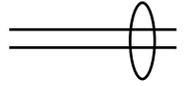


Who are we to make decisions for the congregation

Session Starter Number 10



Unison Prayer:

Living God, by your grace we have gathered for this session meeting. We assemble with personal concerns and pastoral concerns for the congregation on our minds. Bless us with the patience to hear and understand one another as fully as possible. Bless us with wisdom to know your truth. Bless us with the courage to apply your truth to the decisions we need to make. Help us to be your faithful servants. Through Christ Jesus, our Lord, we pray. Amen.

Introduction:

Within our church, the session possesses significant power and authority. Section 105.2 of the *Book of Forms* states that the session meets, "...for the purpose of establishing good order and providing for the pastoral care of the congregation. All who are members are subject to the authority and discipline of the session." We ought not to treat this authority carelessly. As a session, we have been called by God, to make wise and holy decisions on behalf of the members and adherents of our church.

Scripture:

(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)

After they (meaning Paul and Barnabas) had proclaimed the good news to that city (Derbe) and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, then on to Iconium and Antioch. There they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, 'It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God.' And after they had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe.

Acts 14:21-23

A Brief Commentary: *(Invite another elder to read the following commentary)*

The first time Paul and Barnabas visited Lystra, the locals eagerly mistook them for the Greek gods, Zeus and Hermes when Paul healed a lame man (Acts 14:8-19). Paul quickly convinced them that he and Barnabas were mere mortals who had come to tell them about the living God. While some believed, others were persuaded to attack Paul with stones and leave him for dead. Paul survived and fled to Derbe. After a time there he risked returning to Lystra, where he encouraged the believers. Between this first and second visit, it had become clear who among the Lystra believers possessed gifts suitable for the office of elder. With prayer and fasting, Paul appointed them leaders to oversee and guide this community of faith.

Reflection:

Two thousand years of history have slipped by since Paul and Barnabas appointed elders to provide leadership to the fledgling community of faith in Lystra. We continue to emulate this ancient model and appoint elders within our congregations through an election and discernment process. We do so in the faith that God calls women and men to this ministry through the fervent prayer and the careful thinking of congregations. We are reminded, therefore, that elders must not be selected on the basis of popularity or as a reward for years of service. The choice must always be grounded in the understanding that God gives some gifts to provide a specific kind of ministry within congregations. As stated in *Living Faith*,

Through the office of elder
men and women are ordained to share with the minister
in the leadership, pastoral care, and oversight of the congregation. (*Living Faith* 7.2.4)

In order to provide leadership, pastoral care, and oversight within a congregation, the session must exercise a certain amount of authority. This authority makes some elders nervous possibly because, in our society, authority is often abused by those who have it and mistrusted by those who do not.

A while ago I was moderating a session meeting. As we drew near the point of voting on a recommendation that would have a significant impact on the congregation, one of the elders almost frantically asked, "Who are we to make decisions on behalf of the congregation?" To this elder it seemed dangerously presumptuous for the session to make decisions affecting the rest of the congregation.

Ironically this is exactly what sessions are meant to do. Called by God, we are to use the gifts of God to lead and serve the people of God. The constitution of The Presbyterian Church in Canada entrusts sessions with significant power. Naturally, the authority bestowed upon elders is meant for the good of the church and should never be used for self-serving purposes.

There are times when surveys are helpful. A session that wanted to move worship from 11 a.m. to an earlier time sent a questionnaire to the congregation in order to find out what new time suited most of the people. While a questionnaire can discover what a congregation prefers, ultimately it is the session that must decide what time the congregation will meet for worship.

There are situations when congregational voting is necessary, such as during the call to a minister or when decisions are made at congregational meetings. Still, the responsibility for the life of the congregation rests with the session. A quick glance at the headings scattered through the 'session' portion of the Book of Forms makes this clear. The session is responsible for seeking out, preparing and admitting professing members, for providing Christian education, for all aspects of stewardship, for mission and outreach and much more.

As elders, we should do all we can to ascertain the needs and expectations of the

members and adherents of our congregation. We bring this knowledge to each session meeting. Then we must not shrink from our calling to make decisions -- some of them difficult decisions -- on behalf of the congregation in faithful obedience to scriptures and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Who are we to make decisions for the congregation? We are the session.

Suggested follow-up question:

1. What authority figures or institutions do you trust? Why?
2. What authority figures or institutions do you not trust? Why?
3. Discuss a time when the session's authority was challenged or questioned. Why did that happen?
4. Discuss a time when the session used its authority to make an unpopular but necessary decision.

