

Serving as Elder

SESSION 3

What elders do

The *Book of Order* gives the session specific responsibilities. This part of the study will explore some of them.

Worship

It is the session's responsibility to see that worship is provided for the congregation. The Directory for Worship allows lots of latitude in Presbyterian worship but there are some distinguishing characteristics. Here are some of the things all Presbyterian worship has in common:

- God is the focus. Presbyterian worship speaks to the deepest human needs, but it always centers on God, not ourselves.
- Scripture is read and proclaimed, usually through a sermon, but often through music or other forms of expression.
- We pray.
- There is an opportunity to respond to God's Word. In addition to giving our tithes and offerings, we may also respond by offering God our lives and our spiritual gifts.

The pastor and the session share responsibility for worship. The session is in charge of:

- setting the time and place of worship
- the use of things like candles, flowers, banners, and so forth in the place of worship
- the selection of hymnals, Bibles, and other materials for the congregation to use in worship
- educating the members of the congregation about worship and encouraging them to participate

The pastor is responsible for:

- the selection of the Scripture lessons to be read
- the proclamation of the Word
- the prayers



Even though the session and the pastor are responsible for different aspects of worship, love and trust will dictate that they work together respectfully to prepare worship that glorifies God and builds up the people.

- the music that is sung
- the order of worship

Even though the session and the pastor are responsible for different aspects of worship, love and trust will dictate that they work together respectfully to prepare worship that glorifies God and builds up the people. They will include educators, musicians, and other church members in the planning of worship.

Education and Spiritual Formation

One of the greatest gifts Christ has given us for our spiritual journey is the fellowship of other believers. It is the responsibility of the session is to make sure the members of the church have opportunities to study Scripture, share their faith journeys, and practice living together as a community of faith. Elements of a good ministry of Christian education include:

- **Bible study.** Try to have a variety of classes. If a congregation is too small to have more than one Bible study at a time, offer different types of Bible study at different times of the year. Frequently offer an introduction to the Bible for those who are unfamiliar with Scripture and need a class where they won't feel embarrassed to ask the most basic questions. Offer classes on particular books of the Bible or on themes that run through Scripture such as forgiveness, love, or vocation.

- **The Christian life.** Church members want to know how their faith affects the way they live together in their families, how they can be good Christians in the work place, and how their faith informs the way they spend their money or cast their votes. We need to discuss these issues with other Christians and learn from one another.
- **Growing in spiritual practices.** Throughout the ages, Christians have learned many ways to be more open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Presbyterians are reclaiming some of those ancient practices even as we are learning new ways to be aware of God in our midst. There are many resources on forms of prayer, devotional Bible reading, Christian meditation, retreats, and other spiritual practices that can enhance the spiritual life of a congregation.
- **An educational program for children and youth.** The church school program for children and youth should be sensitive to the different stages of intellectual and emotional development we all go through. Christian education starts in the church nursery where infants and toddlers experience the love and acceptance of Christ from loving caregivers. Elementary school children are eager to master information about the Bible in doses they can handle. Teenagers are trying to figure out who they are and how they relate to peers and parents. A confirmation class can prepare teenagers to confirm their baptism and claim Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

The session should take care that the materials used in its educational ministry are carefully chosen. It is tempting to settle for a curriculum that looks easy to teach without taking time to evaluate its content. Elders need to recall those things discussed in session 1 of this study that distinguish us as Presbyterians and make sure the educational curriculum is not at odds with them. That does not mean a congregation should only use curriculum published by our denomination (although it provides many good resources). It does mean, however, that what is taught should be compatible with our confessions. The pastor and a certified Christian educator are two invaluable resources in helping choose curriculum.

Educational ministry does not have to be confined to Sunday morning. Many congregations have midweek classes at the church or small-group meetings in homes. A good educational ministry will help its participants grow in all areas of the Christian life. Educational ministry provides not only opportunities to learn through reading and discussion but also time to build friendships and support one another as well as a chance to serve others.

Ministries of Care and Compassion

The way a session fulfills its responsibility to care for the people will vary from congregation to congregation. In many small churches where all the members know one another, the pastor and session keep up with pastoral needs through word of mouth. Larger congregations may develop systems of pastoral care to ensure that no one slips through the cracks. Often a session will delegate primary responsibility for pastoral care to a board of deacons. Caring for one another is a characteristic of Christ's church, and the session needs to see that care and concern permeate every aspect of the congregation's life. Here are some ways elders can make sure members of their community are cared for:

- Keep a list of members and friends of the church who are confined to their homes due to age or illness. Work with the pastor to establish a schedule for phoning and visiting those who are on the list. The visits should not be done only by the pastor but also by elders, deacons, and church members.
- Set up a prayer chain. This is a group of people who have a special ministry of prayer. The members of the chain pray for those who are homebound, those who are sick, and those facing special needs.
- Make sure Sunday school teachers and leaders of other groups in the church always follow up when a member of their class or group misses a meeting. Sometimes a person's absence from church activities is an indication that they need special attention.
- Set up a team to review worship attendance. Some churches ask worshipers to sign attendance sheets, sometimes called Friendship Registers or the Ritual of Friendship. During the week, someone reviews the list and looks for changes in attendance patterns. Computer programs are available to assist with this task. No one should be allowed to miss four weeks of participation in the life of the church without being contacted. Otherwise they are likely to assume, "No one at that church cares about me."
- "Review the roll of members at least annually, and shall counsel with those who have neglected the responsibilities of membership" (G-5.0502). The session can approach this task as an opportunity to give compassionate attention to the spiritual life of church members and consider ways to care for those who have drifted away from the life of the church.

- Spend time at every session meeting praying for those who are in need of care.



Evangelism and Mission

One way the church fulfills its mission to proclaim the gospel of Christ is through evangelistic outreach into the community. One goal of a congregation's educational ministry should be to equip church members to talk about their faith confidently in appropriate contexts. The session should encourage members to invite others to worship and special events.

Sometimes the very strengths a congregation has in nurturing a caring community of faith are the weaknesses that keep it from welcoming visitors. Some of the strongest bonds people have are with fellow church members. Week after week they come before God together in worship. They share the depths of their souls in classes and small groups. They have supported one another in some of life's most significant moments. They have worked together on important projects. Whenever church members are together, they want to nurture those special relationships. New people who visit a church may feel that the bonds among the members are so strong there is no place for them. Many congregations that think of themselves as a friendly church are shocked when they hear that newcomers experience the congregation as cold and unfriendly. It is a challenge to nurture important relationships while reaching out to form new ones. The session needs to remind the congregation constantly that the friendships we have in church are gifts Christ gives us to proclaim the gospel. They strengthen us and support us so we can reach beyond ourselves. Elders can set a good example by being on the lookout for visitors and making a point of speaking to them. Some churches appoint designated greeters who know the congregation well and love to meet new people. When they meet newcomers, they introduce them to someone with whom they may have something in common. Whenever possible, session members should avoid doing church business at church social functions and concentrate instead on making newcomers feel welcome. Another way the session can make newcomers feel welcome is to examine carefully the order of worship, the church newsletter, and the church buildings to see if there are things that might make visitors feel excluded or unwelcome.

It is the responsibility of the session to notice what God is doing in the community and the world and discern the congregation's role in that work. In recent years, theologians and other church leaders have applied to the local church lessons learned by missionaries to foreign lands. When missionaries go to different cultures, they first learn about the culture. They learn the language so they can communicate. They learn the customs, how the people understand the world around them, and the things that are most important to them. Then they

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prayerfully discern how to present the gospel in ways that speak to that culture. They realize that Christ comes to different people in different ways. They do not adjust the truth of the gospel but they adjust the way it is presented in order that others can hear it.

Local churches can do the same thing. The culture around us is changing. A church that is sensitive to those changes and responds accordingly is called a *missional church*. That means that it sees all that it does as part of the mission of Christ to reach out to the world. A session is missional when it is continually asking how Christ can work through its congregation in order to spread the gospel. A missional church respects and values the traditions it has inherited but it understands that Christ gave us our traditions, our confessions, and our forms of worship as gifts to use in his work. A discerning session will know when those things that have worked well in the past have to be changed or even abandoned for the sake of the gospel.

The needs of the local community, not to mention the world, are so great that no one congregation can do everything that needs to be done. In his wisdom, Christ has established many congregations, each one with a unique set of gifts. The session should be clear about what makes its congregation unique and look for ways to use those special gifts in the service of Christ and the world. One of the benefits of the connectional polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is that we work together through presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly to identify places where the church is called to serve. We marshal our gifts to respond to those needs. In other words, elders do not have to reinvent the wheel every time they look for mission opportunities. They can unite with others to find their special calling.

Stewardship of God's Resources

God gives us everything we need to do the work to which we are called. The session is "to challenge the people of God with the privilege of responsible Christian stewardship of money and time and talents" (G-10.0102h). Talk about Christian stewardship should not be confined to one time of year known as the "stewardship season" or the "stewardship drive." We

need to be reminded continually that it is a privilege to give. The session can encourage this by developing an effective communications strategy that regularly tells the congregation how its gifts of money are bearing witness around the world. That strategy may include frequent “moments for mission” in the worship service, articles in the newsletter, special programs that feature missionaries and beneficiaries of the church’s benevolence, and testimonies throughout the year from church members about how their giving reflects their faith. Elders should lead the congregation in giving generously to the work of the church.

The session is responsible for determining how the offerings of the church are to be distributed. There should be clear and frequent communication about how the offerings are used. The *Book of Order* requires some financial standards, such as the annual appointment of a treasurer by the session, counting of offerings by at least two people or a fidelity bonded person, and an annual review of church finances by an auditor or other qualified person (G-10.0400).

It is up to the session to see that any church property is maintained, insured, and used properly. The property used by a congregation is held in trust for the whole denomination (G-8.0201), so buying, selling, or mortgaging property requires the approval of the presbytery in addition to the approval of the congregation.

Although pastors are responsible to the presbytery for the performance of their ministry, effective ministry cannot take place unless the session and the pastor establish a relationship of trust and accountability. The session, perhaps working through a personnel committee, should meet with the pastor at least annually to help set goals, review accomplishments, and identify areas for personal and professional growth. The session should encourage the pastor to take regular days off, use vacation time for renewal and refreshment, and take advantage of continuing education. Not only are those practices good for the pastor’s well-being, they benefit the ministry

of the congregation by having pastoral leadership that is fresh and renewed. The session should annually review compensation with the pastor and recommend any adjustments to the congregation.

There should be written personnel policies for employees of the congregation so all parties are clear about what is expected of each other. Good personnel policies spell out holidays and vacation policies, how spending is authorized, grievance procedures, and eligibility for benefits. There should also be a policy that covers sexual harassment. Most presbyteries have such policies that cover ministers, and sessions can adapt presbytery policies for the local church.

Keep the Big Picture in Focus

Strategic planning is an essential task of the session. It is easy to get caught up in the work of keeping the church running: something always needs to be done to the building, teachers need to be recruited, and worship needs to be prepared. It is up to the session to see that all those tasks are done well and in a way that honors God. But session members do not have to do all those tasks themselves. In fact, if the elders do all the work of the church, they deprive other members the privilege of using their gifts. Trust committees or task forces to carry out specific responsibilities. Elders need to make sure every group within the church is held accountable and reports to the session on its work, but elders should not do everything. They need to devote time and energy to the big picture. They need time to step back and evaluate the whole ministry of the church to make sure it is serving faithfully and effectively in a changing world.

About the Writer

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