

What Makes a Great *Spiritual Advisor* (aka. Overseer)?

WHAT DOES AN OVERSEER DO?

WHAT TYPES OF PEOPLE SHOULD A LEAD PASTOR BE LOOKING FOR?

WHAT ARE THE WAYS WE CAN DECREASE THE LIABILITIES OF BEING AN OVERSEER?

The advice on this page is designed for Overseers as conceived by the "Hybrid" model of church government. If you're not well acquainted with this model, I encourage you to check out some of the free resources on this site that explain it.

But as a quick reminder, the Hybrid is designed to encourage the following four entities to work together: (1). *Lead pastor (a.k.a., Apostolic Leader)*; (2). *Financial Trustee (aka, Director)*; (3). *Elder (aka. Deacon / staff)*; (4). *Overseer (aka, Bishop / Spiritual Advisor)*.

People often ask me: "Why are churches moving towards the term *spiritual advisor* instead of *overseer*?" Part of this is because, to some people, *overseer* automatically means "direct authority" over a local pastor (similar to bishops in traditional denominations). This has naturally led to a lot of misguided lawsuits.

You see, in the Hybrid model of governance, *overseers* generally do *not* have direct authority over local pastors. Indeed, they're more of a mentoring board. And they only have legal authority when called upon by the trustees or elders. Thus, to avoid being targeted by overly aggressive lawsuits, churches are moving towards the term *spiritual advisor* as it implicitly denotes a different type of relationship.¹ But it begs the question: What does this relationship actually look like? And ultimately, which types of people are ideal for this role?

According to our bylaws, Overseers play numerous roles:

- (1). **They coach the lead pastor, and/or staff or trustees on major decisions.** They are a consulting board. But they have *no legal authority unless there's a formal investigation activated by one of the internal boards* (Eg Trustees or Staff Elders).
- (2). **A few of them participate on the Compensation Committee** for the Lead Pastor which is often one-in-the-same as a "Care Committee" (a team that oversees sabbaticals, marriage counselling, travel schedules, etc).
- (3). **If there is a substantive accusation of misconduct, and they are activated by trustees or elders, they alone have full authority to discipline or exonerate the lead pastor.** Sheep should never be in a position to discipline or exonerate their shepherd (as they often lack objectivity and are prone to local politics). I.e., the Overseers play the role of an outside professional who can be activated as an independent mediator or judge in times of crisis.
- (4). **During pastoral searches, they have significantly more experience and credibility to help fill the pulpit, manage the emotions of the staff, and provide suitable candidates for the church.** Personally, I do not believe in lay-search committees (which usually lead to church plateaus and disasters in the vast majority of circumstances).

Thus, an ideal overseer is...

- (1). **AN ACTIVE SENIOR PASTOR:** Remember, this is a crisis board... people who will be leading amidst moral failures or staff rebellions. They need to have a resume that could withstand scrutiny. Overseers who aren't active senior pastors are often seen as less credible and qualified to make complex and controversial decisions. Ideally, you want overseers who pastor churches that are larger and more resourceful than

¹ For example, in the Catholic church, there has been a sad tradition of sexual misconduct among priests. But even more scandalous, there have been a lot of bishops who covered up this behavior – leading to lawsuits.

Obviously, independent churches do not have bishops – and even though we have overseers, they do not have direct authority over the pastors they oversee (unless officially called upon in crisis). Unfortunately, there are a lot of rookie law-firms who don't realize the distinction. They waste valuable time and money going after *overseers* who aren't legally culpable the same way that traditional denominational overseers are. Naturally, this creates a problem for independent churches. No one wants to be an overseer (for liability reasons). And when you decrease mentoring and accountability, it ironically increases moral failures! So, what are we to do? For starters, some say: "let's distance ourselves from direct-line flow-chart terms like bishop or overseers." Also, many "Spiritual advisors" are signing special indemnification clauses (little legal statements that clarify their roles and protect them from liability). Lastly, churches simply need to invest in legal counsel for when these misguided lawsuits occur.

your own church. You want your staff to “look up to” these churches. Yet, on the other hand, we also need to make sure your overseers are...

(2). ACCESSIBLE and AVAILABLE: You don’t really want “big name pastors” who will never be available to come preach at your church. Yes, a big-name pastor may add credibility to your church; but, the goal isn’t merely to get figurehead leaders who will lend their names (as if this were a book endorsement). Rather, you want people you could actually call in times of crisis and they would be willing to come. Thus, I would avoid pastors who are so successful that you would be scared to text them. Pick people who could come preach once every two years. You want your church and staff to feel familiar with them so that, if a crisis required their assistance, your leaders would have some sort of connection and/or trust.

(3). PICK SPIRITUAL PARENTS AND SIBLINGS - You want overseers who pastor churches of similar style and size. Be sure to pick at least one overseer who has a “Restoration Gift” (aka., the ability to pastor you through your toughest day). You want people who aren’t impressed by you (and can be honest with you); yet, are also people you would trust to literally take over your church in a time of crisis. Pick people to whom you could feel safe confessing your sins. They don’t need to be your weekly accountability partners; but, you want people you can be vulnerable around.

(4). MORE THAN THREE, LESS THAN SEVEN:

If you only have 2 overseers in a time of crisis, it could be easy for an internal board of trustees or elders to dismantle or undermine the authority of your overseeing board - which I’ve seen happen a lot over the years. Internal boards tend to lose all of their objectivity. They fall prone to internal fears and staff politics while overseers make big decisions. Thus, in times of crisis there’s often a tension between the “internal board,” the staff, and the overseeing board. Thus, when there are only 2 overseers, it’s way easier to undermine their authority by accusing them of being too detached or [fill in the blank]. However, when the overseer board is comprised of 3 or more dynamic senior pastors, it’s harder to pull an internal coup. On the other side, you probably wouldn’t want more than seven overseers as this would be a rather cumbersome number of relationships to maintain. Remember, you’ll want your church to have some sort of relationship with these overseers. Thus, it helps to pick people who could come preach. But, the maximum number isn’t as important as the minimum number.