

# Some Principles for How to be an Effective Elder in an Effective Session

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**A preliminary note for non-Presbyterian Elders:** Committees of all kinds tend to exhibit the same unhelpful behavior. This is because they are all made up of people. These Principles are written from the frame work of a church with a Presbyterian form of government. But keep reading. Even if you aren't a Presbyterian Session, even if you aren't in a church at all, if you work with people in decision making bodies there are some takeaways for you too.

All committees and boards tend to experience the same kinds of unhealthy behavior ...unnamed concerned people being brought to the discussion to add weight; after-meetings in the parking lot where people say what they really think; time wasted because committees want the whole body to do the work they should have done; inappropriate sharing to gather allies for a particular side; a fear of acting because of perceived negative fallout.

If you make decisions in any kind of group, we hope you find this helpful.

## **Remember who you are**

As an Elder, you are at the core of what we believe as a church. The Reformed Tradition, of which we are part, believes in strong groups, not strong individuals. The reason we historically reject the office of bishop isn't because we have an aversion to pointed hats. It's because we believe that unchecked power in the hands of any individual will sooner or later be abused. Our nation with its system of checks and balances is built on the same belief.

Remember, you don't have individual power -- only collective power! Elders sometimes get the impression that their role entitles them to get involved and make decisions, even personnel decisions, in every area of church life. They have no problem invading other Elder's "space." (I'm the Elder in charge of Christian Education and isn't everything we do as a church really Christian education or really mission or really stewardship or whatever.) Elders do have power but only as a member of Session in cooperation with the other Elders, They don't get to be soloists and need to be brought up short by other elders

When you attend a meeting and work in conjunction with the other elders, you are showing your belief in the priesthood of all believers. You have things to learn and you have things to contribute with the other leaders of the body of Christ where you serve.

Sometimes when a Session is facing a hard decision, one of the elders may suggest polling the congregation. That is usually a mistake. The congregation elected you as people of demonstrated wisdom and spiritual maturity. That means you have to do your job. If you do poll the congregation, ask questions where you genuinely need input after you've done your job and made the hard call like, "The Session has determined that it's time to go to two services. What times are best for you and your family?"

### **Be at the meetings and vote**

Elders are expected to enter the discussion at Session meetings. The congregation elected Elders to represent it which Elders cannot do if they remain silent. Silence is deceptive if Elders say things after the Session meeting that should have been said at the Session meeting. The truth spoken in the parking lot after the meeting is better spoken in the meeting itself.

If Elders are silent on any vote, their vote automatically goes to the winning side. For example, if 12 people are present for a meeting and the vote is eight 'for' and there are no votes 'against' the motion, then the vote is a unanimous vote in favor – although four members were silent. The only way a member can actually refrain from voting is to speak up to say, "I wish to be recorded as abstaining on this vote." The name of the Elder will be recorded in the minutes of the meeting as abstaining. However, a request to abstain must come before the Moderator has declared the results of the vote. If the Moderator has said, "motion passes," then it is too late to abstain. This is a Roberts Rules device to recognize that people who are to help decide should not and cannot avoid their responsibility by simply remaining silent.

### **Don't meet on the side:**

The Session may not meet without the Moderator (the Pastor). The Moderator or his or her designee must, by constitutional provision, be present for all meetings of the Session except for meetings (if needed) which will be moderated by pre-arrangement by a member of the Committee on Ministry.

### **Don't let your meetings get hijacked**

Session meetings are normally open meetings, meaning that members of the congregation may attend. However, they may not speak without asking for permission each time they wish to speak unless Session granted them privilege of the floor at the beginning of the meeting. They should hold that to a minimum so that Session meetings do not become town hall meetings. The only exceptions to this are:

1. Observers from the Board of Deacons if the Session has voted to grant observer privilege for the year.
2. Elders elect who are observing but who have not yet taken office.

If privacy is needed, the Session can go into Executive Session. Any member can say, "I move that we go into executive session." If passed, all visitors must leave the room, allowing the Session to discuss especially sensitive matters such as personnel issues.

### **Don't do other people's work:**

The Session should always resist doing Commission/Committee work. When a question or proposal comes up that relates to one Commission of the Session, the Session should refer the matter to the appropriate Commission and move onto the next item of business. The Commission then studies the matter and comes back to the Session saying it has dealt with the matter, or is prepared to make a recommendation to the Session. When the Session begins to discuss a matter that belongs to a Commission then the Session is caught doing Commission work and the Session will get bogged down.

There is a guiding distinction between the work of the Commissions and the work of the Session. Generally, the Session creates and monitors basic, overall church policy and avoids the 'nitty-gritty.' The details and the actions are left to the Commissions of the Session. The Chairperson of every commission should come to the Session with reports and recommendations. When Chairpersons ask a Session, "What do you think we should do about 'this or that'" that Chairperson is forcing the Session to do his or her Commission work. The only exception to this is when a Commission is dealing with an issue that has the potential to affect the peace and unity of the church and the Chairperson of the Commission desires Session input.

### **Be appropriate with your sharing:**

No Elder should ever tell anyone anything that they cannot tell to everyone in the congregation whether the Session is in an executive session or not.

It is always inappropriate to tell people who voted for or against motions at the Session meetings – or to report who said what at Session meetings. Once the Session decides any issue it makes no difference who made a motion, or who said what in the debate, or who voted one way or another. Once the action is taken, it becomes the action of the whole Session, even if someone voted against it. Your job as an elder does not include gathering allies in the congregation to pressure the other elders into doing it your way.

If an Elder feels that the Session or Moderator has acted improperly, the proper place to lodge a protest is with the Presbytery – not with the congregation.

It is not inappropriate to tell people outside of Session actions Session has taken. In fact, the congregation should be regularly informed about the actions of Session.

## **Be willing to lose people -- You'll lose far fewer**

There are times when a Session is unwilling to take an action they know is important for the health and outreach of a congregation because the Session is fearful that some powerful group or individual in the church will be offended and may even stop coming to worship. For example: "We really need to repaint the church nursery but the Miller family's mother painted those cute kittens and ducks on the wall in 1974 and if we repaint, the Millers will be offended. You know they're big givers." When a Session acts this way it is giving individuals or unelected power groups veto power over the Session actions. The Session has ceased to function as the Session. It is much healthier for the elders to do the job they are called by God and the congregation to do. The result is a much healthier church overall and healthy churches tend to keep and hold on to people who value health.

## **Don't empower phantom voices**

According to I Timothy 5:19 it is always inappropriate to go to any elder or Pastor with the complaints of "one or more persons who have requested that they not be identified." This is a way for a person to claim more weight for their position than is warranted and easily leads to exaggeration. The essence of any witness is that we identify them so that not only their words may be known but also that their words are placed in the proper context. Following 1 Timothy 5: 19, the Elder or Pastor should not receive such anonymous input.

## **Attend Presbytery**

The congregation is part of the Presbytery. The meetings of the Presbytery are made up of every minister member of the Presbytery and a lay Elder from each congregation within the bounds of the Presbytery. Collectively, these people are the 'Bishop' for the area. They make decisions that affect (and sometimes bind) the congregations and the ministers within the bounds of the Presbytery of jurisdiction. While the congregation elects the Elders, the Book of Order states that the Session is responsible to the Presbytery for the wise governance of the church.

The ministers are never members of their congregations. They do not represent the congregations at the meetings of the Presbytery. They represent themselves in the Presbytery. It is the role of the lay Elders to represent the interests of their congregations. It is a representative form of democracy.

## **Organize for Efficiency and Sharing Power**

A Commission (sometimes called a Ministry Team) is like a committee except that it is formed with full power to act without having to come back to its forming group for approval for its actions. It is fully 'commissioned' to study, decide and act as it sees fit. A congregation rarely uses, organizes, or appoints a commission. However, that

is the normal mode for many Sessions.

The Session appoints the Chairperson of each Commission (each of which must be a member of the Session) and any other members of Session that may be on each Commission. The Chairperson of each Commission then appoints other members of the congregation to be on the Commission with him or her. The chairperson may seek the advice of the Pastor, but he or she has full power to appoint.

The overall purpose of the commission system is to place the “programming power” in the Commissions and to prevent the Session from functioning as a committee of the whole – thus allowing both Session and the Commissions to fulfill their purpose. Participation in the Commissions is also a key opportunity for Elders to exercise the spiritual oversight and care that are central to their ministry. These should be more than business meetings. They should also be a place where lives are touched and hurts and needs shared.

A Commission has the power to act in an area of responsibility through authority derived from the Session. Unlike a committee, a Commission does not need to report every action to the Session for further discussion and decision.

1. Each Commission should elect a secretary to take complete minutes. Since a Commission works with derived authority, its minutes are a part of the records of the Session.
2. Commission secretaries will prepare a summary of Commission actions and distribute a copy to each Elder no later than the morning of the Sunday before the Session meeting.
3. The summary should include a list of items discussed, actions taken, and highlight any dates or planned events.
4. Elders wanting further information on an item listed in the summary should contact the Chairperson of the Commission before the Session meeting.
5. Commissions are free to designate budget categories, shift funds from one category to another and expend funds as long as the total expended does not exceed the budget for the year.
6. Before the discussion of the budget at the Session meeting, each Commission will communicate to the Chairperson of the Stewardship Commission its budget request for the next year.
7. Each Commission and Committee of Session will give a full report to the Session per established schedule. Items that need to be dealt with by the Session before this scheduled report time may be brought to the Session at the appropriate point in the agenda designated “other Commission business.”

The Pastor of a church has ex officio membership on every commission, committee or task force of the church except a pastor or associate pastor nominating committee where appropriate participation is defined by the Presbytery Committee on Ministry. Ex officio status always implies “with vote” unless the term “ex officio without vote” is explicitly used. A particular Commission or group in the church cannot on its own add “without vote.” That limiting provision would need to be established in particular instances in the bylaws of a corporation as in the Nominating Committee.

### **Let Your Pastor Handle the Staff**

If there is more than one minister on the staff the Pastor may delegate an Associate Pastor to represent the Pastor with vote on any one or more Commission, Committee or Task Force. Anyone who has the power to delegate also has the power to un-delegate. Neither Session nor any Commission can designate which member of the staff will relate to any particular commission or committee. All staff assignments are the prerogative of the Head of Staff. No member of the staff (secretary, organist, choir director, custodian, etc.) should be invited to be on any Commission that in any way relates to their area of paid involvement. It is the responsibility of the Head of Staff Pastor to assign and/or delegate members of the staff to relate to particular Commissions.

### **Don't go Congregational on the budget**

The Session adopts the budget. The congregation does not. The congregation only sets the salary and contractual terms for any Presbytery-installed pastor. A budget is a policy. In effect, by adopting an annual budget, the Session is saying that the policy for the year is that it will spend specific amounts on each of the areas of work. Church manager(s), Commissions and Committees can spend up to the maximum budgeted for their particular area without Session approval. After that, Session approval is needed for each expenditure. For example, if the budget is a total of \$17,250 for the whole category of Facilities, up to that amount can be spent by Facilities. Once that \$17,250 is gone any additional expense has to have Session approval (or the Session can adjust the budget to enlarge the budget for Facilities).

### **Use your Personnel Process Wisely**

The Personnel Commission has a very special role in relationship to the Pastor and the non-ordained staff. While the Commission may elect to review any staff member as a part of the normal review procedures, the day to day direction of the staff is the responsibility of the Pastor as Head of Staff. It is inappropriate for members of the Personnel Commission to give job direction to staff members apart from the normal review procedures. The normal review of any non-ordained staff members is normally done in conjunction with the Pastor or his or her designee who serves as the staff member's direct supervisor.

In the Presbyterian form of government, the Session (or Session through the Personnel Commission) is not the 'boss' of the Pastor or Pastors. The Committee on Ministry of the Presbytery fills this role.

However, the Committee on Ministry effectively assigns a portion of this review to the Session of the local church through mandating regular personnel reviews of ordained staff to be carried out by the Session. If the pastor(s) are not fulfilling the responsibilities of their role(s), the Personnel Commission may and should visit with the Pastors to suggest improvement. Any formal review that is less than satisfactory is to be communicated to the Committee on Ministry.

If the problems continue, the Personnel Commission should request that the Session ask that representatives of the Presbytery Committee on Ministry visit with the Session to discuss the problem. The Committee on Ministry may appoint another pastor member of the Presbytery to moderate such a meeting and the pastor need not be present in order to facilitate full and open discussion. Other concerned pastors and members of the church staff may be invited to such a meeting to share their specific concerns with the representatives of the Committee on Ministry but may only be present at the meeting for such "testimony" and any follow-up questions presented by the Committee on Ministry.

### **Be Biblical in Your Personnel Approach**

When a member of the church's paid staff approaches an individual member of the Personnel Commission or the Commission as a whole expressing a problem with a Pastor, the first question the Commission member(s) should normally ask is "Did you address this with the person directly? The Pastor may or may not always be right, but we need to follow a biblical approach outlined in Matthew 18:15-17." If the person says, "No," the response should normally be, "You must address this issue with the Pastor. If you have dealt with the Pastor on the matter and are not satisfied with the response you have received, then, following Matthew 18:16, you may present your issue to the Personnel Commission.

For the sake of action, the complainant may ask to meet with the Personnel Commission as a whole. It is there that he/she would describe his/her concern. However he/she must understand that the Pastor (as the person complained against) will be informed about the complaint and its nature and will have the right to be heard. This is not meant to defeat the complainant. The Pastor must be able to hear it all to adequately address his (or her) side of it from a personal and administrative point of view. So, while members of the Personnel Commission cannot hear any complaint privately or prematurely, ask 'Have you addressed the Pastor with your complaint, and if so, do you want to request a formal meeting with the committee to present your complaint?'

When a member of the congregation comes to any Elder with a complaint about the Pastor, the Associate Pastor, or any of the Elders, the biblical response needs to be

much the same. The person is to be told that the first step is to discuss the concern with the Pastor or Elder involved. If this one-on-one approach does not prove satisfactory, the Elder may accompany the person with the concern to meet with the Pastor or Elder following Matthew 18:16. It is important that the Elder discern the true nature of the complaint. Is the person genuinely not being heard or is the person not being obeyed? Is the failure to resolve the issue to the satisfaction of the complainant a difference of priorities or understanding or does it reflect a possible failure to maintain the vows of ordination and the biblical standards of life and conduct?