

Serving as Elder

SESSION 1

What is a Presbyterian elder?

Goal for the Session

Participants in this session will use discussion and reflective questions to help them to define the meaning of ordination and to state some of the key beliefs of Presbyterian elders.

Preparing for the Session

- Read the Participant Handouts for all three sessions in order to see what each session contains and to be aware of how these sessions connect with each other. Read all the Scripture passages and the references to the *Book of Order* included in the handouts.
- Distribute copies of the Participant Handouts before the meeting and ask participants to read the appropriate handout each week, write any questions in the margin, and bring the handout with them to the meeting.
- The Leader's Guide assumes it will take fifty-five minutes to complete this lesson.

Materials Needed

- Newsprint and markers, chalkboard and chalk, or dry-erase board and markers
- Several copies of the *Book of Order* for reference in case there are questions

Teaching Tips

- Feel free to adapt this guide to the needs of your leaders and any time restrictions you have. You may have covered some of this material in other educational settings, so adjust, expand, or eliminate materials to make the time helpful for your elders.
- No doubt you will know each participant better than the rest of the group, but it is wise to have some sort of introductory activity each time you gather. This adds a comfort level for those who do not know the group

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Prayer
- Being set aside
- Introduction of the group

EXPLORING

- The meaning of ordination
- What elders affirm
- Christ's church: an extended family
- Presbyterian identity

RESPONDING

- What elders believe
- Overview of confessions and creeds

CLOSING

- What we learned
- Prayer

as well as you do or for those people who have trouble remembering names. If you always have the participants share something connected to the lesson, you and they will also learn about each other in a more significant way.

- As people share their beliefs and experiences related to leadership and church functioning, listen carefully for differences in polity and beliefs that will need to be clarified. Allow plenty of time for discussion among the members of the group.
- In addition to the information learned, this time can be a group-building experience as church experiences and beliefs are shared.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Loving God, you have called us to exercise leadership in this congregation and on this session. We are grateful for your gifts and for your assurance that you will be our guide in this time of leadership. Be with us as we explore together the particular ways to live out our faith in this leadership role. **Amen.**

2. Being Set Aside

Invite participants to focus for a moment on the following two sentences from the “Ordained to Serve” section in the Participant Handout: “Ordination does not mean that those who are ordained are closer to God than other members of the church or that their service to Christ is somehow more important to the work of God’s reign. Every Christian is called to serve Christ, but those who are chosen for ordination have particular gifts that the Holy Spirit has given them to lead the church.”

Ask the participants to think of one word or phrase that describes what this “setting aside” to serve the church means to them.

3. Introduction of the Group

Invite participants to introduce themselves, giving their name, most current leadership role in the congregation, other denominations or religious experiences in their faith journey, and how they understand being “set aside” for leadership.

Exploring (20 minutes)

4. The Meaning of Ordination

Invite participants to talk in pairs about their understanding of the last paragraph of the section titled “Ordained to Serve.” What does it mean to serve and not to be served? How does that understanding determine the way an elder leads? Ask, “What is your understanding of the statement that the authority comes because elders serve in ‘the name of Christ?’”

The discussion should lead participants to understand that they are not called and ordained to this leadership role to lift up a particular agenda or because they are especially good but they are called to serve according to Christ’s will and with God’s guidance.

5. What Elders Affirm

Ask someone to read the sentence from the Participant Handout that begins, “Elders don’t give up their freedom of conscience . . .”

Discuss together what participants believe to be the boundaries that determine how elders lead. How does this connect with the *Book of Order* reference G-1.0301?

In this discussion, participants should come to understand that God is the guide for their actions and not the will of the congregation or their own will as individuals.

6. Christ’s Church: An Extended Family

In the second paragraph of the Participant Handout under “What Elders Believe” the handout says, “You might compare Christ’s church to an extended family. Within that large family are smaller families, each with its own way of being a family. Each individual family has its own customs.” Ask the group, “How has the experience of the previous denominations mentioned been different from this denomination and congregation in the ‘family customs?’” In the discussion people will probably mention ways to celebrate Communion and baptism, orders of worship, use of creeds and confessions, images for God, and translations of the Bible most often used.

7. Presbyterian Identity

In pairs discuss the following statements. “I am a Presbyterian because . . .” And “The family custom for our Presbyterian family most meaningful to me is . . .” Have each pair be ready to share briefly their answers.

Responding (20 minutes)

8. What Elders Believe

If the group consists of twelve people or fewer, divide them into three equal groups. Invite the group to look at the “What Elders Believe” section. Assign one of the following topics to each group: “Trust in Jesus Christ,” “The Role of Scripture,” and “The Confessions.” Ask them to read their section and be able to tell the total group about this belief and why this belief is significant to Presbyterians and to elders in particular. Note the group focusing on “The Confessions” needs to focus just on the first three paragraphs in that section.

9. Overview of Confessions and Creeds

Take five minutes and have the group read the material under the section “The Confessions” that begins, “The earliest confessions . . .” and ending at the “Conclusion” section. Ask people to circle specific beliefs mentioned and create a separate list of the beliefs that are most significant to them. Have them briefly discuss their lists in groups of three to four.

Closing (5 minutes)

10. What We Learned

Invite each person to share a word or phrase that indicates something he or she has learned about being an elder in this time together.

11. Prayer

Almighty and Sovereign God, we pray with deep thanksgiving for the people who have shaped the Presbyterian Church and our lives with their thinking, writing, and openness to your guidance. Be with us as we continue to learn what it means to serve in leadership in this church. May we learn to share our beliefs with others as we continue to grow in our understanding of faith. We pray in the name of your son, Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Teaching Alternatives

- Combine all three sessions to create a half-day retreat or a longer session together on an evening or weekend morning. Also, spend more time on sections of the study of particular interest to your group.
- In the introduction, ask participants to identify one way additional education times could strengthen their leadership skills. Create a list of the help needed and use this list to design additional times of enrichment for the elders.
- Use 1 Timothy 3:1–7 for a Bible study to help elders identify personal qualities of an elder in the early church. Combine the Scripture with a look at G-6.0303 for the qualities of an elder. Encourage participants to identify gifts they believe they have for this leadership role.
- If your group is larger than twelve people, when you use the section “What Elders Believe,” divide people into groups of three to four and assign the topics. Several groups will be discussing the same topics. The sharing time will take longer because of the increased number of groups, so plan accordingly.
- In G-2.0100 of the *Book of Order* we learn that the confessions tell the church members and the world who

and what the church is, what the church believes, and what the church resolves to do about its beliefs. Ask them also to identify at least one way your congregation lets members and the world know who and what the church is, what the church believes, and what it resolves to do about it.

- In the online version of the *Companion to the Constitution* (see Web site under “For More Information”) on page 80, there is a helpful article about “call.” Divide the group into six smaller groups and assign each of the types of call mentioned to a group. Ask them to read their section quickly and be able to tell the rest of the group about that sort of call. Then discuss what it means to them to be called into leadership.
- If you want to spend a little more time on the documents in the *Book of Confessions*, draw a timeline that connects church history, basic beliefs, and specific documents. Using this activity will add about fifteen minutes to the session. The necessary information comes from the “The Confessions” section in the Participant Handout.

Key Scriptures

Matthew 20:26–28

1 Timothy 3:1–7

About the Writer

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For More Information

To learn about the elder as spiritual leader see <http://www.pcusa.org/today/believe/2008/elders.htm>.

This is an online resource from Mission Presbytery that contains a great deal of helpful information: <http://www.mission-presbytery.org/downloads/Handbooks/WalmsleyHandbookforElders.pdf>.

The following Web site is the address of Elder William Winter at the National Gathering of Elders in August 2007 in Nashville, Tennessee: <http://www.pcusa.org/oga/perspectives/oct07/elder-as-leader.pdf>.

Information about the Order of Elders can be found here: <http://www.pcusa.org/pastorselders/aboutorder.htm>.

On pages 84–85 of the online version of the *Companion to the Constitution* found at <http://www.pcusa.org/oga/publications/constitution-companion.pdf>, there is a helpful chart about the similarities and differences in ordination for Ministers of Word and Sacrament, elders, and deacons.