be a normal, though hopefully infrequent, experience in our family of churches. We must not create the sense that to leave Sovereign Grace indicates some level of failure. We are but a small and imperfect part of all that God is doing in his church. Every peaceful separation of a church should result in a fresh reminder of our broader unity in Christ, our confidence in his promise to build his church, and our shared hope in the full and visible union of all true churches when the Lord returns.

In all of these responses, Sovereign Grace churches and pastors should keep their eyes on the Lord and their hearts full of the promises of his grace, knowing that God directs all our ways and will be faithful to lead us according to his own wisdom and love. We should seek to do all we possibly can to actively support the leaders among us with grace and gratefulness, and do all in our power to support our shared mission of planting and building faithful churches for the Lord. And, we should celebrate that our future is not ultimately dependent on the decisions of our leaders or the responses of our pastors and churches,

but on the unchangeable character of our God of all grace.

Conclusion

For the sake of our unity and our joy, we should all strive to appreciate the blessing of gifted and commissioned extra-local leaders, and should be eager to value and follow their leadership. Likewise, we should all strive to appreciate the ways our polity decentralizes authority and gives voice to each eldership, and should value the blessings that have come to us through a representative government.

We all have a crucial role to play in the health of our partnership, and each one of us will have an impact on our ecclesiastical union, for better or for worse. We can all do our part by continuing to hold fast to the gospel, faithfully serving our own congregations, eagerly participating in RAE's and the CoE, supporting extra-local leaders, treating fellow-elders throughout Sovereign Grace with charity and honor, and continuing to work together to plant and strengthen churches for the glory of God.

The Lord loves his church, and he has good things in store for us as a union of churches. We are ordinary pastors, but we have an extraordinary Savior. We are jars of clay, but we have a priceless treasure in the gospel. We are weak in ourselves, but strong in the Lord. As we press on together in our mission, may God continue to deepen our unity, fill us with joy and thanksgiving, and increase our passion to make Christ known in all the earth.