

Preparing for Eldership

- online version

(fully revised edition)

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"encourage one another and build each other up" ... 1 Thessalonians 5:11

Study 1 - Introduction

1. The Idea of Eldership

a) Eldership belongs in the church

Jerusalem is first!

Leaving aside the elders of 1st century Judaism, the first time New Testament elders are mentioned is in connection with the church of Jerusalem. It is from Antioch, where believers were first called Christians, that the church sent relief gifts to Jerusalem and “local church elders” are introduced in the biblical record (read Acts 11:25-30). We are not told how they came to be elders.

Throughout the Lycaonian cities and surrounding country, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in each church (read Acts 14:21-23).

In the light of the fact that Paul and Barnabas were leaving these cities and never likely to be able to return to the churches, can you suggest what role the elders have in the life of each church?

From reading Paul’s address to the Ephesian elders, can you suggest what role the elders have in the life of a church (read Acts 20:17 and 20:28-31)?

The New Testament record is saying that elders have their role within a definite context – they have authority and exercise service within the context of the local church. While apostles were *to go out* from place to place spreading the gospel, elders are *to stay* and govern the local church.

[We note how, at first, the elders are appointed by the apostles and the first church planters (see also Titus 1:5), but ever since this apostolic era closed, elders are members of a local congregation elected by that congregation.]

We need to understand and appreciate *the church* if we are to understand eldership:

- “church” translates the biblical Greek word *ecclesia* and refers to the Christian assembly: the company of the Lord’s people
- it’s the word used in the gospels during the discussion that Jesus had with Peter – read Matthew 16:16-20, especially v. 18

So we need always to keep the discussion of eldership closely allied with an understanding of its context (the local church). The implication is that everything the Bible says a church ought to be and to do is at the heart of the role of an elder.

b) Eldership is one way of God expressing authority in the church

Read 1 Timothy 5:17, 18

In practical terms what do you think Paul means by “direct the affairs”? (note: the expression “of the church” is added by the NIV and is not in the original Greek, but it is implied from v. 16).

To assist us with the above question, consider how Paul uses this expression “direct the affairs”, or in the Greek *prohistemi*, elsewhere in the New Testament (or at least a form of the word *prohistemi*):

Romans 12:8 “leadership”

1 Thessalonians 5:12 “over you”

1 Timothy 3:4, 5 “manage”

Read Acts 20:28 again, where Paul reminds the Ephesian elders that they are to “keep watch” over the church. In practical terms what do you think Paul means by “keep watch”, especially in the light of verses 29-31?

Read 1 Peter 5:2 where Peter addresses his fellow elders as “shepherds” – having oversight over the flock of God. What does the idea of having “oversight” mean (especially in the light of the same word being used in Acts 20:28)?

Elders are given to the church so that it will prosper, mature and stay on track. The church consists of forgiven sinners – sinners who need leaders to direct and guide them. The church is better off when led by eldership – it is God’s gift for the church.

This is the concept behind the story of Acts 14:23 – it was Paul’s desire to have elders appointed in each new fellowship of believers, and by this appointment the evangelists could move on to the next town confident that the church they had left behind was in good hands.

c) Elders are under authority

Elders come under the authority of Jesus. While elders exercise authority, they themselves are under authority. We remember Jesus’ words when he speaks with Peter at Caesarea Philippi. Read Matthew 16:13-20

Whose church is it? _____

Who is building the church? _____

Who is the foundation? (i.e. on whom is it built?) _____

There is only one king and head of the church – Jesus Christ. Jesus is also the exalted and ascended Lord. While he is not with the church in a physical sense, his presence is here with us in the church and he continues to rule us through his Holy Spirit and his revealed word: the Bible. In a sense we could think of the Holy Spirit and the Bible as acting as “deputies” to the Lord Jesus Christ for each brings glory to Jesus and each acts consistently with, or (in the case of the Bible) reveals consistently, his will.

The only way elders qualify to rule the church is for them to submit to the rule of Christ as expressed in the Bible and revealed through the Holy Spirit. This means that elders are leaders *under authority* and must always act according to the Holy Scriptures in the light of the Holy Spirit of God. Elders are not free to rule on their own, or as they wish.

d) Eldership is *the* distinctive New Testament Office

The distinctive office of leadership is – the elder. There are several different terms used in the Scriptures to describe the church leader. These descriptions, each referring to New Testament church leadership, reflect the varied gifts needed in the church in order to lead the people of God.

Record the word used in each of the following:

Titus 1:5, 6 _____

Titus 1:7 _____

Acts 20:17 _____

Acts 20:28 (2 different terms) _____

1 Peter 5:1 _____

1 Peter 5:2 (2 different terms) _____

1 Timothy 5:17 _____

e) Eldership is “tried and trusted” over the years

Old Testament background:

Eldership is often found in the Old Testament. It existed throughout Israel’s history. Moses was told to gather together with the elders (first recorded in Exodus 3:16). He was to rule in connection with the elders (Exodus 18:21, 25, Numbers 11:24 and Deuteronomy 1:9-18).

The elders of the Old Testament functioned in two ways: teaching and ruling. They acted as representatives of God’s people, acting for the benefit of his people. They led in prayer and worship, and kept order in God’s community. They ruled and led God’s people.

In preparing for eldership we’re hardly thinking of anything new. The Old Testament insisted on certain qualifications – essential requirements for leadership. Leaders were to be “wise, understanding and respected men”, and “capable men ... who fear God, trustworthy men who fear dishonest gain” (Deuteronomy 1:13 and Exodus 18:21).

Read Deuteronomy 1:13 and Exodus 18:21 and list below each qualification of leadership mentioned:

New Testament:

Wouldn't this list be a suitable New Testament standard for the election of elders in the church today? But this list *IS* the New Testament standard. The words might be different, but it's all listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. Qualifications for elders focus on three important aspects of a person's life: moral behaviour, understanding of Christian doctrine and family life. Bear in mind that these are minimum qualifications:

- a) the morality of an elder must be of such quality that it is above reproach and without public scandal or question
- b) knowledge of sound doctrine is required because duties include teaching God's truth and refuting error
- c) stability of family life is essential because, as Paul says: "If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?"

Each of these areas of our life is important and maturity in them cannot be rushed. So it's not surprising to read that an elder should not be a recent convert (1 Timothy 3:6). Again, Paul wisely warns the congregation not to be in a rush to set apart a man as elder (1 Timothy 5:22).

So, it's no surprise to find that by the time of Christ the function of the elder was well accepted and clearly defined. It is with this long pedigree and background that the New Testament apostles took the accepted and understood practice of the church being led by elders and gave the eldership a clearer and more useful definition. The New Testament redefines and polishes the old idea that congregations ought to be ruled by a group of elders.

2. Personal reflection – AM I READY?

Two important questions:

a) "Does God want me in the eldership?"

- **to help answer this question ... begin with the following:**
 - Do I want to serve as elder? Is there a desire for it (see 1 Timothy 3:1)?
 - Should I step forward for this or could I, just as easily, continue to serve the church as I am without putting my hand up for eldership (i.e. continuing to do "works of service" as in Ephesians 4:12)?
 - Am I selfish in motive, seeking to satisfy myself or looking to improve my own standing in the church (see the disciples' poor motives in Mark 10:35-45)?

- Does anyone else think I am qualified and ready? What do my elders think, my pastor and my family? Or, am I the only one (see Paul's instruction to Timothy where he mentions other people's opinions of Timothy, i.e. "the body of elders laid their hands on you" and "everyone may see your progress" ... 1 Timothy 4:14-16)?

b) "Am I preparing for eldership now?"

- Do I enjoy reading the Bible and prayer to God each day?
- Do I love people and have an ability to help them grow and be disciples of Christ?
- Am I already committed to the welfare of the local church, and also the wider church?
- Am I keen to become more holy, to live humbly and live in submission to Christ?
- Do I have a heart for the lost and compassion that they might be saved?
- Am I willing to relinquish claims on personal needs for the good of others?
- Do I have the ability to discern right from wrong and to make decisions accordingly?

Study 2 - Qualifications

1. Elders: ready-made ... or trained?

There is more than one way to answer this question ...

a) God makes elders for the church

To what extent do you agree with the following statement by Lawrence Eyres? Does he give the full picture?

“God makes men elders, and it is the church’s duty to discern which men God has given to the church for teaching and ruling. Our business is to observe the workings of grace in the lives of twice-born men, and to judge of their fitness for the office on the basis of all the qualifications of Scripture.”

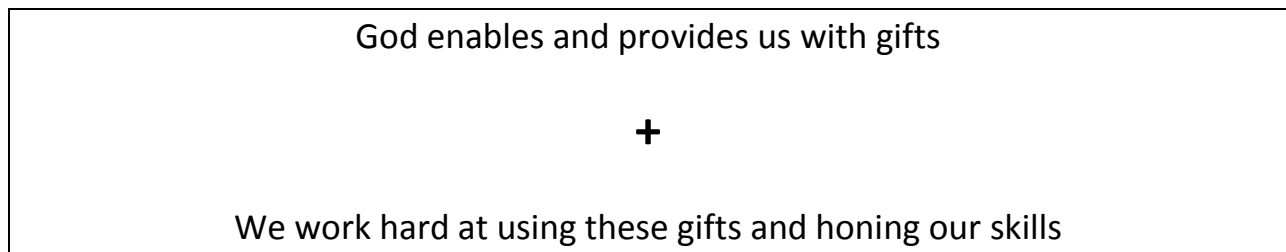
b) The church trains men in preparation for eldership

By way of analogy, consider the truths about your own salvation in Jesus Christ as expressed in Philippians 2:12,13 “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you ...”

The question arises: To what extent are we working out our own salvation and to what extent is it God’s work that saves us? How do you explain this?

Does this explanation shed light on the situation with regard to eldership?

These two aspects of eldership sit comfortably side by side and without contradiction:



God enables + we work hard

c) What we ARE vs what we CAN DO

Read 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and then Titus 1:5-9 and seek to understand the qualifications for eldership. If you were asked to make a quantitative analysis, where would you say the emphasis lies between:

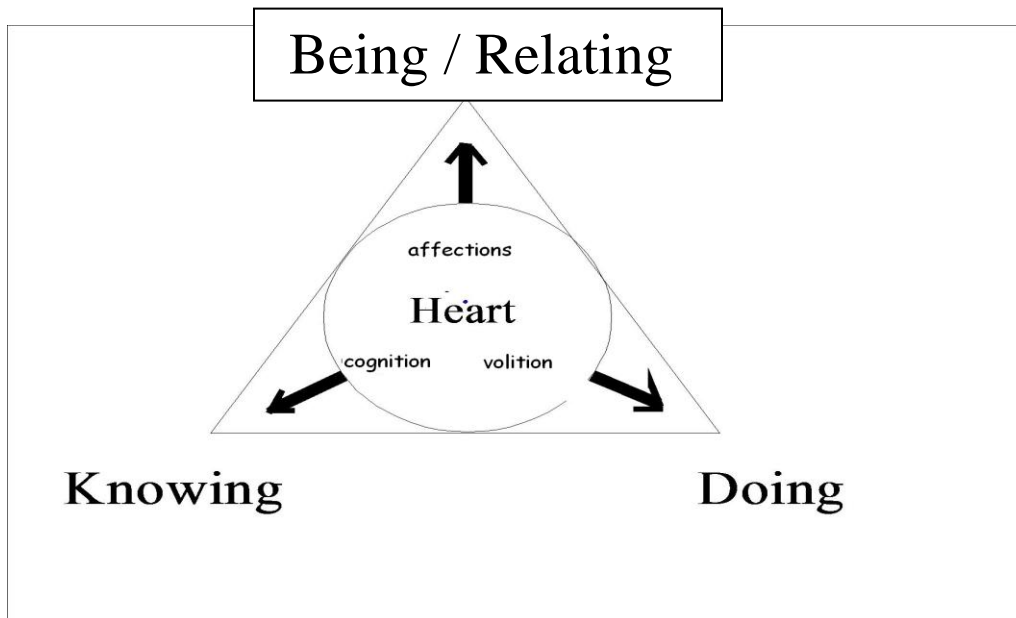
- qualifications that relate to what we ARE?
- qualifications that relate to what we CAN DO?

i.e. where is the emphasis? _____

and is this emphasis clear or marginal? _____

This is an important aspect to focus on before proceeding to the meaning of each qualification. What you ARE before God and the type of person you ARE when you're with people is as important as the skills you have. What is addressed at this point is who you are when no one is around ... where are the attachments of the heart ... what are the motives and disposition ... what affects you as a person?

In describing growth in the Christian, one writer (William Kirwan) says there are three aspects at work: our knowing, our doing and our relating. Kirwan says that our heart is moved by these three aspects: what we learn (knowing); what we work at (doing); what moves us (relating), as in the following diagram:



Becoming a good elder requires growth in all three areas: knowing, doing and relating. What you know, what you do, and how you relate to the Lord and others are all connected. Knowing precedes doing – we cannot do unless we know what to do. But knowing and doing are inseparably connected to relating – all knowing and doing must have a relational goal. If not then we fail the test of righteousness. Our deeds will be self-serving deeds.

Can you see the disastrous consequences of not having these aspects in balance? Think in very practical terms what might be the consequences of elders who:

i) place too much emphasis on “knowing” at the expense of “relating”?

ii) place too little emphasis on “knowing”?

iii) place too much emphasis on “doing” at the expense of “knowing”?

iv) place too little emphasis on “doing”?

2. Elders: male or female? And does it matter?

So long as he or she is a *good* elder, surely that’s all that matters? While this is a familiar sounding argument, the Bible teaches that gender matters. The Bible says that eldership is open for qualified males only.

Read 1 Timothy 2:11-15

Scripture says, in v. 12:

- in the church, women are not to teach; and
- in the church, women are not permitted to hold office (have authority) over men.

Context:

The context for this teaching is Paul's directives as to "How things run best in the church". He has already (2:1-8) given encouragement to the believers about the prayers during worship. Then he instructs women about dressing modestly (2:9,10). In the next chapter Paul instructs the church on who is qualified to take the office of elder and deacon (ch 3).

So this teaching on male headship comes in the middle of Paul's teaching on health and order in the church.

Reasons given:

There are reasons attached to this teaching – reasons given in verses 13 and 14 – verses that refer us to Genesis 2 and 3. The teaching of 1 Timothy 2 is made in the light of the founding principles of Genesis.

Paul's instruction is that in the church there is a relationship between men and women and this relationship was established by God in the beginning, where:

- Adam was the first formed and because of that he was given authority (as seen for example in the authority to name the creatures and to name Eve);
- Adam was first given instructions about the fruit trees and their differentiation;
- Eve acted independently of Adam which led her to sin first.

In the light of these events, God has placed a relational order between man and woman. This order has nothing to do with rank or superiority or preference in the kingdom. It has everything to do with function and purpose. The qualified man is to lead.

These are the foundational reasons why leadership of the church is only open to qualified men.

3. An elder's profile ... what does a good elder look like?

We now study more carefully the two passages that describe the qualifications of an elder. You will see next page a list of 23 qualifications required of an elder. 15 of these are found in 1 Timothy 3, then, while there is much overlap as well, there are an additional 8 traits found in Titus 1.

Read and consider each one.

Write in your own words what you think the qualification means and then be prepared to answer the question each time: "WHY is this a necessary trait in an elder's life?"

NIV	NASB	in practical terms this means ...
from 1 Timothy 3 vs. 2 above reproach	above reproach	
husband of but one wife	husband of one wife	
temperate	temperate	
self controlled	prudent	
respectable	respectable	
hospitable	hospitable	
able to teach	able to teach	
vs. 3 not given to much wine	not addicted to wine	
not violent	not pugnacious	
gentle	gentle	
not quarrelsome	peaceable	
not a lover of money	free from the love of money	
vs. 4,5 manages his own family well	manages his own household well	
vs. 6 not a recent convert	not a new convert	
vs. 7 has good reputation with outsiders	has good reputation with those outside the church	
additional from Titus 1 vs. 7 not overbearing	not self-willed	
not quick tempered	not quick tempered	
not pursuing dishonest gain	not fond of sordid gain	
vs. 8 loves what is good	loving what is good	
upright	just	
holy	devout	

disciplined	self controlled	
vs. 9 holds firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught	holding fast the faithful word in accordance with the teaching	

4. Putting it all together

Questions to discuss:

a) How many of the qualifications do you think should be evident in the life of a man before he is elected elder? Are some of them “optional”?

b) To what degree should they be in evidence? Can some of these qualities be seen “by degrees”?

c) Can we expect some qualities to develop after a man has taken up the office of elder?

d) Is this setting the standard too high? Are you daunted by all this?

e) What role does the Lord play in equipping and enabling the elder (see 2 Corinthians 3:4-6)?

Study 3 - Theological Convictions

- giving assent and signing the formula

1. The idea of subscription

By our involvement in various clubs and accessing services of 21st century society, we're frequently asked to give assent to questions and expected to sign agreement to documents. We give assent to internet agreements that we've barely read. We sign insurance papers without checking every clause.

There are at least three ways in which we can subscribe to a document:

- in full agreement with each clause (read and understood);
- in general agreement with the tenor of the document, but, if pressed, admitting we are not in agreement with every individual clause;
- with dishonesty: signing to get the job done, but without meaning it.

Are there other ways to sign? _____

Which way is expected of an elder? _____

Read Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

What does Scripture teach us about making and keeping vows? (also, Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:37)

2. The 1st four vows

a) Vow no 1 - what does it mean?

- | |
|---|
| 1. Do you believe the Scripture of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and the only rule of faith and practice? * |
|---|

* The Presbyterian Church of Victoria uses the first vow as written in the unconfirmed minutes of the GAA (1 May 1974) minute 54.18, while other state churches within the PCA follow that written in the minutes of the 36th General Assembly (June 1977), minute 26.5. Though worded slightly differently they express the same theological commitment to the Bible as the written Word of God.

Questions to discuss:

i) What does it mean to believe “the Old and New Testaments **to be** the Word of God”?

Further, contrast this with other peoples’ view ... i.e. what else do people say about the Scriptures?

ii) What does it mean to have Scripture as your “only rule of **faith**”?

iii) What does it mean to have Scripture as your “only rule of **practice**”?

b) Vow no 2 - what does it mean?

2. Do you own and accept the Westminster Confession of Faith, as amended by the General Assembly, read in the light of the Declaratory Statement contained in the Basis of Union adopted by this Church on the 24th day of July, 1901, as an exhibition of the sense in which you understand the Holy Scriptures, and as a confession of your faith, and do you engage firmly and constantly to adhere thereto, and to the utmost of your power to assert, maintain and defend the same?

Questions to discuss:

i) Assuming that you have read the Westminster Confession of Faith, what is your opinion of it as a statement purporting to set out the teachings of Scripture?

Historical background –

The famous 17th century “Long Parliament” of Stuart England engaged for years in a struggle for power with Charles 1st. During these tumultuous years the Parliament ordered a conference of theologians to meet in Westminster Abbey to sort out, once and for all, what it is that the Church

believes. The hope was that all the church would unite around such a statement of faith. It took approximately five years of meetings. Nearly 100 English and 6 very influential Scottish theologians eventually produced a series of documents to succinctly define what the church believes, teaches and how the church worships and how it is regulated. One such Westminster document is the Confession of Faith which the Church of Scotland officially adopted in 1647.

ii) Do you know of our church's amendments to the Confession?

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia has amended it twice:

- at **ch 24.4** to allow a man to marry his deceased wife's sister, or a woman to marry her deceased husband's brother
- at **ch 27.4** to allow that in certain circumstances a Home Missionary may administer the sacraments

iii) Assuming that you have read the Declaratory Statement, what is your opinion of it as a statement purporting to affirm the essential teaching of the Confession while giving light to some matters?

Historical background –

The 1901 Declaratory Statement, like its Victorian predecessor of the 1880s, was designed to affirm the essential teaching of the Confession while giving further light to some of the more difficult aspects of certain doctrines:

- while holding to **Christ's mediation of redemption** by grace, as set out in the Confession, we are committed to the free offer of the gospel to all mankind without distinction;
- while affirming the Confession's teaching of **God's election to eternal life**, we do so with the truth that God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance;
- while holding, as does the Confession, that the **usual means of salvation are hearing and responding to the Word of God**, we affirm that this does not necessarily mean those who die as infants or without means of understanding are lost;
- while holding to the Confession's teaching of **mankind's corrupt fallen nature**, we do so in the light of evidence that many may, without possessing the light of salvation, display virtuous and exemplary characteristics that display the image of God;
- while required to **hold the essential doctrine taught** in the Confession there is need to allow liberty of opinion on other (i.e. non-essential) matters;
- while affirming what is taught in the Confession with regard to **submitting to civil magistrates (as their authority is given from God)**, it is with the understanding that individuals maintain liberty of conscience, having the right to make private judgments.

iv) The key question is to ask: Is the **amended Westminster Confession of Faith read in the light of the Declaratory Statement** an expression of the sense in which you understand Scripture? i.e. Is this **your** confession of faith? _____

v) In what practical ways are you already engaged in asserting, maintaining and defending this faith?

In what ways do you assert and maintain it?

In what ways do you defend it?

vi) Why is an elder required to subscribe to a doctrinal confession of faith? Isn't it enough to ask him to "confess your faith in God, revealed to us in Jesus Christ", as we used to ask prior to the 1970s?

(Reading Titus 1:9 may help in this discussion question.)

Summing up:

The Westminster Confession of Faith teaches a system of doctrine that best expresses biblical truth and provides a framework in which we see the message that has been taught to us. It equips us to be able to pass the message on to others and refute opponents of faith.

The Confession serves as a standard from which we teach and against which we can measure error.

c) **Vow no 3 - what does it mean?**

3. Do you own and accept the purity of worship as practised in this Church?

There is an obvious question: What is the "purity of worship as practised in this Church"?

BEFORE reading what is printed on the next page, write down *your own thoughts* as to what are the distinguishing marks and style of Presbyterian worship:

Presbyterians have something distinctive to say about corporate worship. In summary:

- true worship is God-centred with the focus being on the glory of God, and therefore is conducted with a spirit of reverence for God
- true worship is organised and directed by principles of worship found in Scripture; and, therefore, is composed principally of the following biblical elements: singing of praise, prayer, reading of Scripture, preaching and the sacraments (two only)
- true worship is uncluttered by ritual or elaborate ceremony unless that ritual or ceremony is expected of us by the teachings of Scripture

What else do you think should come into consideration as regards the “purity of worship as practised in this Church” - perhaps something that you don’t see practised but would like to, or that we could do better?

The Church does have an approved book of common order called “Worship” – which provides a guide to the orderly administration of the sacraments and other special services. It also has a book of suggested prayers in “Pray”. They are both available for download at the *GAA Public Worship & Aids to Devotion Committee* website. You need to register at the site before download is permitted, but it is FREE.

d) Vow no 4 – what does it mean?

4. Do you own the Presbyterian form of government to be founded on the Word of God and agreeable thereto; and do you promise that, through the grace of God, you will firmly and constantly adhere to, and to the utmost of your power, in your station, assert, maintain and defend the same?

Again, there is an obvious question: What is “the Presbyterian form of government”?

BEFORE reading what is printed on the next page, write down your own thoughts as to what are the distinguishing marks and style of Presbyterian government:

Presbyterians, while never claiming to be the only true church, have something distinctive to say about best practice in church government. In summary:

- the church is ruled, under God, by a series of councils, each consisting of teaching and ruling elders (Acts 28; 1 Timothy 5:17)
- a local congregation of believers selects and calls their own teaching elder (referred to as minister or pastor) and they also choose their own ruling elders; oversight of that congregation is in the hands of the minister and elders meeting in session
- to complement the spiritual direction provided by session, congregations choose deacons to exercise a ministry of mercy and practical care (Acts 6:1-6)
- ministers and elders in equal proportion combine together in regional groups called presbyteries to oversee the affairs of all local congregations, but not to the exclusion of sessions (1 Timothy 4:14; Acts 15:1-35)
- ministers and elders in equal proportion combine together in state and federal general assemblies from time to time to oversee the wider work of the church best handled by that wider body rather than at regional or local level alone (Acts 15)
- the working assumption is that members of the church gladly submit to such government as to the Lord (Hebrews 13:17)
- the only head of the church is the Lord Jesus Christ, so all the functions described above are always subject to his authority and under the guidance of the Word and the Holy Spirit (Colossians 1:18)

Finally, are you prepared to assert, maintain and defend this? _____

3. The Formula

I own and accept the subordinate standard of this church, with the explanations given in the articles contained in the Declaratory Statement, as an exhibition of the sense in which I understand the Holy Scriptures, and as a confession of my faith. I further own the purity of worship practised in this church and the Presbyterian government thereof to be founded on the Word of God and agreeable thereto; and I promise that through the grace of God I shall firmly and constantly adhere to the same, and to the utmost of my power shall, in my station, assert, maintain and defend the doctrine, worship and government of this church.

This Formula is a summary of the first four vows, and is the church's attempt to maintain a desirable degree of uniformity of church teaching and practice (given liberty of opinion mentioned previously).

The Formula & the 1st four vows are all to do with the doctrine, worship and government of the Church.

Study 4 - Ministry

1. The elder as shepherd – three key passages

a) Read John 10:14-18

There is only one Good Shepherd – Jesus Christ. In what way does he demonstrate ultimately that he is dedicated to the care of his sheep? i.e. What lies at the climax of his pastoral care?

All shepherding takes as its model of best practice the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus' provision for his sheep is our faultless example and after all he has done for us in teaching and prayer and personal encouragement the greatest of his shepherd's work is that done on the Cross.

b) Read John 21:15-19

Jesus has a ministry for Peter to do (he commissions Peter three times!). What word or words would you use to describe the ministry expected of Peter?

What sort of duties would Peter perform in faithfully carrying out this ministry?

According to Jesus, what motives should drive Peter in this ministry?

_____ and _____

c) Read 1 Peter 5:1-4

What is the metaphor that Peter uses to describe the ministry of an elder?

Let's link the three passages:

JESUS ⇒ PETER ⇒ ELDERS

Jesus equips and commissions the apostle Peter to faithfully carry out the ministry of a shepherd.

Peter, in the manner of Paul with his Ephesian elders (Acts 20:28), trains his elders to shepherd along with himself in the manner of Jesus Christ the Chief Shepherd.

Elders are then to do likewise, and in the manner of Paul’s instruction to Timothy (2 Timothy 2:2), while they shepherd as elders they are to train a new generation of men to shepherd too.

All this is to be done in the light of Jesus’ ultimate sacrifice for sinners on the Cross. The finished work of the Cross – God’s work of reconciliation – is the perspective from which we can be shepherds.

What is it about shepherding that makes this such a wonderful metaphor to describe the ministry of elders? i.e. What features of shepherding are illustrative of an elder’s work?

The biblical image of shepherding seems to be the key image for the eldership. There are only two places in Scripture where elders are addressed directly (Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2) – and they are, in each place, charged “to shepherd” the flock of God.

2. The final three vows

5. Do you adhere to your acceptance of the Call of this congregation to exercise among them the office of ruling elder?

6. Do you engage through divine grace to discharge with diligence and faithfulness the various duties of your office, watching over the flock, showing yourself a pattern of good works and giving a conscientious attendance on the meetings of Session, Presbytery and Assembly when duly called so to do?

7. All these things you profess and promise through grace, as you shall be answerable at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ?

Again, there is an obvious question: What are the “various duties of your office” (vow 6)?

BEFORE reading what is printed on the next page, write down your own thoughts as to what are the various duties of your office in keeping watch over the flock:

Various duties include:

- **ruling together** as a session - to provide administrative and spiritual government of the local church
- promoting, providing and encouraging sound **teaching of the Word** in the local church's ministry, in particular with reference to:
 - public worship occasions
 - youth
 - children
- **visiting the sick**, and others in need, as required
- **prayer** among the people for the work of the kingdom
- facilitating involvement in the **wider work** of the gospel outside the local church

a) ruling

An elder is expected to "direct the affairs of the church" (1 Timothy 5:17). The verb Paul chooses here is from the Greek *prohistemi* and is used elsewhere for "leading". What do you think is meant by the word *prohistemi* as it is used in the following verses?

Romans 12:8 (it's the word "leadership" in NIV) _____

1 Thessalonians 5:12 (it's the word "over you" in NIV) _____

1 Timothy 3:4,5 (it's the word "manage" in NIV) _____

So, we expect to see elders making decisions for the welfare of the local church, assessing progress, bringing changes and planning for the future. We expect elders to be decision-makers, change agents and strategic planners. Elders "direct" the work of the church, not by their own inclination, but as men under direction from the Chief Shepherd (see 1 Peter 5:4) and under the influence of the Holy Spirit of God.

Motive is important in the exercise of such leadership. Scripture is careful to point out HOW the work of the elder is to be done.

What poor attitudes are warned against in 1 Peter 5:2,3?

b) teaching

Scripture does not suggest that every elder is to teach publicly. Nevertheless, Scripture does say: an elder must be “apt to teach”.

This ability to teach might be so that you can open up the Scriptures one-to-one or in a small group. We are mindful here of the ministry of Priscilla and Aquila who, in the privacy of their own home, were able to satisfactorily teach Apollos the Word of God (read Acts 18:26).

Alternatively this ability might be displayed in an elder’s visit to the sick or the bereaved where you can open up a Scripture passage to suit the occasion and give comfort. There are many principles of God’s Word that you can “teach” beside the sick bed of the seriously ill.

Then, the role extends to promoting sound teaching within the congregation and protecting them against false teaching. This is part of the elder “keeping watch over all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (Acts 20:28). This is integral to the responsibility to “refute those who deny it (i.e. sound doctrine).” (Titus 1:9)

Reflect on opportunities in which you have been involved in teaching God’s Word. In what settings have you demonstrated already that you are “apt to teach”?

c) visiting

Read James 5:13-16

What are the elders of the church expected to do? _____

What are the expected results of this ministry? _____

We note here that the main verb is “to pray” and that the whole passage is about prayer. We can see that the main activity is that of prayer and that “anoint with oil” is the secondary issue. It most likely means to apply medicine as appropriate (rather than ritualistic anointing - which would be implied with the use of a different word for anointing that James decides not to use here). If this is a correct understanding of James’ instruction, then what he is prescribing is prayer and medicine, (D W Burdick).

Reasons to visit are not restricted to sickness. The bereaved, most likely, would benefit from an elder’s visit; so would the frail and infirm, the imprisoned etc. Visitation may be beneficial on a regular basis, even where there is no specific reason.

While it is James who specifically mentions ‘elders visiting members of the church’, there are many other parts of the New Testament where it is implied or assumed that we will want to visit. It’s such a natural part of what Christians want to offer one another and elders ought to be at the forefront of this ministry.

Eg

- In the Thessalonian letters, Paul, Silas and Timothy greet the church at Thessalonica and encourage the brothers to “warn the idle, encourage the timid, help the weak.” (1 Thessalonians 5: 14).
- In the letter to the Hebrews, God has said: “do not forget to entertain strangers ... remember those in prison ...” (Hebrews 13:2,3)

d) praying

All Christians are called on to “pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17) and to pray for everyone (1 Timothy 2:1). The hallmark of the Christian is that he or she is one who always prays. If the elder is to be an example to the flock (1 Peter 5:3) then he preeminently must be always praying. Elders are known as men committed to prayer.

Read Acts 6:1-4

If we consider the role of an apostle in some way as comparable to that of the elder, what is it that elders of the church are to be set aside to do?

_____ and _____

e) wider work

In the first place the elder is to be committed to the welfare of his neighbourhood church. But this commitment is not exclusive to the local church. It extends to surrounding churches as well, and even as wide as the world-wide church of Jesus Christ.

Read Acts 15:1-35

Who was it that met to consider the problem (v. 6)?

Who was it that signed the letter carrying the decision (v. 23)?

In this passage we see that though the church under stress and division was in the far north (Antioch) it was the southern city of Jerusalem where the elders and apostles gathered to sort out the problems and to provide a way forward.

This is just an example from a one-off scenario of the first century. Yet it is indicative of the wider role of the elder: beyond his local church.

3. The elder in session

a) the idea of plurality

An elder rules together with other elders. Elders rule as a group, not as individuals. Recorded in Acts 14:23, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders (plural) in each local church. We also note that in the two recorded cases of direct Scriptural addresses to church elders (Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5) in each case they are addressed in plural.

Consider what this means, as regards decision making:

- there is safety in that this prevents one man “going alone”
- the congregation knows that decisions are made by session as a whole and not by one man
- the elders submit to the rule of session (even if, at first, an elder has difficulty agreeing with a decision, he must let it be seen as a session decision that he will support)

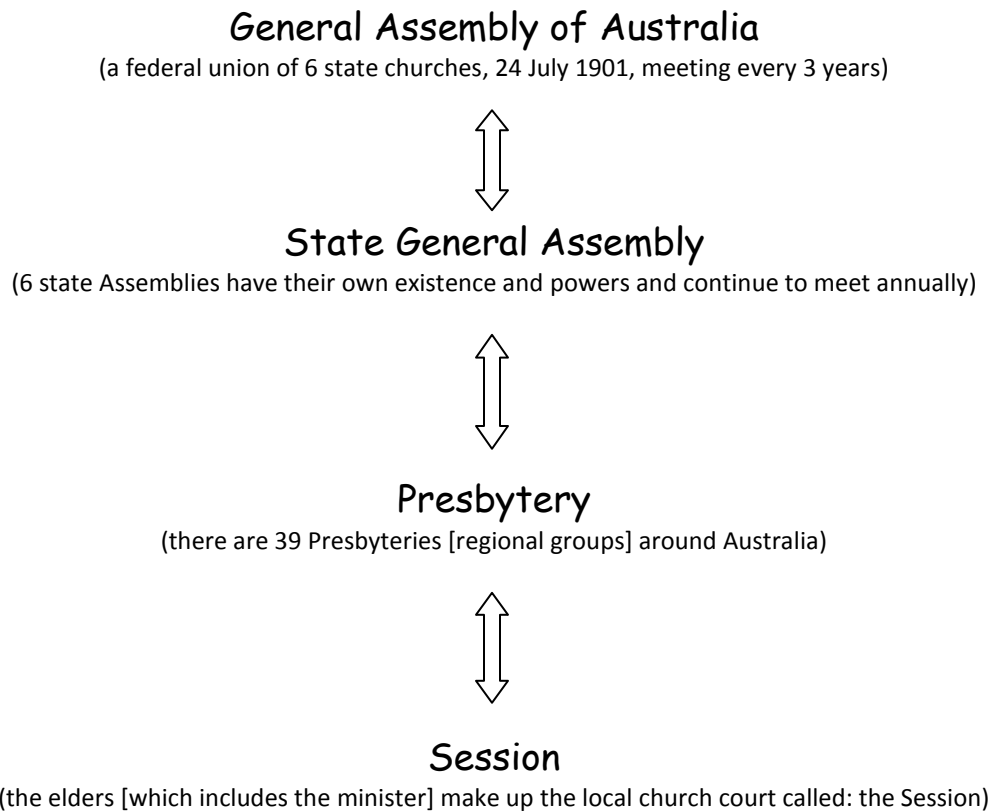
b) the idea of parity

This means that we each have a say, with no-one deferring to a bishop or a senior elder. The teaching elder (or minister) is one of the elders. His voice and his vote does not automatically carry more weight than each of the other ruling elders of Session.

The only qualification is that the teaching elder (minister), as he preaches, does have more say. When he is giving sound teaching from Scripture then he is to be listened to and followed.

c) the idea of hierarchy of church courts

This means that we have a series of ascending and descending church courts:



We take as our pattern that which we find in Acts 15. The local issue that was at boiling point, being unresolved locally, was taken to the wider church for reference and decision. Acts 15 seems to be a representative gathering of elders and apostles for the region. The decisions of this gathering (Acts 16:4) were regarded as binding on all the churches.

Study 5 - Home visitation

1. The elder as a visitor - exemplified in Scripture

In each of the following cases look for the blessing or challenge that came to the home owner and record your comment on one aspect of the home visitation. Try and identify one surprising “twist” during the visit. Be prepared to share these reflections around the group:

a) Luke 7:36-50 ... Jesus dines with Simon (the Pharisee)

b) Matthew 8:14,15 ... Jesus visits Peter’s home

c) Luke 10:38-42 ... Jesus visits Mary & Martha at home

d) Acts 10:23-48 ... Peter visits Cornelius’ home

e) Acts 16:13-15 ... Paul & companions come to Lydia’s home

f) Acts 18:24-26 ... Apollos at Priscilla & Aquila’s home

We do not suggest that these blessings and challenges couldn’t have been conveyed in some other way – but Scripture records them as having taken place within the family home – aided by warm and trusting relationships.

2. The elder as a visitor – encouraged in the PCV code

3.43 Roll of families

The Session, in the exercise of its pastoral duty, compiles and keeps a complete roll of families and individuals connected with the congregation. Before the minister leaves his charge, the Session brings this roll up to date.

Alternatively, see NSW code 4.37

3.44 Elders' districts

The Session ordinarily assigns to each elder an area within its bounds, provides him with a list of the families and individuals within that district whose names are on the roll of families, and charges him with their oversight under the direction and control of the Session.

Observation and reflection

Given that churches may decide to carry out this duty in different ways, nevertheless, take time here to discuss what is your current church practice and reflect (without directing criticism against anyone) as to how effective this method is. i.e. in practical ways, how is oversight exercised, or in Peter's words: How are the elders currently "being shepherds of God's flock, serving as overseers"?

3. The elder as a visitor – HOW to do it

What is “pastoral visitation”?

a) “**pastoral**” means “like a shepherd”. It is derived from the Latin word for shepherding, or for feeding the sheep. So, when we go to a parishioner, it is with the specific purpose of feeding, building up, encouraging as a good shepherd does for his sheep.

b) “**visitation**” means to “go and see” how things are. It is derived from the Latin word *videre* meaning “to see”.

So, putting both words together, when we engage in pastoral visitation, **we are going, with a shepherd’s heart, to see how things are**. This clarifies our task and provides pastoral focus for us. Genuine pastoral visitation has taken place where there is spiritual shepherding.

Under headings 4, 5 & 6, on this and following pages, this study sets out three major discussion questions that are best handled in small groups and answered BEFORE glancing at this author’s suggested answers on the next page.

Try and answer yourself first before proceeding EACH time.

4. WHY DO WE GO VISITING? What do we set out to achieve? Can you identify at least 3 main reasons?

a) _____

b) _____

c) _____

Suggested contribution for the discussion:

a) we go to encourage (to build up one another in the faith)

We ask ourselves as we set out: “Is there some way we can be encouraged today? Can this person or family be built up in the knowledge of the Lord? Can they become stronger in faith as a result of this visit?” Without predetermining the outcome or predicting where the conversation will go, it ought to be foremost in our minds that we desire mutual edification – a deepening of faith.

b) we go to comfort (to demonstrate the love of God)

We ask ourselves as we set out: “Is there some way I can bring comfort to this person or family today? Is there a particular need that they face to which the Scriptures can apply counsel and comfort?” We might know of a need before we go for which we can prepare. On the other hand we might only discover the need in the moment of conversation and it catches us unaware. We are to be good listeners, and seek, without being formulistic or intrusive, to bring God’s Word into the situation.

c) we go to counsel, advise or bring warning

While not often being called on to do this, we ought to be ready to do so when necessary. We ask ourselves as we set out: “Are there some issues going on in this person’s or family’s life that needs addressing? Are there dangers lurking nearby for this home about which this family seems unaware?” We might only discover the issue in the moment of conversation and it catches us unaware. Without being formulistic or intrusive, we wish to bring God’s Word into the situation.

Reflect on how God “visits” us to minister to our needs:

- consider how God has visited us and reconciled us through the coming of Jesus Christ (the incarnation is God visiting our planet) – Galatians 4:4,5
- consider how God reaches us and applies his love in our lives through the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit (he not only visits us but takes up residence) – John 14:16,17
- consider how God ministers to us through the agency of Christian fellowship and the ministry of the Word through others – Colossians 3:16

5. How do we conduct a pastoral visit? Are there identifiable stages in the visit?

- a) _____
- b) _____
- c) _____
- d) _____
- e) _____

Suggested contribution for the discussion:

a) Prepare

Create an expectation about the visit. Warm your heart to it. Your preparation should take the form of praying to the Lord for his enabling. Before you go – in the car as you travel or as you walk to the door – be a man of prayer. Be a man of dependence on the Lord.

In preparing your people, it's always wise to ask in advance: "Is it OK for me to call on you this week, maybe Wednesday?" It's a polite and inoffensive way to make arrangements. It's hardly a threatening proposition and it helps create in their mind a sense of expectation. It might even ensure that the TV is off before you arrive!

b) warm up

It depends on the relationship you've already established and, of course, on your own inter-personal skills, but normally there is a time early in the visit when conversation is labored. Allow for a period in the visit when the atmosphere is just warming. It's important not to be alarmed by this or caught off-guard. It's no reason to abort! It's only natural – so persevere. If you sense you are having trouble making connections than look for clues around the room (pictures, wall hangings). There is usually a story somewhere in the room. Try to sense what's important for this family. Pray for God-given common sense. Warmth and openness are the keys.

c) transition

As enjoyable as such conversations are, firmly guide the conversation to matters that are more important. It's most important that you make spiritual inquiry, and if it's not happening then it's your responsibility to make the transition. Let all know that you are there for a purpose. There are a thousand and one questions you can use to make the transition: "What have you been enjoying lately in the Bible?" or "Is it difficult being a Christian at work?" or "How do you think we're going at church at the moment?" or "The preaching on Sunday was on Prayer – do you find it hard to pray?" Then you can enter the main purpose for the visit, which is to open God's Word and pray.

d) Bible and prayer

The one you have been visiting may expect it and ask for it, but if it's needed ... you offer to read from the Bible and pray. Reading consecutive parts of the Scriptures (consecutive from last time) is best. I find it helpful to make this offer about half-way through the planned time for the visit. This allows time for the conversation to take a different turn after you've read from the Bible and prayed. If you visit these

people regularly then they will be expecting it. If they aren't expecting it then it's most unlikely that the offer: "Do you mind if we read from God's Word and prayed?" will be declined.

Be a man wise in prayer. In your closing prayer demonstrate that you have been listening.

e) leave

Know when to leave. After promising to leave with "Well, I must go now", please keep your word, and leave. Future visits will be more welcome if they know that you'll leave when expected to, and that you won't annoy people by overstaying your welcome.

f) reflection

Write brief notes in your dairy or whatever system you use. Write down names and key events in this person's life that you are likely to forget. Make a note of the one significant issue you discussed and also the Bible reading you chose. Then, on return, you can begin with: "Last time we were talking about _____."

Finally, you'll need to report to your fellow elders on the fact that you have visited and asking them to pray. I don't believe it's right to share anything of the conversation, especially any personal issues. Be known as an elder who can be trusted to keep confidences.

g) on-going commitment

Keep any promises you make. If you say during the visit "I have a book on this at home" or "I have the email address of a friend whose advice could be helpful", then make sure you follow this through. Keep on praying for those you have visited. Keep them on your heart, bring their needs to God in prayer.

6. Pitfalls for the unwary? What are some of those "awkward" responses from people - some potential "dangers" that could scuttle the visit?

- a) _____
- b) _____
- c) _____
- d) _____

Suggested contribution for the discussion:

a) criticism of the pastor

How do you handle this?

Pray for two important abilities: to listen sympathetically and respond wisely:

- correct facts that are wrong or skewed (assumes that you are knowledgeable about what happens around the church and in your pastor's life); don't let false rumour go unchallenged
- silence is not a wise response – because your silence speaks – it inevitably implies assent
- challenge the person complaining to address the issue head-on ... with: "Look, you are concerned about this so what's say I make an appointment for you to speak with the pastor. I'll mention to him that you wish to speak." Indicate that you are not passing this on, but that you are referring him to the pastor
- ask the person whether they are praying for him
- be clear to explain that you are part of the team *with* the pastor (session, fellow elder etc)
- avoid "biting" or responding with anger ... Proverbs says that a soft answer turns away anger, but a harsh reply stirs up strife

b) anger

How do you handle this?

Listen sympathetically.

Respond wisely. In general terms (not knowing the specific case):

- be alert to the unhelpful type of anger that allows the devil a foothold (Ephesians 4:26,27)
- refuse unwholesome talk, but encourage conversation that builds up (Ephesians 4:29)

c) gossip

How do you handle this?

Decline to accept gossip in the conversation (Ephesians 4:25)

d) argument

How do you handle this?

Depends on the circumstance. There is a level of debate where "iron sharpens iron" and leads to understanding truth more clearly, yet there is also speculative argument and grandstanding that is of no use at all.

Study 6 - Working together in Session

The format for this study is different to that of the previous chapters – there is less directed study and notes. The invitation is given for the leader to facilitate discussion over a wide range of activities that elders typically work on in session. At each point there is space for participants to write notes as the class works through the chapter. All the excerpts provided are from the PCV Code (2010 edition).

[We are sure that similar sections of another state code can be found where this book is used in other states.]

1. Public worship services

3.33

The Session fixes the occasions and times for regular public worship and for such special services of public worship as it considers necessary. Session determines, after consulting the congregation, what books of praise shall be used in the public worship of the congregation, and ensures that a sufficient supply of the authorised books of praise and of other necessary church music is available for the congregation, organist, other musicians and choir. The Session also sees that all other things necessary for the conduct of public worship are available for the use of the minister, consulting the congregation or the board of management when any substantial financial outlay is involved. Action under this rule requires the concurrence of the minister of the congregation

2. Baptism

3.34

The Session arranges, normally following the minister's interview and baptismal preparation with the applicant(s), and with the minister's recommendation, for the sacrament of baptism to be administered to:

- a. the children of parents one or both of whom are communicant members or baptised persons who make such profession of their faith as would entitle them to be become communicant members;
- b. adults, upon profession of their faith in Christ and obedience to Him.

The sacrament ordinarily is administered during public worship, but in exceptional circumstances and for sufficient reason it may be administered other than at public worship.

The Session encourages believing parents to have their children baptised without unnecessary delay. A certificate of baptism is given by the minister after the administration of the sacrament, and the names of those baptised are promptly reported to the Session and entered in the baptismal register

3. Lord's Supper

3.35

The Session appoints the time and place, and makes suitable provision, for the public observance of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It also arranges, normally through the minister, for the sacrament to be administered privately, when necessary, for sick or aged communicant members. In such circumstances the minister should be accompanied by at least one elder.

Public invitation to participate in the Lord's Supper is ordinarily given by the minister, in a form approved by the Session, to:

- a. communicant members of the congregation;
- b. visiting communicant members of other Presbyterian congregations;
- c. visiting members of other branches of the Christian church.

4. Supervision of the rolls:

3.36 – 3.38; 3.43; 3.29

The Session keeps a roll of communicant members in the form prescribed by the General Assembly. Session adds to this roll the names of those persons who from time to time it receives as communicant members:

- a. by profession of faith; or
- b. on receipt of satisfactory certificates of transfer; or
- c. by special resolution of the Session for this purpose.

It removes from this roll the names of those persons who cease to be communicant members of the congregation:

- d. through death; or
- e. by issue of certificate of transfer; or
- f. by special resolution of the Session for this purpose.

The Session keeps a roll of adherents in the form prescribed by the General Assembly. Session adds to this roll the names of those persons who it considers fulfil the requirements of adherents after carefully explaining to them the requirements of rules 2:16-18 and obtaining their assent. The names of those who cease to comply with these requirements are removed from the roll of adherents.

The Session keeps a register of baptisms in the form prescribed by the General Assembly and adds to it the names of all persons baptised within the parish or mission field under the jurisdiction of the Session

The Session, in the exercise of its pastoral duty, compiles and keeps a complete roll of families and individuals connected with the congregation. Before the minister leaves his charge, the Session brings this roll up to date.

5. Admission into membership:

3.39 – 3.41

Admission into the visible church of Christ is by the sacrament of baptism received in infancy or in later life, but baptised persons are admitted into the privileges and responsibilities of communicant membership only when, having signified their desire to become communicant members, they make profession of their faith and are admitted by the Session to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

In the case of those desiring admission to communicant membership it is the duty of the Session, therefore, following explanation of rules 2:13-15 to the applicants, to satisfy itself as to:

- a. their baptism;
- b. their profession of faith in Christ;
- c. their knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith (as defined, for example, in clause 1 of the Declaratory Statement), and the nature and significance of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper; and
- d. their life being consistent with their profession.

The Session revises the rolls of communicant members and adherents annually. In doing this it may remove from the roll of communicant members the names of those persons who have shown their lack of interest by infrequent attendance at public worship, having little or no involvement in the witness and work of the Church, or by continued absence from the Lord's Supper, provided that the Session, if practicable, first gives these persons notice of its intention and then gives them an opportunity to be heard in the matter.

6. Care of the young

3.45

The Session has the oversight of the Christian education of the young of the congregation. In the exercise of this duty it encourages religious training in the home, establishes and supervises Sunday schools, and provides Bible classes and other similar groups. It appoints superintendents of Sunday schools and Bible class leaders and youth group leaders, and it may also directly appoint Sunday school teachers. However where it does not wish to do this it authorises the Sunday school superintendent on its behalf to do so. It approves the material that is to be taught. It calls for regular reports from all the youth organisations of the congregation and makes provision for the training and suitable equipment of those who take part in the Christian education of the young.

7. Oversight of congregational life

3.46 – 3.49

The Session has the supervision of all clubs, societies and groups of communicant members and adherents and others in connection with the congregation. No clubs, societies and groups can be recognised as connected with the congregation without first receiving the approval of the Session and indicating willingness to conform to rules 2:36-42.

The Session convenes the annual meeting of the congregation, not later than the end of October, and any other congregational meetings as it judges necessary on the request or advice of the minister or the board of management or for other sufficient reason (see rules 2:20, 22, 23).

The Session normally prepares a written review of the life and work of the congregation, including the Sunday School, for presentation to the annual meeting of the congregation. It may also approve for presentation to that meeting either in whole or in part the reports and financial statements submitted to it by the congregational organisations (see rule 2:22).

8. Diaconal Ministry

3.54 – 3.56

The Session may establish a diaconal ministry according to the general principles and operational guidelines outlined in the rules that follow

The general principles of the diaconate are as follows:

- a. The diaconate is an office of mercy, with responsibilities different from those of the eldership or a board of management.
- b. The diaconate is to be concerned firstly with the poor and needy within the local body of believers, then with believers further abroad, and finally with the temporal welfare of all humanity according to biblical guidelines. Their ministry shall be under the direct supervision of the Session.
- c. Service in the diaconate is open to both men and women.
- d. There is a need for training for all deacons

9. Church Discipline

The Session has, and as necessary exercises, the power of discipline over members of the congregation in accordance with the law of the church. Any name removed from the roll of communicants or the roll of adherents in the exercise of discipline is restored only by a special resolution of the Session for this purpose

An elder is (as any other communicant member of the congregation) under the jurisdiction of the Session. The Session may remove the name of any elder from the roll of the Session if that elder can no longer perform his duties as an elder

10. Relations with other courts of the church

3.59 – 3.67

The Session of every parish is represented in the higher courts by an elder duly commissioned by the Session for that purpose. In a similar way the Session of every home mission station is represented in the Presbytery.

When a Session is unable to arrange for one of its own members to represent it in a higher court, it may commission an elder who is willing to act and is a member of another Session within the bounds of the court to which he is commissioned, and who is certified as such by the moderator or clerk of his own Session.

Further Reading - eldership

Don't stop here – keep reading

These are the most satisfying books I've read on the subject ...

1. Alexander Strauch, "Biblical eldership" (Revised Edition, 1995)

An in-depth study from the Scripture on the subject of eldership with an urgent plea to restore biblical church leadership in the church . Over 270 pages.

2. Lawrence R Eyres, "The elders of the church" (1985)

A short yet thorough, practical study of biblical church government. Discusses the ruling elder, the teaching elder, biblical principles of each, and more.

Still in print despite being over thirty years old since the original (1977) – WHICH IS A TESTIMONY TO ITS VALUE.

3. David Dickson, "The elder and his work" (2007)

A most enjoyable and satisfying book. Thoroughly biblical and practical with principles drawn from the New Testament and lessons gleaned from history. (136 pages)

4. Gerard Berghoef and Lester De Koster, "The elders handbook" (1979)

A classic book from the Reformed Churches. Its value is that it is intensely practical and hard to surpass in general usefulness.