

The Role of Ruling Elders on Session

A Leader Reader by Steve Lytch

Qualities of a Session Member

Since the time of the Bible, God has called on leaders for God's people. Moses, Deborah, and David in the Old Testament and Peter, Paul, and Priscilla in the New Testament are just a few of the people God chose to lead Israel and the church. God still calls women and men to lead God's people. When the members of a Presbyterian congregation elect someone to be a session member, it means they see gifts of faith and judgment that God has given that person so he or she can lead the church.

The most important responsibility session members have is to nurture their relationship with Christ. He is the head of the church. He is the one to whom they are accountable, and their duty is to lead the church where Christ directs it. That doesn't mean that session members should disregard the insights and opinions of those who elected them. In fact, good session members are good listeners. Christ often speaks through the collected wisdom of his people. But ultimately, session members make decisions based on their understanding of what Christ wants the church to do. Session members cannot discern Christ's will unless they are continually cultivating their relationship with him through daily prayer, Bible study, and other spiritual disciplines.

Session members do not lead God's people in a historical vacuum. They inherit a rich tradition that informs and enriches their work. Therefore, they need to be familiar with the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that is made up of the *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order*. Presbyterians do not claim that the way we do things is the only way to serve God faithfully. There is much we can learn from other Christians. Nevertheless, we have been entrusted with a particular way of approaching the gospel and orga-

Prayer

We give thanks for the diversity of people who are called to be parents. Remind us that the gift of parenthood comes to all kinds of people from different lifestyles and cultures who share a common bond to love and nurture children. May you give to all parents the ability to model the gifts of humility, compassion, and love that bespeak the presence of your own perfect love manifested in our homes and in our hearts.

—Christopher H. Evans, "A Prayer for Parents," in *Prayers for the New Social Awakening: Inspired by the New Social Creed*, ed. Christian Iosso and Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

nizing Christ's work. It is a lively tradition that is always being reformed. It is always open to criticism and change, but session members need to understand the tradition they have inherited so they can critique it in love. They are not expected to be experts but to be familiar enough with the basic principles of our statements of faith and our church government that they can lead within the framework of the Presbyterian branch of the family of faith.

People inside and outside the church look to session members as examples of what it means to be a Christian. Therefore, they should take special care that the way they live reflects well on Christ. This doesn't mean session members are expected to be perfect. In fact, the longer we follow Christ and the closer we come to him, the more we realize how imperfect we are and how much we rely on his grace. All Christians should

live upright lives, but session members have a special responsibility to do justice, love mercifully, and walk humbly with God.

Finally, session members lead by example. They can't encourage church members to be good stewards of their financial resources unless they themselves are generous givers. They can't ask others to help the poor and needy unless they are engaged in ministries of service. It's hard to expect members to invite friends to church unless session members are comfortable speaking about their faith in Christ. But living a Christlike life also means recognizing our human limitations. It's not up to session members to do all the work of the church. In fact, if they do, they have fallen down in their responsibility to involve others. Even as session members lead by example, they need to obey the fourth commandment and observe a regular Sabbath rest.

Responsibilities of a Session Member

The specific responsibilities of the session are spelled out in the *Book of Order* in chapter 3 of the "Form of Government." They include:

- providing worship for God's people,
- receiving and dismissing church members as well as equipping them to do Christ's work,
- overseeing all the congregation's programs,
- approving the annual budget (while clearly communicating with the congregation),
- overseeing church property, and
- guiding the church's ministries of justice, service, and evangelism.

Many sessions delegate these responsibilities to committees. Session committees provide opportunities to draw on the leadership gifts of other members of the congregation.

Taking Risks

The only security in life lies in embracing its insecurity. And faith in Jesus Christ, far from diminishing the risks, inspires the courage to take them on – all of them, including the risk of intellectual uncertainty.

—William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 144.

It is also important that session members cultivate their relationship with the pastor and others on the church staff. The church staff relies on session members to lift them up in prayer daily and to show pastoral concern for them and their families. Session members should develop the kind of relationship with the pastor in which they can offer support and constructive guidance. It is the responsibility of session members to let the pastors and the rest of the session know about any pastoral concerns and also any groups within the church that need attention.

A Session Member Serves the Whole Church

Session members are ordained to serve the whole church, not just the local congregation. They should keep up with what is going on within the life of the presbytery, the synod, and the General Assembly so they can interpret the actions of those councils for the local church and participate as commissioners to the other councils.

While session members are involved in the day in and day out work of the church, it is important that they always keep the big picture in mind. They should be able to step back from the work of their committees and see how all the work of the church fits together. Session members need to work together as a team of spiritual leaders. This involves spending time together in prayer, Bible study, faith sharing, and strategic planning. It means keeping in touch with what is going on in the community and the world so that they can identify new ways for the church to respond to new circumstances. Session members should always be thinking about what the church will be like at least three years into the future.

The role of a session member is key in the life of the church. Many people feel overwhelmed when they are chosen to serve. But Christ gives us what we need when he calls us. The most important thing a session member can do is to show the rest of the church how graciously the Lord provides for those who follow him in faith.

About the Writer

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