

Case Study

Church Name: FBC Fulton **Pastor's Name:** Stephen Cavness **City/Town:** Fulton

What were your motivations in making this transition? Transition came about as a result of deacons and other church members asking questions during a 2020 sermon series on the pastoral epistles. Obviously, “elder/ elders” comes up repeatedly in 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus. I gave brief explanations as they came up in the sermon texts. In deacon’s meetings and one on one conversations, people had more questions about what the differences are between a pastor and an elder, why we use the language we do, and why they never hear of Baptists having elders- usually only Presbyterians and Church of Christ. Also questions regarding the nearly 100% NT use of elders in the plural, and why, if plurality is assumed in the NT, they only have ever known a single pastor model.

I did not have an agenda to transition FBC to an elder plurality. Personally, my view was that it would probably be a better model than single pastor, but I did not see it as a “sin” issue and was not looking to find an opportunity to change our polity. But the people were eager to ask questions and learn.

What steps did you take in the process? During the aforementioned sermon series, the deacon body asked if I would be willing to answer their questions during a monthly mtg. For the next 2 years, nearly every monthly deacon’s mtg became an impromptu “Q&A” session re: elders. They also asked me to provide resources for them to consider (books, articles, etc.). I also brought in a guest speaker who was on an elder body at an SBC church so they could ask him questions.

After those 2 years, the deacon body was unanimous to bring it to the whole church for consideration. So we then took another year of going through the same process with the whole church. We had a few guest speakers come (pastors/elders in SBC churches) who could speak to their experiences, the history of elders in baptist churches, etc.

We also had a few open mic/town hall opportunities for people to ask questions and I taught specifically on the topic a handful of times. We also made resources available (books, articles, videos, etc.)

After that year (which was 3 yrs. total) the church voted by 95% to begin a transition to a plurality of elders. Since then we have been updating the by-laws and I have taught on the role and qualification of elders a couple of times. We anticipate selecting additional elder(s) this fall, Lord willing.

What challenges or hurdles did you face? No major obstacles other than overcoming ignorance (in the true sense- not a pejorative) as to what the Bible says about elders and the history of elders in Baptist history. People just didn’t know what they didn’t know. But once we took the time (slow, intentional) people understood and embraced it for the most part. Some were still a bit uncertain because it was unfamiliar, but they couldn’t argue with the evidence they had been presented with.

What were the benefits of this transition? Still in process- but one immediate benefit was that it prompted people to be in the word more. It has increased an awareness of and appreciation for biblical

authority *and* sufficiency. It has opened many eyes that “the way we have always done it” is not only an unwise ministry philosophy, but also depends on how far back “always” actually is.