

### ***What was involved in pastoral oversight in earlier centuries?***

When we think of the functions of the Session in the 16th and 17th Centuries, we have to remember that the church was not a minority in the community. There was only one church and everyone in the parish was under the rule of the Session.

The Session was responsible for the moral conduct of everyone in the community. Elders were required to report to the Session on any kind of bad behaviour that came to their notice – everything from breaking the Sabbath to quarrelling, from drunkenness to unchastity or adultery. The offenders would be called to appear before the Session, to make public confession and express repentance. The matter might end there but more frequently the offender had to sit on the stool of repentance in public view of the congregation for a certain number of Sundays, depending on the gravity of the offence.

For serious offences the offender might have to appear before the Session and the congregation in sackcloth and may even have to pay a fine.

The Session in those days might have to meet once a week or once a fortnight to deal with such cases and for many Sundays of the year there would be someone on the stool of repentance at public worship.

### ***What is involved in pastoral oversight today?***

Such severity of public rebuke would be quite unthinkable today but it was once a powerful effort by the church to produce a clean and orderly life among the people.

What do we mean by “session discipline” today? Have we gone too far in the other direction – the direction of the permissive society – and made each person’s conduct their own private affair, and their own conscience their only guide without reference to whether they are a member of the church or not.

Is there still such a possibility as Christian rebuke in private by an elder or a minister, where

conduct is unbecoming in a member of Christ’s Church? What is even more fundamental is the fact that the Session – minister and elders together – are jointly responsible for the spiritual welfare of the people of our congregation. If we ever lose sight of this fundamental responsibility – our responsibility to God for the people in our care – then have we not abdicated our main function in the Church of Christ?

We in the Presbyterian Church maintain that oversight of the congregation – its pastoral care, if you like – is best exercised through the Session, a group who know the people because they live among them from day to day.

But the question we need to ask is “How effective is our oversight – our *episcopate*?”

### ***What is involved in “purging the roll”?***

An example of pastoral care is the requirement that a Session purge the Communion Roll each year. Names may be removed from the roll if they haven’t attended at the Lord’s Table for two years without justifiable reason.

Such persons are not “excommunicated” for they may not be refused access to the Lord’s Table if they desire to communicate. Instead they are informed that their names have been placed on a supplementary roll and it is rather unlikely that they will present themselves at the communion service.

Purging the roll is a delicate and difficult operation that may cause mortal offence to some who have been so removed. Some Sessions simply ignore this duty while others go in for occasional wholesale purges.

It seems that the people who are liable to be purged are the very people who are in need of spiritual supervision. The aim of this process therefore should not be to drive people further away from the church but to bring them back into active fellowship.

One preliminary step might be a courteous letter from the Session, signed by the Clerk and Minis-

ter, calling attention to their continued absence from the church and inviting them to resume fellowship in worship and service. This might then be followed up with a visit from the two elders or an elder and the minister, bringing a definite invitation to return to the church. There is also an opportunity to identify and remove any causes of difficulty.

This procedure may not be easy but it puts the whole business on a proper footing of exercising spiritual oversight among the members and it may bring some back to the reality of Christian Fellowship.

### ***How does a Session promote Christian Education within the parish?***

The system of catechizing members with essential doctrine is dead in the 21st Century. But there is a desperate need for a system of adult education that aims to develop both knowledge of doctrine and Christian life-skills.

These needs are not adequately met in listening to one sermon a week. Even Sunday School is of diminished effectiveness as children usually stop attending just as they begin to grapple with the problems of living.

The session has the responsibility of seeing that the Christian Education activities of the congregation offers opportunities for the “seamless” growth and development of all members as Christians.

Of great importance is the climate of learning.

The church must give all people the chance to ask questions, to receive opinions and to discuss answers. It must provide a climate which is not overtly dogmatic and promotes thoughtful analysis of all ideas.

One area that an effective Session must provide for is the development of young leaders within the congregation.

In practical terms Sessions should promote an unthreatening learning environment, at a range of suitable times at varying levels of difficulty. These need not always be led by the minister.

### ***How does a Session initiate change and development within the congregation?***

There is an urgent need in today's congregations for more positive leadership from the Session. That body's role is not merely to keep things ticking over – doing maintenance work – but to act as the policy making body for the whole church. It is the “Board of Directors” of the whole enterprise and it must work out the new policies that meet the changing situation in which we find ourselves.

Sessions are also a stabilizing force in the life of the congregation. Ministers come and go and with them their varying emphases and enthusiasms, but the Session goes on and usually embodies the real tradition of the congregation.

The danger is that Sessions may become purely conservative or even obstructive to new ideas. “We never did that before” is a deadly welcome to any new suggestion.

But this is not good enough today. When society all around us is changing rapidly, the church cannot become a refuge for those who want to see nothing changed.

Some new initiatives may come from the minister, some from the elders. Ministers and elders need to listen to one another, but both have to listen to the world around about and ask such questions as, “What are the needs of the people in this parish?” and “How is the church to try to meet them?”

Many new initiatives will come from members of the congregation.

### ***How can the Session assist the work of other groups in the congregation?***

The Session is responsible for the spiritual effectiveness of all the organisations of the congregation.

This will mean an annual visit by one or more elders to each organisation, reporting back to answer the question “How much is this organisation contributing to the spiritual mission of the

church?”

The Session may want to consider if there are groups whose needs are not being catered for. Such groups may include such diverse groups as young married couples, older singles, young people 15-20, community activists, rare attenders, breast feeding mothers, age pensioners

# Elders Association



## The Pastoral Responsibility of the Elder

### **Some Questions for Discussion**

1. In this permissive age, how does a visiting elder raise a delicate subject of pastoral welfare with a family or an individual in that family?
2. What ranges of spiritual development exist within your congregation and how might your session provide for those needs?
3. How might you Session deal constructively with a worthwhile suggestion containing some problems and flaws that has been raised by someone?
4. What questions might an elder assigned to visit an organisation in the congregation be expected to ask the leaders and members of that group?

In this study:

- What was involved in pastoral oversight in earlier centuries?
- What is involved in pastoral oversight these days?
- What is involved in “purging the roll”?
- How does a Session promote Christian Education within the parish?
- How does a Session initiate change and development within the congregation?
- How can the Session assist the work of other groups in the congregation?