



QLD PRESBYTERIAN
ELDER TRAINING

THE ELDERSHIP PAPERS

FOR THE TRAINING OF ELDERS IN THE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF QUEENSLAND

Eldership Paper 4



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Eldership Paper Four

The Elder and the Session

Introduction

In the previous Eldership Papers, we have largely dealt with the Elder as an individual or as part of a body of Elders that included the Minister.

In this paper, we will be distinguishing the role of the Elder from the role of the group of Elders - the Session - and this will also prepare us for future papers that deal with the denomination and the role of the Session and Elders within it.

An Elder and a Minister are Not a Session

A principle of Presbyterianism is that all Courts of the denomination (Session, Presbytery, State Assembly and Federal Assembly) exercise authority over a particular range of issues and yet are still accountable for the exercise of that authority¹¹. We will explore this stratification and limitation of power in more detail in the next paper – The Elder and the Denomination – but at the beginning of this paper it is important to make a distinction between the role and power of a Session as compared to the role of the Elder and the limited authority of the Minister.

Hats

One helpful way of approaching this is by thinking of the different ‘hats’ that an Elder will wear at different times:

- The Elder as a Child of God ‘hat’
- The Elder as a mature follower of Jesus ‘hat’
- The Elder at Session ‘hat’

¹¹ The Westminster Confession, as well as the Larger and Shorter Catechism, were developed during the English Civil War. A war waged against Charles I who claimed to rule by Divine Right and resisted any attempt by Parliament to be accountable.



The Elder as a child of God ‘hat’

Fundamental to an Elder is not that they are an Elder, but rather, they are a child of God through his grace revealed in Christ. This places him with all other children of God as a forgiven sinner and human being undergoing restoration in the image of Christ, as fellow servants in Christ in the local church.

The Elder as a mature follower of Jesus ‘hat’

As we have seen, Eldership is primarily recognition of being a model of Christian maturity accompanied by the ability to teach and the ability to care in a complex system like a household. The Elder should be aware that being a model of Christian maturity is fundamental to their public role. As a mature member of the church who has a pastoral role for the household of faith, an Elder should be able urge and encourage spiritual maturity in their brothers and sisters through conversations and prayer.

The Elder at Session ‘hat’

The Session meeting is a meeting of a Court of the denomination. The Elder has a deliberative and determinative role in local church policy, discipline and direction. It is to Session and not to the Elder that power is given. Outside of the Session meeting, the Elder does not have the power or authority that the Session has but does have the influence of any mature member of the church.

Constitutionally, Ministers have very little power except over what happens in public worship, including funerals, marriages, and in the service of ordination of Elders. The Minister determines who may preach, and as a function of his role as teacher determines that all teaching material is appropriate (Code 3.45; 3.48). The Minister also controls which religious groups may use the property belonging to the congregation (Code 3.46). However, the Minister can develop an authority over time by teaching God’s Word well.

Both Elders and Ministers are ordained and essentially make the same promises, with some differences. Another principle of the Presbyterian denomination is that those who make promises are given particular responsibilities. This includes Communicant members as well as Elders and Ministers.



The Code

In the following Papers we will be quoting the Code. The Code is the document that has been developed over a significant time as a guide to:

- What the different responsibilities of the different Courts are, and how they are to relate to each other
- How the responsibilities of those Courts and office holders in the Courts are to be performed within the Presbyterian Church of Queensland.

The Code in Action

The Code should operate like the bones in a body; unseen but important when particular actions are required, e.g. making significant decisions, or in times of crisis. In normal church life, the relational, gospel ‘flesh’ is on display not the ‘bones.’ When there is a crisis the wise processes of the Code can bring calmness and direction in a difficult situation.

Courts

The Presbyterian denomination in Australia is made up of four Courts¹²:

- Session
- Presbytery
- State Assembly
- Federal Assembly

Session

The Session is the Court of each local church, composed of Elders and called Ministers.

The Oxford Shorter Dictionary defines a Session as:

“ 2a *The meeting of a legislative or deliberative body to conduct its business;*

The Role of the Session

Below is a summary of the function of the Session from The Code Rules 17-19.

1. **Oversee and promote the spiritual health and fruitfulness of the Church in regard to public worship, teaching and discipline.**

¹² We will be looking at the Presbytery, State Assembly and Federal Assembly in greater detail in the following Eldership Paper



2. Supervises all ministries and groups within a church including of all employed staff, according to the rules and practices of the Presbyterian denomination.
3. Determine the time, date and place of public worship, the Lord's Supper and Baptism.
4. Admit persons to membership of the church.
5. Discipline erring members and restore them to membership.
6. To call congregational meetings.
7. Examine the suitability of persons for Eldership and membership of the Committee of Management.
8. Ordain and induct Elders.
9. Appoint leaders and group leaders of ministries such as Sunday Schools, Youth Groups, Growth Groups etc.
10. Nominate special offerings in agreement with the Committee of Management.
11. Receive and discuss petitions from members of the church.
12. Provide for the care of the poor.
13. Ensure the sending and receiving of appropriate documents to Presbytery, state and federal Assembly.
14. Ensure secure holding of congregational records.

How this Might be Done

It is one thing to have these responsibilities described it is another to ensure they are appropriately done. Below are a few ideas of how a Session can keep its fingers on the congregational pulse.

- The Minister provides a review of the things he has been doing since the last meeting. This is not 'hours spent in ...'. Rather, it is an opportunity to encourage questions about to be asked about pastoral issues, upcoming issues and, above all, prayer for those issues.
- The Session approves the job description of all paid staff workers, and ministry leaders. Therefore, in order to understand each ministry area for each Session meeting a different ministry leader or staff worker, if there are any, provides a one-page summary of how their ministry is going. This is provided a few days before the Session meeting. The ministry leader then attends the Session meeting and is given perhaps half an hour could be given in the meeting, broken up as: 20 minutes to ask questions about the report (how their ministry is going, and how they are going in their ministry?)



and 10 minutes given to praying for the leader and members of the ministry.

- Developing policies and processes for regular occurrences in the life of the church. This way, repeating issues can be dealt with before the Session meetings, allowing Session time to be spent discussing new issues and not going over the same ground every time.

These regular occurrences would include:

- Approving information documents about membership, baptism or giving.
- A policy for interviewing the parent/s for prospective infant baptism and candidates for adult baptism
- A policy with regard to interviewing prospective members
- A process of conflict within the church community

A Session is required to meet for its business at least four times a year. Most Sessions meet monthly however, these meeting don't always have to be official Session meetings where decisions are recorded.

Session meetings should not look like the board meeting of a secular business. This decline into a mere business meeting is not avoided by having a short Bible reading at the beginning followed by an even shorter prayer and a benediction at the end.

The purpose of a Session meeting is to deal with the spiritual oversight of the church under its care and this is a spiritual process of prayer, discussion and discernment.

A Closed or Open Session

Traditionally, Sessions are, by definition, 'closed.' This defines the discussion within the meeting as confidential. This is an incredibly important principle when dealing with difficult pastoral issues and particularly issues of discipline. However, in my experience, issues such as these did not make up the majority of items on the agenda. As a consequence, it is possible to reverse the procedure so as to start with the Session meeting as 'open' and only 'close' the meeting when dealing with confidential issues. Elders could then discuss all material with others in the church, except for those issues that occurred in 'closed' Court.

As much as is possible, Session should not be seen as a place of 'secret men's business.'



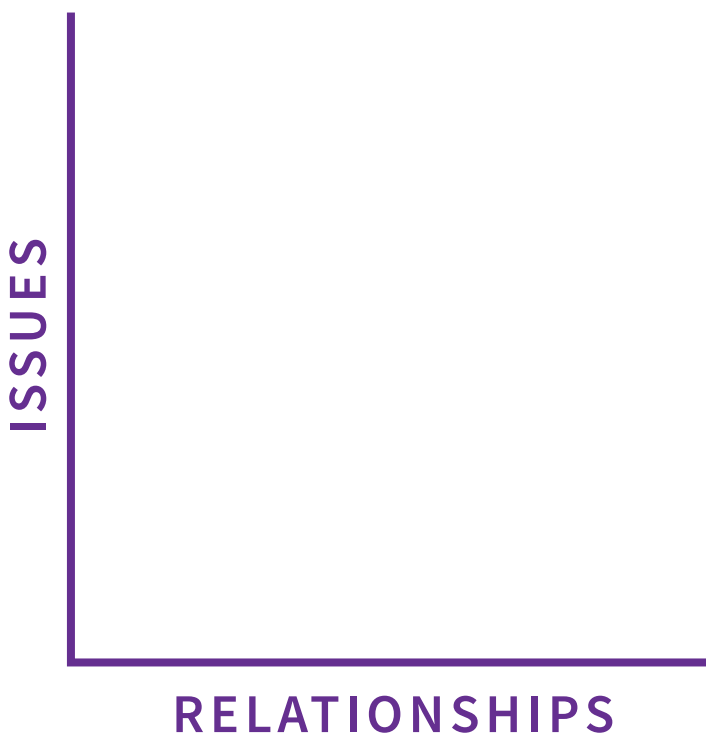
Developing a Culture of Collaboration and Discernment

Most if not all, decisions that are made concerning a church are made up of two components:

- how big, important or urgent an issue is; and
- the significance of is the relational component of the decision

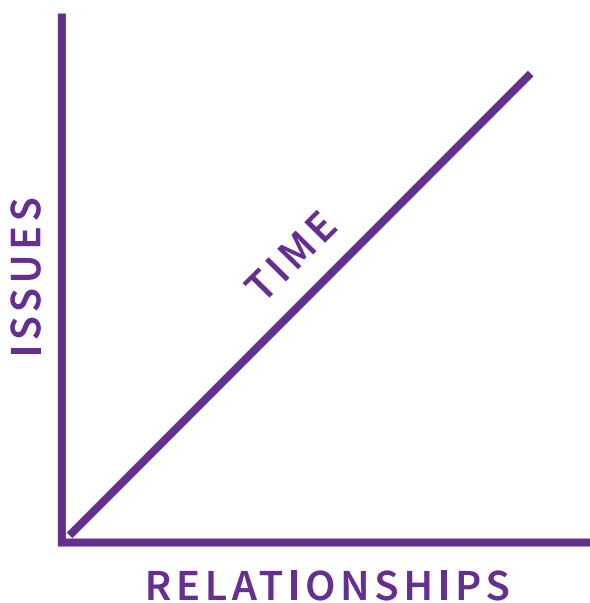
On the diagram below, discuss where you would plot the following issues. Give reasons and discuss them with the Minister and/or other Elders:

1. Evacuating the church due to a fire
2. Starting a new church service
3. Beginning a new ministry
4. Changing the time of the service





In the diagram below, I've added another vector – time. Good leadership anticipates significant issues that will impact lots of people and makes use of the time that anticipation gives.



On the diagram above, where you would plot the following 'issues.' Give reasons and discuss them with your Minister and/or other Elders:

1. The congregation is growing and there is little space for new people to join.
2. The Minister and an Elder come up with a draft paper with five options to discuss at the Session meeting to determine the top two options.
3. The Session at calls a congregational meeting to discuss the challenge of growth. They provide a draft paper to the congregation with the two preferred options, with reasons, for congregational input and feedback.
4. The Session with the congregational input determines to go ahead with option x or explore other options.
5. Sufficient lead time allows collaboration and engagement.



Discernment in Two Movements

Below you will find two resources for discernment

1. The Six Hats by Edward de Bono and
2. The Five Steps of Discernment

The Six Hats

Session is a place of discernment, but sometimes Elders experience it as a roadblock to discernment if there is unwillingness to engage in an idea, especially if it is the Minister's idea. A healthy Session is one that is able to discuss, offer different opinions and even disagree without causing relational break down in its membership. A Minister should encourage good discussion, different opinions and even healthy disagreement - but this needs to be valued and cultivated. One tool for doing this is the Six Hats - which are six different coloured hats (White, Yellow, Black, Red, Green and Blue) that represent six different sorts of thinking - all of which are valuable.

In my opinion, this should only be used for significant decisions, rather than smaller ones. Essentially, each coloured hat is given time for people to contribute thoughts that fit that colour and the results are noted. It is helpful to write the contributions on a white board.

Often a decision is fairly obvious at the end of a discussion, or at least the significant issues are identified.

The Five Steps of Discernment

This is a process of prayerful discernment over an issue that can be used by couples, groups, churches and, of course, Sessions. I've used this towards the end of a call process with the Session and the Selection Committee, and found it very useful.

Zack Eswine - Chapter 15 Leadership

In *The Imperfect Pastor*, Zack Eswine asks three questions when making a decision with the leaders of the church that I think are very helpful:

1. Is this the right thing?
2. What is the right way to do this?
3. Is this the right time?

These questions will help us make wise and timely choices.



Conflict

Decision making can bring conflict. Conflict is normal and can be good for clarifying issues and helping the Session to grow as a mature team. How the members of Session handle conflict will be an example to others.

One principle about conflict is that, in the middle of conflict it is hard to agree on the rules of healthy biblical engagement. This is best done before a real conflict issue occurs.

Two resources that will help in having a healthy Session are:

1. Covenant Commitments for Christians in Times of Tension and
2. Resolving Everyday Conflict – a Peacewise DVD and workbook

Covenant Commitments for Christians in Times of Tension – You will find this document at the end of this paper. The way I've used this with a Session is: make it available to all members of Session; work through the document in a Session meeting wholly devoted to being clear about the material; sign the document and make it part of the Session's minutes and policy documents.

Resolving Everyday Conflict – This is a seven-week training program that is helpful in dealing with conflicts that we regularly find ourselves involved in. I believe all leaders of teams, ministries and groups should have done this course but especially Elder who 'are not given to anger nor are they argumentative.



Five Step Process of Discernment



This simple five step process is designed to allow for three sources of discernment to work in harmony together.

These are:

- God-given human insight
- the wisdom of reflecting in community and
- an intentional time of listening to God.

This idea has been adapted from Gerard Hughes' *God of Surprises*.

1. Gather a small group of people who you trust, who know you well and are willing to walk a process of discernment with you e.g. husband and wife, growth group, retreat group, peer group, soul friends, (If you are a Minister you might access your Session).
2. Frame the question you are discerning in a closed form so that the answer is 'yes' or 'no,' e.g. Is my time here complete? Will I seek another term as Pastor? Should I apply for this position? Would it be good for our family to move to this location? Should we become members of this church? Is it time to resign my job? Should I take up theological study? Should I go into full-time ministry?
3. Allocate a time period for the decision, e.g. 2 weeks, 1 month, three months. Then divide whatever period you have allocated into five equal parts i.e. a month becomes 5x 6 days. You can intentionally set aside a period that more easily divides into 5 i.e. 10 weeks.
4. Then follow the outline below:

Step A: Compile the reasons for saying 'Yes'

(We don't compile a list of 'pros' and 'cons' straight away. When we do that we tend to balance a 'pro' with a 'con,' which works against the process.)



During this period the group collectively seeks to produce the most thoughtful and considered list of reasons to say 'yes' that it can. Apply as much wisdom and reflection as possible to this.

- a) The primary person asking for assistance with discernment puts together an initial list and circulates it.
- b) The group meets for discussion of these, or emails their ideas around and adds or suggests any others.
- c) The primary person edits the final list and distributes the completed list to the group on the last day.

Step B: Discern these reasons

During this period the group agrees to not communicate with each other but to pray through the list asking God for assistance in discerning how important each 'reason' is. There is no further discussion of these.

- a) Members of the group agree to pray daily and to record their reflections during or after prayer.
- b) In particular, they are asked to 'tune in' to questions that should be raised or sense that the 'reasons' listed are growing or decreasing in importance.

Step C: Compile reasons 'against' or to say 'No'

During this period the group collectively seeks to produce the most thoughtful and considered list of 'reasons to say 'No' it can. Care is taken not to simply mirror the 'first list' in negative form. Significant independent 'reasons' that stand on their own are sought for.

- a) Again, the primary person puts together an initial list and circulates it for reflection.
- b) The group meets or emails their thoughts for discussion of these 'reasons' and suggest the addition of any others.
- c) The primary person edits the final list and distributes this list again to the group on the last day.

**Step D: Discern these reasons**

In the same way as in step 2, the group agrees not to discuss the validity of the 'reasons against' but simply to pray regularly through the list asking God for guidance in discerning how important each 'reason' is (the process is to see a commonality in discernment that is not due to discussion).

- a) Members of the group agree to pray daily and to record their reflections during and after prayer.
- b) In particular, they are asked to be sensitive to questions that should be raised or the sense that these reasons are growing or increasing in importance.

Step E: Evaluate and Reflect on the changes which occurred over the discernment period

In the final period the group first reflects on the lists and their journaling in silent times and then meets to share listen and reflect together in what happened for each list; particularly during Step B and Step D as people prayed and reflected.

- a) The group members share one at a time their sense of what God confirmed or challenged over the four steps, with specific attention paid to the times of silent prayer.
 - b) The primary person should listen and then share last.
 - c) Is there a clear sense of a pattern arising from the discussion?
5. It may be that a clear direction can be affirmed as a result of this process. It also may be that, as the group discussed the outcome of the process, the critical questions to ask and answer become clear. This also may allow the decision to be made on a clearer basis.

Adapted by Tim Dyer

John Mark Ministries 2005




Revised 2015



Six Thinking Hats

Adapted from Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats

- Uses parallel thinking to arrive at a solution (design a way forward) rather than adversarial debate.
- The six hats are coloured: white, red, black, yellow, green, blue.
- The six hats represent six directions (or ways) of thinking.
- The result is a creative and collaborative investigation that leads to clarity.
- It will often save time because it removes debate that can often be a mixture of different directions of thinking at the same time.
- The function of the Six Thinking Hats is to organise the decision-making process.

| Hat | Focus | Notes |
|---|--|-------|
|  | <p>Calls for information known or needed. "The facts, just the facts."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Available data• Past trends• Gaps in the data | |
|  | <p>Symbolizes brightness and optimism. Under this hat you explore the positives and probe for value and benefit.</p> | |
|  | <p>Judgment - the devil's advocate or why something may not work. Spot the difficulties and dangers; where things might go wrong. Probably the most powerful and useful of the hats, but a problem if overused.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Why might it NOT work? | |



Signifies feelings, hunches and intuition. When using this hat, you can express emotions and feelings and share fears, likes, dislikes, loves, and hates.

- All gut feelings - intuition



Focuses on creativity: the possibilities, alternatives, and new ideas. It's an opportunity to express new concepts and new perceptions.

- Creativity
- Other ways of doing things



Used to manage the thinking process. It's the control mechanism that ensures the Six Thinking Hats® guidelines are observed.

- Process



Covenant Commitments for Christians in Times of Tension

“ Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:30)

As individual members and as the body of Christ, before God, we commit that:

In our thinking we will

- | | |
|----------------------|--|
| Accept conflict | Acknowledge together that conflict is a normal part of our lives. It arises from different needs, values interests and viewpoints. It is healthy if handled well. Rom 14:1-8; 10-12; 17-19; 15:1-7 |
| Affirm hope | Affirm that as God walks with us in conflict we can work through to a place where we can continue together and grow through the experience. Matt 18:20; Eph 4:15-16 |
| Commit to reflection | Be willing to engage in thoughtful reflection about our own attitudes, the part we are playing in this conflict and the unhelpful expectations we may be carrying. Matt 7:3 |
| Commit to prayer | Admit our needs and commit ourselves to pray for a mutually satisfactory outcome for all involved (ie we do not pray for our success or for the other to change, but for a join way forward). James 5:16 |

In our actions we will

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Go to the other... | Go directly to those with whom we disagree; avoiding behind-the-back criticism, waiting the other person out, or playing games about who should 'go first'. Matt 5:23-24; 18:15-20 |
| ...In the spirit of humility | Go in gentleness, patience, humility. Be prepared to own our part in the conflict instead of pointing out others' wrongdoing. We will be prepared to share our needs, interests, and values. Eph 4:25; Gal 6:1-5 |
| ... To seek and to offer forgiveness | We will be prepared to offer an apology for any hurts we have caused the other and to seek their forgiveness. We will be prepared to receive an apology, and before God, will seek to offer forgiveness as ti is requested of us. Eph 4:32 |
| Be quick to listen | Listen carefully, ensuring we understand what is being said and why, before responding. We will seek as much to understand as to be understood. James 1:19; Prov 18:13 |



| | |
|---|--|
| Be slow to judge | We will suspend judgements and will avoid making assumptions of other's motives. Matt 7:1; Rom 2:1-4, 14:13; Gal 5:22-26 |
| Guard our tongues | We will avoid sharp, barbed comments or replies which are hurtful. We will take great care to guard against 'labelling', threats, or words that carry a negative connotation. James 3:5; Eph 4:29 |
| Be willing to talk and work through differences | We will work through the disagreements constructively. We will grant space for all to reflect and think with compassion. We will find ways to honour each other's interests, needs, values, and concerns. We will agree to a fair and reasonable process of how the outcome will be determined. We will engage in co-operative discussion about the options and consider each fully. We will accept the emerging outcome and working with it, not against it. Acts 15; Phil 2:1-11 |
| <i>In our lives we will</i> | |
| Be steadfast in love | Be firm in our commitment to seek a mutual outcome; be stubborn in holding to our common foundation in Christ; be steadfast in love. Col 3:12-15 |
| Be open to mediation | Be open to accept skilled help. If we cannot reach agreement among ourselves, we will use others with gifts and training in mediation, consultation, facilitation, and negotiation. Phil 4:1-3 |
| Trust the community | We will trust the community and if we cannot reach agreement or experience reconciliation, we will turn the decision over to others in the congregation/denomination or from the broader church community. Acts 15 |
| Be the Body of Christ | Believe in and rely on the solidarity of the Body of Christ and its commitment to peace and justice, rather than resort to the courts of law. 1 Cor 6:1-6 |