

September 23, 2015

Brothers and sisters of SGC,

This past Sunday night we had an important meeting for our church. Many topics were covered that will impact our church in the next year and in the years to follow. Because not all of you were able to be there, we wanted to communicate some of what was said in a letter.

One important issue we took up was that of a Senior Pastor transition. Three or four years ago in a family meeting, I talked about someday transitioning out of my role as Senior Pastor. Lord willing, that will actually happen in early 2016. As we have considered the matter and prayer, the elders are in complete unity in our belief that Daniel should be the next Senior Pastor. It is our hope and expectation that this will happen in January.

Remember that the Senior Pastor (or Lead Pastor or Lead Elder) is not a biblical office per se, but it is a role and responsibility that reflects how an eldership organizes itself. *The Book of Church Order of the Sovereign Grace Churches (BCO)* allows for such a role if an eldership so chooses. The BCO gives a list of responsibilities that are within the purview of a Sovereign Grace eldership to delegate to such a man in that role. This list includes providing doctrinal leadership through a prominent teaching role, leading the elders as a team, setting our agenda, coordinating eldership training, and deploying the elders on the team according to their spiritual gifts. The Senior Pastor thus serves the eldership by leading them.

For the last several years the elders have been gradually moving toward this transition. Much of this has gone unnoticed by the church, but among the eldership there has been a shifting of responsibilities. You're aware that Daniel has preached more than I have in the past year. Some of that was because of my extra-local responsibilities, but not completely. Daniel has become a very strong preacher and expositor of God's word. We believe that the church will be well served by Daniel's gifts. He is theologically strong, and in my opinion, this is a vitally important quality for a Senior Pastor.

Daniel has also been leading our elder meetings for the past 2-3 years and has done a great job. This arose fairly naturally. With my responsibilities within the Sovereign Grace Churches and with all of the travel involved, Daniel has been doing a lot of the management required to coordinate the work of the elders. If you worked in the office, you would have figured that out pretty quickly. He works well in the midst of leading a plurality of elders, which is critically important.

He has led well through the education and training of the newer bi-vocational elders, Mike and John. He is now helping Sam as he walks through a similar process. He was effective preparing them theologically so that they were able to pass the Sovereign Grace ordination exams. Now, Mike and John were pretty formidable on their own, but they would say Daniel was very helpful in their preparation.

Daniel has been on staff since 2000. He was in training for a couple of years and was ordained in 2004. He has grown in his abilities, and we who work with him have noted that progress. He has continued to grow, as you would expect, in character and wisdom and humility. As we have prayed about this and duly considered it, it seemed good to us and the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28) to designate him for the role of Senior Pastor.

It seems wise for you to know the thinking of the elders on this issue in some detail.

However, having said all of this, **we would like to invite your input on this decision.** Our *Book of Church Order* states,

*The precise nature of the role of the lead pastor may vary depending on the maturity of an eldership, the range of gifts on the team, the level of specialization on the team, etc. The elders decide who will serve in this capacity (with appropriate input from church members and guiding counsel from other leaders in Sovereign Grace). (BCO-7.1)*

We would welcome your input through the end of November. Over the next weeks we will communicate (1) some of the specifics about the role of the Senior Pastor, (2) make suggestions that will help you give input, and (3) give some understanding about how our plurality of elders functions at SGC. We will take up the matter for final consideration sometime in December as an eldership. The plan at this point is that the change would happen in January.

Thank you for hearing our hearts in this as we both explain our rationale and ask for your input. You can give that input—positive or negative—to your sphere pastor or to one of the other elders if Daniel is your sphere pastor. You can tell us personally or by email. We truly want to hear from you. We trust that you know that.

Related to this, another upcoming change is me going to part-time work as an elder. I'll be 67 on my next birthday, and I have decided to slow down a bit. Because I can draw Social Security, I am able to make less money from the church. I still want to minister as an elder, and I still want to serve in whatever way the elders want me to. So I'm not going anywhere. I'm just slowing down a bit. My weekly schedule will be about half of what it is now. We'll see if I can do that. I have slowed down some already in the past year, to about 50 hours a week on average. I plan to go to 25 hours on January 1<sup>st</sup>. As you could tell from our deacon commissioning last week, I only have two home groups to extend pastoral care to. My counseling hours will drop some. I will continue to preach and teach classes. And I hope to write some. I am pretty excited about this.

A strategic benefit from reducing my salary by half is that it allows us to bring John on full-time. And that is a gift to our church. God in his providence has given us a man who is uniquely gifted to carry both an administrative load and a pastoral one. And that is a difficult task. By the nature of the office, an administrator needs to be able to drop down into significant detail as well as delegating and deploying gifted folks for a variety of tasks. I am not that person. But John is! He is an excellent pastor and an excellent administrator. Him coming on full-time is going to be a real benefit. He has a real capacity to spin plates—and keep them spinning. John came on full-time at the beginning of September. Basically, about 40% of his job is administration and 60% is his elder work. We will have four months of overlap since I won't go part-time till January.

Another significant moment last Sunday came when Walt shared about the result of his one-year sabbatical. As you know, last summer Walt requested a leave of his duties as an elder to take a break from the rigor of the role. His service as a bi-vocational elder combined with a new career and the already present needs within his family all served to put in him a question about his capacities to juggle all of this. As he shared so well Sunday night, the year of prayer and reflection enabled him

to get a clearer sense of what the Lord has for him now. The result is that he is resigning as an elder at SGC.

Walt worked hard all five years he was actively serving as an elder. He took up responsibilities that were necessary even when they were not his expectation or preference. He brought helpful changes to the office and even served as a full-time administrator for some of his tenure. When money began to tighten at SGC he was quick to suggest that we consider bi-vocational elders and even suggested that he would serve well in that role. In all of this Walt showed himself to be a man of integrity and hard work.

Because there is nothing disqualifying in his character or gifting, Walt retains his ordination credentials within SG. This means he could serve again in our church or another SG church without needing to re-qualify as an elder. Further, so that no one suspects that there is more to the story, please know that Walt made this decision voluntarily (both the sabbatical and resignation) and that there is no moral issue or unresolved conflict with the elders that is contributing to this decision. He remains a committed member of the church and hopes to continue to serve in the area of evangelism as he has opportunity.

Finally, as you have no doubt observed, Sam Hodges continues to serve more prominently at SGC. His preaching gift has been a blessing to us all. His pastoral wisdom and doctrinal strength make an excellent contribution to our eldership. Further, his sense of practical theology (theology applied to daily life) is an area of unique ability for him. We look forward to seeing how this contributes to the life and health of our church in the future. Right now he continues to participate in elder's meetings, has a pastoral sphere (his own home group and Ben Garner's), and is working toward taking the ordination exams sometime in 2016.

This is a lot to process. As with all seasons of change, please pray for the elders. We need God's direction and blessing as we navigate through such times. Further, know that the elders love you deeply. God has given us a sober responsibility to care for you, the flock of God, and we hope to do this as well as we possibly can. Ask if you have any questions about what I've said. We are eager to answer any questions or concerns you have as much as we are able. We look forward to the next year co-laboring with you in the cause of Christ.

*I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. (Phil. 1:3-5)*

In Christ,  
Phil