

The Presbyterian Outlook

The top ten responsibilities of the Session

April 17, 2006 by [Earl S. Johnson Jr.](#) [Leave a Comment](#)

(Editor's Note: this article is the sixth and final one in a series on "What is a Presbyterian Elder?"•)

Whenever I ask our young people a rhetorical question at the time for the Children's Sermon during the service of worship several of them inevitably give the answer "Jesus."• No matter what I ask, the response is the same. Presumably they have learned that the odds are good that he is the right answer to almost any query. Somewhat similarly, when I lead officer training workshops in our presbytery and around the country I always ask new elders, deacons, and trustees to give a singular answer to this question: What duties of the church belong to the Session? "All of them"• is usually the right answer since the Session has to make decisions on most matters that concern the life and work of the local church unless they are specifically given to the pastor or to some other governing body.

What are the top ten responsibilities of the Session?

Perhaps it would not be as interesting or funny to list them in reverse order like they are on late night talk shows, especially since our constitution does not prioritize them, but it might be useful to summarize them in this tenfold way to make them easier to learn and consider.

1. Evangelism. The *Book of Order* begins where most Presbyterians might expect (G-10.0101a.,b.), with a fundamental call to all members to witness in word and deed to their faith in Jesus Christ in accordance with the Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20 and Paul's admonition in Colossians 3:17. The members of Session are charged with inviting people who attend the church into the new life in Christ and with receiving them into membership when they are ready to join. This first responsibility reflects the promise all elders make in their ordination vows when they agree to seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ in their own lives, love their neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world (G-14.0207 f.). All elders are expected to make their speech and conduct audible and visible witnesses to the presence of the living Lord wherever they live and work.

2. Mission and Justice. The Session also has the responsibility to lead the congregation in participation in the mission of the whole Church in the world. What we do in mission is nowhere limited only to our work in the local community, as critical as that is. It includes ministry with all people everywhere who are truly God's children. The range of our mission, as G-3.0000 "The Church and Its Mission"• makes clear, is only restricted by our own imagination, love for others, and the energy given us by the Spirit. Specifically, the Session must lead the congregation to give its life for others through healing and reconciliation; ministering to the needs of the poor, the sick, the lonely and powerless; engaging in the struggle to free the world from sin; and sharing with Christ in the establishing of his just, peaceable, and loving rule in the world (G-3.0300 c.). The importance of mission in the Session's work locally is mentioned in G-10.0102 g. where Session is reminded "to lead the congregation in the ministries of personal and social healing and reconciliation in the communities in which the church lives and bears its witness."•

3. Worship. One of the chief duties of the Session is to lead the members of the church in the way they worship God (G-10.0102 d.). Although the pastor selects the Scriptures and hymns and decides what the sermon will contain, the Session exercises overall control of the time and order of worship, the scheduling of the Sacraments, and the nature of the music program. Major changes cannot be made in the way a congregation worships in any of its services without the express approval of the Session. Detailed instructions are found in the Directory for Worship.

4. Education. When most elders are asked what area needs to grow the most in their church, education is always at the top of the list. More specifically, they often reply that they are almost desperate to find ways to attract new members, especially young adults who will bring their children with them. The Session bears ultimate accountability to provide an educational program that is consistent with Reformed teaching about the Scriptures and presents the good news of Christ in the most innovative and engaging ways possible. Great changes are being made in educational techniques in elementary schools, junior highs, high schools, and colleges and universities all over the world, and elders can no longer be content with a type of Church School program that would have been satisfactory for their great grandparents. A quick glance at educational programs (and advertisements) on television indicates how far some of our churches have to go and indicate why many of our children constantly tell us that Sunday morning is "borrrring"• ! In addition to supervising the church school and the educational program for children and youth (G-10.0102 f.), the Session must also train adults as they grow in personal faith and prepare to bear witness to the world (e.), and provide training for new church officers (k., l.). It is difficult to imagine how Christian adults can witness to their faith and do justice in the world if their faith and knowledge are not being challenged and stretched.

5. Stewardship. The members of Session are directed to challenge the people of God with the duty and the *privilege* (G-10.0102 h.) of sharing their money, time, and talents. This implies that elders must be directly involved with the development of a creative and Spirit-directed stewardship program that calls on the generosity of the members at the

deepest level. One of the highest callings in the Reformed tradition is leading Presbyterians to shun the crass materialism that infects all of us in order to utilize the gifts of creation for God's purposes, G-2.0500 a. (3). In addition, the Session must insure that offerings are collected properly and that money is distributed honestly to the missions to which they were promised. Session members are expected to provide an example to the congregation in their own pledges and volunteer activities.

6. Finance. According to G-10.0102 i., the Session has the exclusive power to establish the annual budget of the congregation, determine how mission money will be allocated, and decide how and when offerings will be taken for outside groups. Although a process may be established to elicit the input of all committees and groups within the church, and the trustees may be closely consulted, the budget finally belongs to the Session. It is responsible for making it, for monitoring it, for investing the church's money, and making sure that all financial dealings are conducted according to the highest legal and moral standards.* A closely related task is the important responsibility of providing "full information to the congregation of its decision in such matters,"• presumably through complete and regular reporting in the church newsletter or other media.

7. Transformation. The members of the Session must find ways through prayer, study, and research to keep in touch with the Holy Spirit in such a powerful way that they can fulfill the charge to "lead the congregation to discover what God is doing in the world and to plan for change, renewal, and reformation under the Word of God."• If we truly are a denomination that is reformed and always being reformed "according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit"• (G-2.0200), the local congregation must take the lead in being open to change, creative challenge, and the possibility of taking risks for the sake of the gospel. The Session leads the way in actively trying to find out where Jesus Christ is going and joining him there. Rather than being threats to the old ways of doing things, change and reformation can bring out the best in us and force us to be fresh and new.

8. Administration. In some churches administration is considered to be a necessary evil and is denigrated to lower ranks of priority in the church's goals. When the special place administration is given in the scriptural list of the gifts of the Spirit is considered, such a perspective is especially short sighted. Administration is the only gift, in fact, to be listed twice by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:27-31 ("forms of assistance,"• "forms of leadership"•). One of the words he uses there describes the activities of the captain or a pilot of a ship.* The Holy Spirit gives some church officers and pastors special talents to organize the cargo loading of the church in such a way that, as it sets out on the course that God determines, it does not founder. Specifically, this important work involves supervising of the deacons, the trustees, and all other organizations in the church; overseeing the administration of the church—long range planning, the maintenance of property and buildings, the obtaining of proper and necessary insurance, and the maintenance of membership and baptismal rolls, as well as ordination records (G-10.0202 m., n., o., s.)

9. Relating to Higher Governing Bodies. The Session is the only body in the church that can elect commissioners to presbytery. In so doing it must implement all principles of participation and inclusiveness that guarantee fair representation. The Session also observes the carrying out of the instructions of higher governing bodies: meeting with representatives of the presbytery when they come to review the church's work; communicating concerns of the congregation to the presbytery, synod, and General Assembly; sending an annual statistical report to the presbytery, as the presbytery requires; and serving in judicial matters in the larger church (G-10.0200 p., r.). Because we are part of a connectional system, the local congregation is directly linked to all other parts of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and it is the Session's responsibility to keep those links clear and strong.

10. Ecumenical Connections. The tenth, but by no means least, important responsibility of the Session, as G-10.0202 q. puts it, is "to establish and maintain those ecumenical relationships necessary for the life and mission of the church"• in the local community. Normally that task involves participation in the local council of churches and possibly in regional interfaith organizations. Because Presbyterians acknowledge themselves to be part of the world-wide Body of Christ, we are proud to count other Christians as our brothers and sisters in faith, and our congregations look forward to working with other denominations to accomplish more together than we can individually. Since we also are open to the ministries of those who practice other religions, we open our hearts to those who see God in a different light than we do with the hope that the one God will bless all of us as we labor together to create a community-wide vision of love, service, and justice.

This brief summary of the work of the Session gives a partial portrait of all that it is required. Many of the functions that elders must take on are outlined in more detail in the *Book of Order*, especially in the Directory for Worship. Even in a thumbnail sketch the grave nature of the responsibilities are clear and demanding enough to make most elders wonder how they can be adequate to the required tasks. The fact is, of course, that individually, and even as groups, we are not strong and wise enough to do all that is expected of us. That is why Presbyterians try to remember that they are dependent at all times and in all circumstances on Jesus Christ who alone calls the Church into being and gives it all that is necessary for its mission to the world, for its building up, and for its service to God"• (G-1.010 b.)