

**Discuss:**

The Minister of the Word doesn't have all the gifts. In his work in the congregation he needs the Elders to share with him, using their gifts, too. The Elders don't have all the gifts, either. Ministers and Elders together need to "prepare God's people for works of service". Then, as all the gifts are released, the Body will begin to fulfil the mission given to us.

- How can we best help one another in this?

# 1. Mission and Eldership

Bible References: Matthew 28.16-20; Luke 24.45-59; Acts 14.22-23; Ephesians 4.11-16.

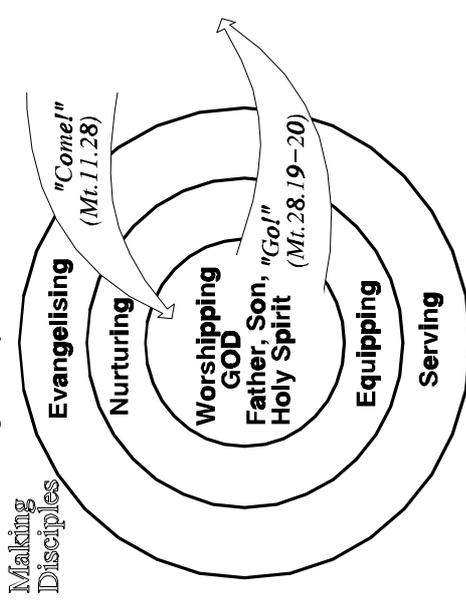
Before we talk about eldership, we need to understand what the church is and what its mission is in this world. Literally, the Church (*Gk. ekklesia*) are the "called-out" ones – the people who have believed the good news of salvation in Christ, are growing in grace and together have become his "body", the means by which he continues to do his will in this world. So there are always two main aspects to the life of the Church – relationship with Christ and with one another which makes us his Body and the doing of his will.

In a previous Parish we reached a point of needing to examine carefully our youth and children's ministry. It was not just a matter of needing to fill a leadership shortage – though that did exist! The time seemed ripe to ask, "What is the Church here for? What is our mission as a whole Body? and what form should our youth and children's ministry take within the total mission of the Body?" Big frightening questions! And about fifty people came along to consider them together! That was the context in which the graphic representation of our mission first appeared. The question, then as now, was not for each person or organisation to describe and justify some present activity, but for us all to say, "Lord, what is your task for us? and how should we be doing it today?"

## Mission

The life of the Body centres on God himself – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So – **worship** is our central activity.

The task of the Body is to **make disciples** – the "fishers of men" bit! The Head still wants "to seek and to save what was lost". But it's not just a matter of gathering them in. They are to become new characters in Christ, gifted by the Holy Spirit to take their place within the Body, part of the means of fulfilling the mission! People outside the Church need to hear our loving Lord calling to them, "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will*



give you rest” (Matthew 11.28). They experience this in the caring **service** of God’s people. And they hear it when the good news – of Christ, forgiveness, salvation, new life – is shared with them (**evangelising**) and they have the opportunity to respond to Christ by faith. They have begun to “come” and now continue to need love and **nurture** so that faith will grow, so that spiritual gifts will be discovered, so that Christian character will be unfolded.

They will be gathered into the worship of God. But nurturing doesn’t end there, for being part of the Body commits us to the mission. Jesus didn’t say, “Come and be comfortable!” In fact, after inviting the people to come to him, he said, “*Take my yoke upon you and learn from me...*” (Matthew 11.29). A yoke is a means of carrying a burden. It suggests that the Lord has work for us to do! The same Lord who said “**Come!**” also says “**Go!**” (Matthew 28.19).

Sometimes we have assumed that the minister (plus a few helpers) are meant to do all the evangelising, nurturing and serving for us! But Paul, writing to the Ephesians, emphasised that the purpose of special ministries within the Body is “*to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up*” (4.12).

So our evangelising needs to include **equipping** – getting ready to do something, discovering and developing gifts that will minister to others in the Body and reach out beyond the Body.

All of us – every one of us – is meant to be involved in some way in building up the Body, in making disciples. All of us, by the grace of God and according to the gifts he has given us, are on active **service**, prayerfully and lovingly ministering to others within the Body and reaching out to others beyond the Body. Our service is evangelism in practice – so vital before the right time comes to express the good news (the evangel) in words.

## Eldership

How does the role of an elder (and of a Minister of the Word!) fit into the commission our Lord has given us? Notice that I am linking the two roles closely together, as in fact the *Regulations* of the Uniting Church quite rightly do (compare 1 Peter 5.1). Think for a moment of Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. Many people have been converted along the way. What is to happen to them all? The two missionaries did all they could in “*strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to be true to the faith*” (Acts 14.22). But they went further – they “*appointed elders for them in each church, and with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust*” (v.23).

The elders in fact were the key spiritual leaders in the local area in ensuring the spiritual health and vital witness of the local Body of Christ. Thinking back to our graphic model – our Sunday Schools, youth and children’s groups, Christian education programme in schools, women’s fellowships, craft groups, men’s breakfasts, bowls clubs, home groups, prayer fellowships... may all have their

rightful place in the life and mission of the Church (though this should never be taken for granted). But the Elders (and the Ministers of the Word) have been entrusted by our Lord with the oversight of the whole life and mission of the Body.

Elders’ responsibility is “spiritual oversight”. Within the Church Council, Elders are to ensure the priority of “matters of spiritual oversight, pastoral care and the mission of the Church” (*Regulations* 3.1.10). Just reflect for a moment on the first two “duties and responsibilities” of Church Council (3.1.13) –  
**(a) sharing with the Minister(s) in mission and in the pastoral care and spiritual oversight of the Congregation;**  
 and  
**(b) nurturing members and adherents in their growth in grace.**

### Reflect for a moment –

- How do these “duties and responsibilities” relate to the Mission of the whole Body?
- What does this suggest about the role of Elder in the congregation?
- What are the priorities for our Elders? for our local Church Council?

Carefully consider the teaching of Paul in Ephesians 4.11-16. Note that, when Paul is writing about “*apostles, prophets, pastors and teachers*”, he is thinking about some spiritual gifts that have a key role in the functioning of the Body. He is not suggesting that they are superior gifts, or that the Body can function without all the other gifts. He is, however, pointing out that there are some gifts that help to ensure the healthy functioning of the Body.

When we read about the problems in the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 14.16-40, we realise that there had developed a severe problem in the area of the exercise of these important leadership gifts, so that worship was no longer done “*in a fitting and orderly way*”. But in Ephesians 4, Paul is not just concerned with worship but with the whole life and mission of the Body in relation to and in response to Christ the Head.

I believe that this speaks very much of the role of the Elder within the Body and of the role of Elders, in an organisational sense, within the orderly functioning of the Church Council. Paul sees these special gifts as having been given “*to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ*” (vv.12-13).