

Serving as Elder

SESSION 2

How elders serve

Principles of Presbyterian Polity

The way a church governs itself is called its polity. Different branches of the church have different polities. For instance, the Roman Catholic Church has a hierarchical polity. To put it simply, the pope has authority over the bishops, the bishops have authority over the priests, and priests have authority over the life of the local parish. Some churches, like Baptists, have a congregational polity. In a congregational polity the members of the local church are responsible for all the decisions that affect their congregation. Congregations may join together to carry out mission or publish educational material, but each congregation can act independently of the others.

The polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is somewhere between hierarchical and congregational. We say we are a connectional church. Each congregation elects its governing board, the session. The local session has considerable autonomy in carrying out its responsibility for the ministry of the congregation. But each session is accountable to the presbytery, which consists of all the congregations in a geographical area. (There are a few nongeographic presbyteries that are made up of congregations of a particular racial ethnic group.) Through the presbytery, the congregations are responsible to each other for their witness to the gospel. Presbyteries are responsible to each other through synods and the General Assembly.

The Bible does not dictate how a church should order its life. Many forms of polity find justification in Scripture. Presbyterians draw from the New Testament model of elders coming together to discern God's will for the church. In fact, the word *Presbyterian* comes from the Greek word that means "elder" (*presbuteros*). (See Acts 15, which describes the Council of Jerusalem, where the apostles met to approve Paul's ministry to the Gentiles.)

The polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is spelled out in the *Book of Order*. Sometimes Presbyterians wish the *Book of Order* were simpler and went into less detail about what we should do. At other times, they wish it provided more specific guidance in making hard decisions. The *Book of Order* is not per-



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fect, and it is regularly amended, but it helps us work together in a way that is fair and democratic. It helps clarify who is responsible for what in the church's life and how we hold each other accountable. It prevents too much authority from being concentrated in one person or group. It helps us be faithful to the unique identity Christ has given us as Presbyterians while remaining open to the fresh winds of the Holy Spirit.

The basic principles of Presbyterian polity are spelled out in the first four chapters of the Form of Government in the *Book of Order*. Let's take a look at some of those principles in order to understand why Presbyterians do things the way we do.

Jesus Christ is head of the church (G-1.0100c). The reason we establish a polity is so we can serve Christ effectively. The church belongs to him. He is the one who called it into being, gave his life for it, and uses it as he pleases. As we saw in session 1, elders are finally responsible to Jesus as they lead God's people. "Insofar as Christ's will for the Church is set forth in Scripture, it is to be obeyed. In the worship and service of God and the government of the church, matters are to be ordered according to the Word by reason and sound judgment, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit."

The congregation is a local expression of the universal church (G-4.0102). When the local session makes a decision, it is not only acting on behalf of the congregation. It is acting on behalf of the whole church of Jesus Christ. Likewise, we cannot cut ourselves off from those parts of the church with which we disagree. The bond we share in Christ is stronger than all the things that divide us.

“The Church of Jesus Christ is the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all of humanity” (G-3.0200). When others look at a congregation, they should see reflected in its life together what God wants for all people. Whenever a session takes an action, it should consider, “Does this show the world what the reign of God looks like?”

Governing bodies make all decisions after opportunity for discussion and by a majority vote (G-4.0301e). This principle may sound obvious, but it reminds us that those who have been chosen by God through a democratic process are entrusted with the authority to lead the church as it follows Christ. There are safeguards in our polity to keep those leaders from making arbitrary decisions. Sometimes the session will delegate its authority to committees, task forces, or even individuals, but a decision about the life of the church that is made unilaterally by a pastor or by a small group meeting in the parking lot after worship carries no authority unless it has the backing of the properly constituted governing body.

There is one other important principle to keep in mind before we look at the way our polity works. “The organization [of the church] rests upon the fellowship and is not designed to work without trust and love” (G-7.0103). Our polity is just a tool for living together faithfully. Unlike civil law, which can coerce people to obey it, church government can’t force people to do anything. When we join the church, we submit ourselves to our brothers and sisters in Christ and trust they are doing their best to be faithful to our Lord. If the way we interact with one another does not reflect his love, then our polity does not work.

Elders at Work

The session is the governing body of a congregation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It consists of those church members who have been elected to a term of office (usually three years) as well as the installed pastor and associate pastors. The moderator of the session is the pastor, or, if the church does not have a pastor, a minister, elder, or lay pastor appointed by the presbytery. Every session elects an elder as clerk of session who is responsible for maintaining the minutes of session and congregational meetings and the rolls of the church.

The session as a community of faith. Time devoted to building a community of faith among session members pays rich dividends. The *Book of Order* (G-9.0301b) requires that all session meetings open and close with prayer. It is tempting, especially when there is a long agenda, for a session to meet that requirement with short, token prayers and leave it at that. But the more time a session invests in forming itself into a community of spiritual discernment, the more open it will be to the pres-

ence of the Holy Spirit to guide its work. Not surprisingly, when a session invests time in discerning the Holy Spirit, it finds that it accomplishes its work more effectively.

Many sessions get away together for a day or an overnight retreat that focuses on building a community of spiritual leaders. This is a time not for planning the session’s work but for sharing faith, studying Scripture, worshiping, and reflecting on their calling as spiritual leaders. It is a good idea to have this retreat around the time new elders are installed. Consider inviting someone other than the pastor to lead the retreat so he or she can take part in all the activities without having to focus on keeping the process moving.

It is helpful for session meetings to begin with worship that includes reflection on Scripture, singing, and a time of silence. Not only is worship the most important thing the church does, it helps the elders open themselves to the movement of the Holy Spirit as they lead the church. Set aside a few minutes for people to share joys and sorrows as well as pastoral concerns in the life of the church. When the session functions as the church in microcosm, not just as a board that transacts business, it can do a more faithful job of serving the Head of the church.

Session meetings. The *Book of Order* requires that session meetings be conducted in accordance with *Robert’s Rules of Order* (G-9.0302). These rules for conducting business should be seen as a tool to help the session make faithful decisions. Each session will adapt the use of *Robert’s Rules of Order* to fit its own style. They are especially helpful in keeping track of complex decisions that involve numerous amendments and substitutions. Sometimes governing bodies get caught up in trying to follow *Robert’s Rules* so precisely that they lose sight of the substance of the issue they are considering. There are times when other methods of decision making, such as reaching consensus, will be more appropriate. The value of *Robert’s Rules of Order* is that it provides a framework for making decisions that is agreed upon and accessible to all. It protects the rule of the majority and the rights of minorities.

Session members should receive an agenda before each meeting. This allows them to give prayerful preparation for the business they will transact. If possible, any recommendations from committees or other organizations that require session action should be distributed ahead of time. The better prepared elders are prior to a meeting, the better decisions they will make. If at all possible, session meetings should last no longer than one and one-half hours. Time is one of the most valuable assets God has given us, and elders should be good stewards of time when they meet. When elders regularly have to meet late into the night after a long day of work and family responsibilities, the church risks burning out its leaders. Care-



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denomination's constitution that have been approved by the General Assembly are considered for ratification.

Each session may determine its own procedure for selecting commissioners to the presbytery. It is preferable that presbytery commissioners serve for a term, such as one year or three years. If a session sends a different elder commissioner to every presbytery meeting, the commissioner is not familiar with the issues being decided or the discussions that may carry over from one presbytery meeting to the next.

Just as session members are to make their decisions based on prayerful discernment of Christ's will for the church, so are commissioners to the other governing bodies. Our polity is designed to allow the Holy Spirit to speak to governing bodies through their discussion and prayer. A session cannot instruct its commissioners to presbytery how to vote.

The session's relationship with the presbytery goes beyond sending commissioners to meetings. The committee on ministry is the unit of a presbytery with which sessions usually have the most interaction. At least once every three years representatives from the committee on ministry meet with the session to discuss the congregation's mission and ministry. (This is often called the triennial visit.) When a pastor leaves a church, the committee on ministry meets with the session to explain the procedures for calling a new pastor, helps the session find interim pastoral leadership, and works closely with the pastor nominating committee through the process of calling a pastor. If there is conflict within a congregation that the session cannot resolve, or if conflict arises between the pastor and the session, the committee on ministry works with the session and the pastor to establish peace and harmony.

Another unit of the presbytery that works closely with the session is the committee on preparation for ministry. This committee is charged with guiding the education and formation of those who are called to the ministry of the Word and Sacrament. Before the committee on preparation for ministry enters into a relationship with someone who feels called to ministry, it meets with the session of that person's church to review the session's responsibilities in preparing ministers. (The various steps in the process of preparing for ministry are detailed in chapter 14 of the Form of Government.) Sessions should consider providing financial support to members of the church who are preparing for ministry. One of the most important things a session can do for the health and future of the church is cultivate and identify those who may have the gifts for the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Most elders will not have the opportunity to serve as commissioners to a synod or the General Assembly, but they should keep up with what is going on in those governing bodies. Synods and the General Assembly represent the unity

ful preparation can make session meetings rewarding experiences that energize elders for service.

Preparing to serve. The session is responsible for providing training for new elders and deacons. It is a good idea to ask session members to receive training every time they are installed to a new term, even if they are already ordained. Officer training provides a good refresher in the basics of our theology and polity, plus it can update already ordained session members on current issues and procedures that may have changed since their previous service. Besides, it is helpful for new elders and deacons to have veteran officers in the class to share their experience. Good training helps new elders feel confident at their first meeting and equips them to serve more effectively. The pastor is an excellent resource to lead the training. Many presbyteries hold officer training events.

Learning does not stop once elders are installed on the session. Some sessions read a book together and set aside a few minutes at every meeting to discuss a chapter. When learning and spiritual growth are incorporated into the ongoing life of the session, it makes the experience of being an elder more rewarding.

Elders and the Broader Church

Elders are not only ordained to serve the congregation. They are also ordained to serve in the other governing bodies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The nonhierarchical nature of our polity is reflected in the fact that the membership of presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly consists of an equal number of ministers and elders. Every session sends at least one elder to presbytery meetings. Sessions of larger congregations send more, following the formula outlined in G-11.0101.

When the presbytery meets, elders and ministers from many congregations worship together. They learn about the work the church is doing and approve new initiatives for ministry. They examine candidates for ministry on their faith and knowledge of theology before approving them for ordination. Sometimes overtures from sessions regarding issues in the life of the church are discussed and acted on. Any changes to the

of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) at the regional and the national levels. They allow local congregations to participate in Christ's work on a much broader scale. They offer resources to enhance our worship and our educational ministry. Our pastors are prepared in seminaries that have covenant relations with them. Sometimes synods or the General Assembly make decisions that create controversy, and that controversy is reported in the media. Session members need to be prepared to interpret the work of other governing bodies to the members of their congregations. Session members can stay informed about their synods and the General Assembly through various denominational publications and Web sites. Special-interest groups in the church distribute a number of publications that advocate a particular point of view on important issues. Sometimes these organizations receive the names and addresses of session members and distribute them unso-

licited. These publications often provide good insights into the life of the church, but session members should make sure they are familiar with all sides of an issue. One of the vows asked at ordination is "Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?" (W-4.4003g). Peace, unity, and purity usually exist in creative tension. Sometimes we are tempted to pursue one to the detriment of the others. It is up to elders to lead the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in a way that builds up the body of Christ.

About the Writer

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