
Engaging in God's Work:

Ruling Elders in The Presbyterian Church in Canada

Part 4: Elders and their relationship with other church leaders

Introduction

Has tension ever crept into the relationship between your session and board of managers? If so, you may have noticed that confusion over responsibilities, boundaries and authority frequently lies at the heart of it. This confusion is not surprising since the ministries of these two bodies often overlap. This issue of *For Elders* will attempt to sort through some of this confusion and provide guidance for working in harmony with one another.

Of course there are congregations that function without a board of managers. Some smaller congregations, for example, do not have enough leaders to form both session and board therefore the session fulfils both roles. Other congregations have chosen to appoint a committee or two of the session to look after matters of finance and maintenance. Even if your church has adopted one of these models don't stop reading. I hope you will still find something of value for your congregation in the next few pages.

There is also, on occasion, further confusion regarding the minister's role on the session and with the board. It is hoped this issue of *For Elders* will also shed a little light of these relationships.

If you have a session and a board of managers in your congregation, pause before reading the following information and make two lists of what you perceive to be the role/tasks/jobs of the session and the role/tasks/jobs of the board.

The Session and the Board of Managers

The *Book of Forms* ties the work of the session and that of the board of managers very closely together.

- 113.6.4 If a board of managers is elected by the congregation, the session will work closely with it to ensure that all aspects of the financial affairs of the congregation are managed in keeping with directives of the courts of the church.**

The session is responsible ...

Primary responsibility for the financial responsibilities of church life belongs to the session.

- 113 The session is responsible for all aspects of stewardship and mission, both spiritual and material, within the congregation.**

The sub-sections that follow 113 address the session's responsibility to see that the congregation is kept aware of, and encouraged to support financially, the work of Christ. They also indicate that moneys raised within the congregation shall be used in accordance with the directives of the session and the higher courts of the church. In section 109.2, the session is assigned responsibility for all policies and procedures regarding the use of church buildings and property.

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- 109.2 The session is responsible for all policy and procedures with respect to the use of the church buildings and property subject to the provisions in sections 114.6 and 163.**

The board is responsible, too ...

What, then, are the responsibilities of the board of managers?

- 162. The duties of the board of managers have special regard to the temporal and financial affairs of the congregation. It is their duty to co-operate closely with the session (which is responsible for all aspects of stewardship) in encouraging the liberality of the people in support of the congregation's total ministry, and to disburse all moneys received for this purpose, subject to the approval of the congregation; to provide for the payment of the minister's stipend and other salaries; and generally to administer all matters committed to their charge as the congregation may from time to time direct.**
- 163. It is the duty of the board of managers to care for the place of worship and other ecclesiastical buildings, and to see that they are kept in good condition and repair.**

Simply put, it is the work of the session to provide leadership and direction in the life of the congregation. That includes the church's finances and property. It is the work of the board of managers to look after the finances and property honestly, wisely and in accordance with the direction of the session. It is this distinction that sometimes becomes blurred and gives rise to misunderstanding and tension.

It is not the objective of this resource to explain in any detail the work of the board of managers. The focus will be on the relationship and interaction between the session and the board. It is important for the harmony of the church and for the effective promotion of the work of the gospel that this relationship be clearly understood and regularly strengthened.

After reading the above information, go back to the two lists you created from page (1). Has your understanding of the roles/tasks/jobs of session and board changed? Were there surprises for you as a result of the reading? Do you need more information about the roles of either session or board? If so, how could you obtain this information?

Pause before proceeding, and ask your group:

Which kind of congregation are we:

Family-sized (less than 50 people in attendance at Sunday worship)?

Pastoral-sized (50- 150 in attendance at Sunday worship)?

Program-sized (150-350 worshipers on Sunday)?

Corporate-sized (more than 350 worshipers on Sunday)?

The size of the congregation...

As noted in the February 2004 issue of *For Elders*, the way in which the session operates is affected by the size of a congregation. The session's relationship with the board is similarly, affected.

Since there are usually comparatively few leaders in a **family size church** (less than 50 people in attendance at Sunday worship), it is very likely that the board will be composed completely, or almost completely, of members of the session. At the very least, the session will be well represented on the board. Therefore the board should never be in doubt about the session's direction, and the session should never be taken by surprise by decisions of the board.

In a pastoral size church (50 to 150 in attendance at Sunday worship), there is more differentiation between the members of session and board. It is common to have both a session and a board, and there may be no elders on the board at all. This distinct membership, coupled with the fact that session makes policies while the board is responsible to manage according to those policies, increases the need for intentional and clear communication between the two groups.

There are at least four ways of achieving this level of communication. First, an elder should be appointed to act as a liaison between session and board. This elder would attend board meetings, take part in discussions, but would not have a vote unless s/he was also an elected member of the board. Her/his primary function would be to convey information between the two groups. Second, the board should regularly report on its work to the session. This could be done by supplying the session with a copy of board minutes. Third, the session should provide the board copies of any public documents it produces that affect the work of the board. Fourth, the session and board should arrange to meet together at least once each year to discuss congregational plans and stewardship. In some congregations, these bodies meet as often as four times each year.

There are two extremes that must be avoided in this session/board relationship. On the one hand, the session should guard against reviewing every action of the board. The board is elected by the congregation and entrusted with duties. It should be given a certain amount of freedom to do its work. On the other hand, the board should not consider itself independent of the session, free to act without regard for the session's policy-making authority and responsibility.

To foster harmony between session and board, three principles may be followed.

1. Reports from the board to the session should enable the session to determine clearly whether or not its policies are being followed.
2. Since *The Book of Forms* (Section 171) only requires the board of managers to meet quarterly, it may be a good general rule that sessions require reports from the board no more often than that.
3. It should be understood by both session and board that whenever either body senses that actions being taken are pushing the margins of session policy, there should be a joint meeting, either of both bodies or of representatives, to clarify the policies and ensure that they are being followed.

It is in the pastoral size church that questions about the **minister's involvement on the board** of managers are most likely to arise. This is because in the pastoral size church the members of the congregation see the minister as their leader. In the smaller family sized church a few key leaders, other than the minister, tend to hold the leadership authority. In the larger program churches and corporate churches the complexity of the organization removes the minister from hands-on management.

Some ministers have little or no financial expertise and little or no interest in board matters. At one extreme, a minister may even reject any financial involvement as being "unspiritual", a position which *The Book of Forms* does not take. Other ministers have a great interest in stewardship and resources, and are therefore likely to want to be involved in the work of the board of managers. Ministers may attend any board meetings and should do so whenever possible especially if requested by the board to be present. The minister should not seek to control the way the board carries out its work, but to provide spiritual and moral support, further links with the session, and pertinent information about session policies and the overall life and activities of the church. The minister cannot be elected a member of the board, nor can s/he vote at board meetings.

Some congregations have chosen to adopt session committees to deal with finance and maintenance issues. The minister would relate to these committees as s/he would any other. By virtue of her/his role in the congregation, s/he is a member of the committees, with voice but no vote. Her/his attendance is permitted, but not required.

In the **program sized church** (150 to 350 worshipers on Sunday), and even more in the **corporate sized church** (more than 350 worshipers on Sunday), the minister has little personal involvement in the various groups which make up the congregation. The minister works with leaders in those groups to ensure that they are functioning well and are following the policies of the session. In these situations, it is common for the minister to meet at regular intervals with the chairperson of the board, either privately or as part of a management group. Reports to the session from the board become increasingly important. The session representatives on the board have a great responsibility to be the conduits for communication between the two bodies. In these larger churches, micro-management by the session is virtually impossible. Responsibility and authority is delegated, although the session remains ultimately responsible for the life of the congregation.

Regardless of the size of your congregation, communication is vitally important. As a group, list ways to improve communication. This might include ideas such as these:

- make a regular schedule for reporting
- name one person specifically to give the report, although this person may vary from time to time
- define the reason for reporting/communicating and so on

The Elders and the Minister

The Minister of Word and Sacrament has a two-fold relationship with the elders in a congregation.

- 105.1 A minister in charge sustains a dual relationship. In respect of his/her judicial functions, he/she is a constituent member of the session, and it is inaccurate to speak of "the minister and session". In respect of his/her ministerial functions, he/she is the executive of the presbytery, and as such distinguishable from the session.**

The minister is an elder...

On the one hand, the minister is one of the elders on the session. S/he is always the moderator of the session, and no session meeting can be held without her/him. As moderator, the minister presides over session meetings by preserving order, taking votes, announcing decisions of the court and pronouncing censures. The moderator may introduce competent business to the court, may address issues, but may only vote when required to settle a tie.

- 115. The minister is *ex officio* (by virtue of office held) moderator of the session. Where there are two ministers they preside alternately, or as may be agreed between them.**
- 115.1 Where there are two ministers, the minister not presiding sits and votes as an ordinary member, unless it is otherwise authoritatively regulated.**

The minister represents presbytery...

On the other hand, the minister is also a member of the presbytery and represents the presbytery within the congregation. The presbytery, as a court comprised of a number of teaching and ruling elders, is sometimes referred to as "the corporate bishop". Together, members of presbytery fulfill, to a degree, the role of bishop in a hierarchical church where the bishop is considered the pastor of all the churches in a diocese, and the priests within the diocese assistants through whom the bishop exercises his/her pastoral responsibilities. Similarly, the presbytery functions as pastor to all the churches, and the ministers who are part of the presbytery are the executives through whom the presbytery carries out its responsibilities. One area where *The Book of Forms* specifically assigns the position of "executive of presbytery" to the minister is when s/he leads in worship. (See Book of Forms, section 111.)

One of the areas the minister stands apart from the elders, therefore, is in the worship service. It is not that the minister is exclusively in control of the worship service and that the elders have nothing to do with it. There are areas of session responsibility (and remember that the minister is part of the session) and areas of ministerial responsibility. It is important that we understand clearly the division of responsibility.

The font, table and pulpit...

Presbyterian worship can be partly defined by three symbols: the font, the table and the pulpit.

The font

The font symbolizes the sacrament baptism. By baptism, children born of Christian parents and new Christians are incorporated into the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church of the Lord Jesus Christ. The session is given clear responsibility for the administration of baptism. (Section 110.4) But at the same time only a minister of the Word and Sacraments is authorized to perform baptisms.

The table

The table symbolizes the sacrament of Holy Communion. At the table of our Lord Jesus Christ his people are united to him and to one another as they partake of his body and blood which represent his atoning sacrifice. The Session also has responsibility for the celebration of Communion, although that is simply stated as "The session determines the appointed times and provides for the administration of the sacraments." (*Book of Forms*, section 111.1) But, again, only a minister of the Word and Sacraments is authorized to lead that joyous celebration.

The pulpit

The pulpit symbolizes the preaching of the Word and the worship of God. Both the minister and the session play a role in worship. *The Book of Forms* says;

- 111. As the executive of the presbytery, the minister is responsible for the conduct and content of public worship and for the supply of the pulpit.**
- 111.1 The session is responsible for regulating the hours and forms of public worship and for arranging special services. The session determines the appointed times and provides for the administration of the sacraments.**

The minister is responsible for "conduct and content" of public worship while the session is responsible for the "hours and forms". These two sections of the Book of Forms have sparked a significant amount of reflection and discussion among ministers, elders and others in the congregation who care passionately about what happens during worship.

It has been said that the authority of the session stops at the chancel stairs. In other words, while the session decides on the time of worship, when the sacraments or other special services will be celebrated, it is the minister who decides on how the service is conducted and what is said from the pulpit. In practice, ministers and elders need to work together and listen carefully to each other about matters of worship. If the minister, for example, decides to reform the Sunday service entirely so that all the music is contemporary and power point projections replace Bibles and hymn books, s/he would be wise to discuss this with session to obtain support before proceeding.

It is important for the well-being of the congregation that minister and elders work together harmoniously, with mutual love and concern, in matters relating to worship as in all other aspects of the life of the church.

If you have been using the previous three sessions in this series as a study, take some time to reflect on what the entire study has meant to you. Offer a prayer of thanksgiving for the things learned.

For a more creative approach, give each participant a colourful construction paper leaf. Ask him/her to write on the leaf a word or phrase that describes what each has learned in the study or what they appreciated in this exploration.