



Best Practices for Leadership Relationships within Local Congregations

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One of the common struggles in congregational life is wrestling with appropriate delegation of leadership responsibility and authority. We find it especially challenging in Presbyterian polity, as we try to best understand and live out what it means to be “elder-governed”. The following is meant to give some guiding principles and best practices to help sessions and congregations align their areas of authority and responsibility in order to best accomplish the mission of God within the church.

A helpful starting point for this conversation is to be reminded of the purpose of the church. God is on mission and has been from the foundation of the world. He desires to restore people and all of creation to Himself. God’s work throughout history culminates in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The church, in all its forms, is the body of Christ and continues to embody the mission of Christ into the world. Therefore, the local congregation is the instrument of God’s mission in the world. Just as God has uniquely designed each person for good works which he prepared in advance (Ephesians 2:10), God has also arranged local churches to fulfill their unique kingdom calling within His mission.

As we are well aware, Christ alone is head of the church. Therefore, we lead as under-shepherds of the True Shepherd. We have the responsibility lead our local church as God’s tool for mission in the world. We want our structures to facilitate the mission that God has entrusted to us in order to maximize our impact in our communities and beyond. It is important to also understand that the scriptures do not dictate a particular model of leadership. While scripture speaks of elders, the governing role of those elders within the congregation is not clear. Elders certainly participate in ministry and do provide spiritual leadership in those instances, but it is not clear that they meet together as a board. This is not to indicate that our governance model is incorrect. Rather, different churches in times and places will have different governance models to maximize the church’s mission.

It is helpful to broadly define the role of the session, the pastor, and the staff. For clarity’s sake, when this paper indicates “the Pastor”, I am referring to the Senior Pastor as Head of Staff. It is understood that there are Assistant Pastors and Associate Pastors, but for our purposes here, know that those pastoral roles would be considered staff under the supervision of the Senior Pastor, and the term “Pastor” is used to designate the Senior Pastor, Lead Pastor, Pastor/Head of Staff, or Co-Pastors.

The Session – Board of Elders

The session is the collective body of the current elders. The session only has authority when it comes together as a body. Individual elders outside of the session meeting have no unique authority, unless they have been specifically delegated that authority or a responsibility by the session or the pastor. It is important to remember that while the elders are called by the congregation, the elders do not “represent” the congregation, nor do they represent any constituency within the congregation. The elders work for the True Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

The session is the governing body of the church and has ultimate authority for the mission of the church under Christ. However, if a session engages too deeply into the daily aspects of ministry, the

pastor and staff will be handicapped in their ability to execute the ministry. Section 1.0603 of *ECO Polity* articulates the overall function and many specifics about the function of the session. The following is an additional way to state the responsibilities of the session that are more categorical in nature.

- **Prayerful responsibilities** – The session as a whole and as individuals have the responsibility to pray for the mission of church. They need to pray and submit themselves to the Lord and His will for the church. They need to pray for the people whom God has entrusted into their care.
- **Discerning high-level clarity** – Congregations will be better able to fulfill their ministry when they can passionately articulate the 5 irreducible questions of leadership (What, Why, When, How, Where?). The session, or appropriate sub-group, should buy into and be actively involved in articulating answers to these questions, and not just be passive supporters.
- **Give input to annual goals** – The session should work with the pastor to determine high level annual goals for the ministry of the congregation.
- **Fiduciary responsibility** – The session is likely the corporate board of the church. There are fiduciary or legal responsibilities with which the corporate board is entrusted. The session needs to ensure that the church has appropriate insurance, offering procedures, and background checks for volunteers with children, for example. The session doesn't need to do these things themselves, but they need to make sure procedures are in place.
- **Articulate boundaries for ministry** – The session is advised to adopt a policy model of governance, which is often called the "Carver Model". John Kaiser, in his book *Winning on Purpose*, gives great detail about how churches can go about implementing this model. This model says that while the board (the session) has ultimate responsibility, the board has policies by which they delegate that responsibility to the pastor and, by extension, the staff. For example, these policies include things like how the pastor reviews, hires, and terminates staff. Another example might be that the pastor needs to get session approval when it comes to changing worship times.
- **Advisory input for the pastor** – There are some decisions that the session will need to make. In other situations, the session may be asked to give their advice on a decision. For example, the pastor might be considering eliminating or radically changing the men's ministry. This would be a decision of the pastor, but the pastor may come to the session to give input and insight into the situation.
- **Review the performance of the pastor** – When going to a Carver Model of governance, the pastor has more freedom and yet more accountability than ever. Because the pastor has the resources and support to execute the mission and goals, the pastor is now accountable for those goals. The elders need to track progress and help the pastor be a lifelong learner in ministry.
- **Blockers for the pastor, staff and mission** – The session, both as a group and as individual elders, needs to support the pastor and the mission. There are times in the life of the congregation that people will push back. The session has the responsibility to stand up for and support the pastor and mission during conflict.

The Staff – Those who have authority and responsibility to execute the ministry

We often think of staff as paid employees, but it is advantageous for a church to use volunteer staff. It is an appropriate distinction to classify these individuals as volunteer staff rather than simply volunteers. Staff indicates both a greater level of responsibility and a greater level of accountability, so whether a staff member is paid or volunteer, the designation of staff is important. Some key principles of staff include the following:

- **The Pastor is the Head of Staff** – The session may determine the staffing structure and which positions to create, but the Pastor is the Head of Staff and has responsibilities to hire, review, set goals, and terminate. Depending on the size of the church and staff there may be a reporting structure, but ultimately the Pastor is the Head of Staff.
- **The Pastor leads the team to execute the mission** – This doesn't mean that the pastor does everything. Rather, the pastor has the ability make decisions and delegate responsibility to fulfill the mission. There are parameters set by the session, but those parameters should enhance the pastor's ability to execute the mission.
- **The staff oversees their volunteers** – Staff need to have the authority to enlist the help of volunteers. It is counterproductive to have ministry committees through which staff need approval to execute ministry. Instead, the staff can cultivate volunteers and necessary teams to execute the ministry. These volunteers can help give input and advice, but they do not overrule the staff member.
- **The staff team synergizes ministry** – When the entire staff or smaller groups of staff get together, there are a few desired outcomes. First, they should cast vision and be reminded of the answers to the five irreducible questions of leadership. Second, they should discuss how the collective calendar and ministry can work together to fulfill the mission. Third, they may give input for things which relate to the entire ministry of the church or their area of responsibility. The pastor or lead staff of that team still has the responsibility to make final determinations, but the group input is valuable.

Answers to common questions in response to the above principles:

1. Is this even Presbyterian?

Presbyterian means "elder-governed". The elders are still governing the church. However, they are looking at the higher elevation of the church and not into the minutiae of execution. Sessions who function this way enjoy better more fruitful conversation and work than those get into the minutiae of daily operations. A great scriptural illustration of this concept comes in Act 6 when deacons were appointed because the elders were distracted from their task by the feeding ministry.

2. Is this too business like?

This is certainly an understandable question. While we want to be careful with the analogy, there are similarities between a church and a business. The church's bottom line is to fulfill God's mission to make a greater quantity and quality of disciples. This is a more important bottom line than any business on the planet! The pastor then is analogous to the President or CEO, and the session is analogous to the board of directors. In these situations, the board has

high level responsibilities, but doesn't get involved in the daily operations of the business. Again, the analogy could get pushed too far, but it is helpful to look at the practices of successful businesses who are clear about their mission and how they execute leadership responsibility.

3. Doesn't this give the pastor too much power?

Presbyterians have long prided themselves of providing the structure of checks and balances that we use in the government of the United States. Arguments can be made as to how well this structure works or doesn't work in our country. Our system is built to maintain the status quo rather than advance the mission. It strikes me as ironic that we are happy to make comparisons between Presbyterians and the US government, but bristle against comparisons between the church and business. This model of leadership doesn't give the pastor too much power, it simply aligns the appropriate authority to the pastor and staff that is aligned with the responsibility that we place upon them. This question also arises from the assumption that the church is a democracy, when in fact it is a theocracy because Christ alone is head of the church.

4. This seems too structured. Shouldn't ministry be organic and natural?

Think of your own skeletal structure. If you didn't have your skeletal structure you would be a blob on the floor and not capable of movement. At the same time, if your skeleton is exposed, you also have a problem. Structure takes a little while to build, but when it is in place and it is aligned you don't have to think about it often and the body is able to move freely. When churches don't have structure, or the structure is unclear and out of alignment, ministry is not able to happen effectively and organically. It is also true that if a skeleton doesn't grow, it becomes the limiting factor in the growth of an organism.

5. What about shared leadership among staff?

When this type of question is raised, it is important to clarify what is meant by leadership. Is leadership influencing other people? Is leadership making decisions? Some extreme examples are if a staff feels that shared leadership means that each person has an equal say in every decision. This model is a recipe for disaster. People might all give their input on a certain matter, but the leader is responsible to bring the group together. The other way that shared leadership can be viewed is that each person can do whatever he or she wants to do. The assumption is that staff members who oversee children's ministry or congregational care, for example, can run that ministry however they see fit. While we want to give staff freedom, there are times that staff need to be told "no" to best utilize resources and keep things in alignment.

I think of shared leadership like a cycling team. A cycling team needs to be in alignment to reach their objective quickly. If everyone is going in their own direction, they will not provide draft for one another. Someone needs to orchestrate the team and determine when certain people are going to take the lead aspects of ministry and have others move to the back. The bottom line is that shared leadership is helpful when staff members are helping to give input to the whole, fulfilling their individual responsibilities, in alignment with the totality of the mission of the church, and, there is coordination of the staff team from the Senior Pastor.

In conclusion, the governance of each of our congregations is in place entirely that we may glorify Christ in the very best way and fulfill his mission far beyond the walls of our churches into our neighborhoods, our communities, and throughout the world. It is my hope and prayer that we can clarify and understand the most effective leadership structure possible, so that we spend our time on all of the right things that make our churches flourish - and that we are set up well to make the very strongest impact for Christ and His kingdom in order that others may come to know the life changing power of His love and grace in their lives.