

Mission and Discipleship Council
Eldership Reflection Paper
January 2013

Introduction

This paper has been prepared by the Working Group on the Eldership for the use of Kirk Sessions as they explore and discuss the meaning of Eldership in the 21st Century. It is meant to be a document that enables discussion and is not prescriptive, but rather gives some background information, historical and theological perspectives and information which might assist Elders in their reflections.

The Group is aware that it is important to get beyond the “functional” aspects of the Eldership to the theological and philosophical areas. The Group, however, believes there is some merit in identifying the functional issues before embarking on the exploration of the crucial nature of Eldership.

1. Functions

1.1. Eldership and Ministry

It is clear that the Church sees all Christians as called to ministry and they exercise their ministry in a number of ways and in different forms. The call to ministry comes as a result of their baptism whereby they are participants in the life and ministry of Jesus and follow in his way as illuminated by the biblical accounts and the witness of the Church over many generations. What any account of the eldership and its nature must acknowledge is that all Christians are called to witness and service and whatever the eldership is, **neither** the ordination process, **nor** the call to the eldership, confers a special status on that person, raising him or her to a level of importance and power over others who are not called, or ordained, to the eldership.

1.2 Eldership and history

It is quite clear that arguments have been made to support the notion of the eldership as a biblical notion and one that is prefigured by the example and experience of the Old Testament and the Early Church. It is difficult, on many grounds to accept that the parallels are clear between what might be seen as ‘eldership’ today and what existed in the North African Church of the fourth century AD or in the ‘elders’ of the Jewish religious community before the time of Jesus. While this lack of biblical and historical precedent may be seen as a disadvantage and weakness, it may also be an opportunity to claim what is basic to the role of eldership from the biblical records and practice of the early Church, and be a means of developing new models which are flexible and adaptable in the contemporary situation of the Church today.

1.3 Elders and Deacons

What is clear from the earliest records of the Church’s life is that those who were seen as exercising the function of elders did so in the form of a particular service to the **whole community of the faithful**. It is very difficult to distinguish the work of the elders from that of deacons who were appointed, or elected, based on their gifts, to undertake forms of particular service for the good of the **whole community**. The eldership, in its diaconal aspect, therefore exists primarily in order to nourish, develop, support and assist the community that is the Church to become what it is intended to be – the body of Christ in the world. Obviously this may take many forms and is dictated not just by the gifts that are available, but the particular circumstances of the individual congregation, or group within the parish, or presbytery, that requires leadership, or facilitation or engagement.

1.4 Elders and community of the Church

Elders act in a role that has a community aspect at all times. This has been associated in the past with the attachment of elders to particular households and districts in a pastoral role (though this is a much more recent development. probably from the nineteenth century, than some would understand) However, the main duty of an elder is to serve the community in fellowship with colleagues who are

also elders and provide leadership. Elders **only exist** for the well-being and building up of the community and this is never to be forgotten in any debate regarding their nature

1.5 Eldership and leadership

Traditionally the leadership of congregations has been seen as residing in the work of the minister of Word and Sacrament and the meetings and duties of the Kirk Session. In the past the Kirk Session met – as a result of the post Reformation developments of the understanding of the true nature of the church - as an 2 agency to support the education of the young in the parish school, the relief of the poor who were resident in the parish, and to ensure that the membership was ‘under discipline’ While this role has changed dramatically over the years, there is still a sense in which the elders who serve on a Kirk Session are those given the authority to encourage and enable the discipleship of others, and in this way ‘give leadership.’ This comes in many different possible ways – through the support of young people, the provision of appropriate facilities for the congregation to have meetings of various kinds, the setting of times for worship, the links with the presbytery as it exercises oversight and discipline, the support of the distressed and alienated, the bereaved and the vulnerable, and the general facilitation of what might be termed ‘the witness of the congregation to the Gospel’ in the world and, in particular, to its parish.

1.6 Eldership and Kirk Session

It is, however, debatable that the eldership exercises leadership in the congregation and community **only** through the Kirk Session. Certainly there are several civil obligations laid upon elders in Kirk Sessions, which require a degree of leadership in the sense of decision making and taking responsibility. However, the leadership of the congregation is not limited to the membership of the Kirk Session and it is important that those who do offer distinct gifts to the church are not seen as offering ‘lesser’ or ‘less important’ service to the body of Christ because they are not elders and not part of the Kirk Session.

1.7 Size of Kirk Sessions

It is clear that the number of elders in the Church of Scotland has increased over the years while the numbers of members of congregations have declined (it would be unfair to suggest a direct corollary of these facts). There was evidence that in 1900 there was one elder for every 40 members of a congregation, and in 1991, one member for every 14 members. The duties of the elder in relation to congregational members probably have increased over the years (as well as the expectations of elders in this pastoral role) and the elder may much more significant role as a pastoral care giver in relation to the members in his or her district than was once the case.

However, this does not really justify in any way, theologically or logically, that the size of Kirk Sessions ought to be determined by the number of districts for which there is an assumed need of an elder. Indeed, many of the congregations and several reports to the General Assembly have highlighted the development of different models of pastoral care that do not require a ‘one elder /one district’ format and utilised the gifts, time and talents – and often the availability of other people - to undertake the pastoral care required in congregations.

Many Kirk Sessions operate with a committee structure and an executive, which makes recommendations on the business for the approval of the larger Kirk Session. These bodies often operate in a way similar to the Council of Assembly in relation to the General Assembly, in exercising oversight and budget responsibility that are then subject to homologation and approval at the General Assembly and acts in a co-ordinating role in relation to the other Councils and Committees of the Church.

This smaller group of the Kirk Session is able to draw on expertise, reports and insight to make recommendations, but the committees and working groups of the congregation only exist to accomplish particular functions and are task orientated. The whole membership of the Kirk Session does not spend time and energy deliberating on all matters, but sets general policy principles which the various areas accomplish on behalf of the Kirk Session, and are delegated to fulfil certain specific functions.

In this way, the principle – articulated by the Panel on Doctrine that ‘**being responsible for something does not mean all have to perform the task**’ e.g. the nurture of young people in the faith, and effective delegation of functions may be the most appropriate and sensible process as it would be the case in business when the production of reports may be the responsibility of one individual who may create the report, but he or she does not act in the direct production of copies of the report and the word processing involved and the distribution are the duties of others.

In the current climate, when people are often pressed for time and many demands are being made of them by other serious commitments (family work, health, community involvement) the Church may require to examine how it can ‘husband’ its ‘people resources’ to greatest effect.

2. Principles of Eldership

2.1 The current situation

There is certainly a good deal of support from surveys of elders undertaken by the Church in recent times for the contention that the Eldership performs a pastoral and nurturing role in congregations, and that those who are invited to become elders are recognised as having particular gifts for the pastoral oversight of congregations.

What is troubling is the way in which the many leaders in congregations are not recognised in similar ways as having particular gifts for the health and wholeness of the local Christian community. Is eldership really to be defined as ‘membership of a Kirk Session’? Is such a limited definition really necessary?

2.2 Is there an alternative view possible?

Perhaps there is some merit in examining the vows taken by elders at ordination, or reaffirmed at the time when they are admitted to a Kirk Session as ordained elders.

This will also involve some attention being given to the concept of ordination of the eldership. It is obvious – given the huge support the principle of life long ordination has had in recent times and the total rejection by the Church membership of any attempt to remove this particular ordinance of the Church and replace it with some form of commissioning, -that ordination has a value and place in the understanding of the eldership for those who undertake it. Some discussion of the concept of ‘ordination’ will follow the reflections on the vow

*Do you believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith?
Do you promise to seek the unity and peace of the Church?
To uphold its doctrine, worship, government and discipline; and
To take your due part in the administration of its affairs?*

2.2.1 Do you believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith?

Here there is a clear commitment to the faith that is celebrated by baptism, (infant or adult), and confessed anew in front of the congregation. Elders are not being asked to make a statement beyond that of other members – this is a reminder that there is no promotion to a ‘higher status’ involved by becoming an elder, but an emphasis on the faithful discipleship and belief that it is the obligation laid upon all who claim the promises of Jesus Christ. It is also a way of seeing the eldership as not a part of a social club which has no basis in religious conviction and experience, and one which demands self-examination and reflection.

2.2.2 Do you promise to seek the unity and peace of the Church?

This phrase identifies the corporate responsibility of eldership. However, it does not mention, or imply, that the person ordained as an elder has the duty, or the responsibility of membership of the Kirk Session. Rather, it demands that the person is aware that the Church is **not** a segregation of saints, but a gathering of sinners who are inclined to argument, dispute and division like all other forms of human society. It lays obligations on them to be those who create an environment of inclusion and listening – and this may be done in a variety of ways from the leadership and support of groups within

the congregations, to ensuring that the hurts and wounds, alienation and isolation of some individuals in the congregation are attended to and responded to as the Gospel would demand.

This encourages the idea that elders are those who are given the maintenance of the ethos of the congregation as part of their role, and they are to be held accountable for its atmosphere of friendship, support and care which it exhibits. It does **not** mean, -if we are to be true to the accounts of the early Church in Acts and in the gospel narratives relating to the disciples - the suppression of debate, discussion and diversity in the congregation's life. Unity is not **uniformity**, and peace is more than the absence of conflict, but the creation of an environment where the good of the body is more important than the supremacy of an individual, or group, and the perspective of Jesus is the critical factor in determining the policy, provision, or decisions required. The vow does not indicate the necessity of eliminating of healthy disagreement, but acts as an instruction and insistence on respect and toleration of each other in the way prescribed by Jesus in his earthly ministry.

2.2.3 To uphold its doctrine, worship, government and discipline

Again there is no direct instruction to become part of a Kirk Session, and any elder may fulfil this part of his, or her, vows by involvement in a range of opportunities of service in a range which may include the Bible Study group, the Guild, the Sunday School, the Youth group, pensioners lunch club, the visitation of the sick, the outreach programmes to the parish of all kinds and regular participation as a worshipper in worship services (and the leadership of them on occasion). The 'upholding' is done by more than mere voting on an issue, but on a life style and demonstration of commitment to the ways of Jesus, and surely is not to be narrowly, or exclusively, interpreted. It is to accept that the eldership is an office in the Presbyterian form of church government or the conciliar system and that decisions made by the courts of the church are binding and not options for choice (e.g. safeguarding). It declares that an elder accepts that the Presbyterian form of polity or church government is 'agreeable to' (if not prescribed by) the Word of God.

By this phrase an individual accepts or reaffirms his or her willingness to be shaped and to shape the community of the Church in the local congregation as suggested by following Jesus - the pathway of discipleship. It also reminds **all** present that there is a distinct and important relationship between discipline and discipleship. Both are rooted in the work of Jesus with the original twelve disciples. Some of the disciples had very unsteady periods, and all of them knew within their experience and minds that they had the capacity to betray Jesus, as we recall they all asked 'Lord is it I? When Jesus predicted his betrayal by a disciple at the Last Supper.

It is incumbent on all members to be under authority and the nature of discipline in the Church of Scotland –while often seen in a very negative manner in the past, is crucial to its original self-understanding (as one of the three 'marks of the Church' as reformed by Knox alongside 'the right preaching of the Word' and the 'right administration of the sacraments'). Discipline is one of the signs of the Church in its corporate existence, which encourages the positive and creative while urging the exclusion of that which is destructive and negative.

2.2.4 To take your due part in the administration of its affairs?

This is the one part of the vows which could be directly argued as indicting the need for elders to be part of the Kirk Session. However, it could also be alleged that the elder is able to act in accordance with this by supporting the Kirk Session in carrying out its decisions, by working with young people, the Guild or in the committees of the church concerned with fabric and finance. In light of the Incarnation it is difficult for a Reformed understanding of faith to see any role in the support of the whole Christian community as being merely 'temporal' and each area may be seen to enjoy a spiritual dimension as it 'builds up the body of Christ'. To eliminate a person from the office and responsibility of eldership because he or she is prevented by family circumstances, or work commitments, from attending the Kirk Session meetings, while he or she contributes to the leadership of the congregation in a multitude of other ways seems to suggest a hierarchical structure and an exclusive attitude that are unhelpful and lacking in creativity and imagination.

2.3 Ordination

For centuries the Church has ordained some of its members to specific and limited service with focused functions and recognition of specific responsibilities. Services of ordination in the Church of Scotland do not, unlike those of the Roman Catholic Church, confer an indelible mark, or character, on the individual, but celebrate the call of God, and the endowing by God with gifts to fulfil their obligations, of the individuals so ordained.

While the parallels may be a little difficult to accept, there is something in the service of ordination that is related to various 'rites of passage' in the way that they acknowledge change in the individual and the relationship of the community to the individual, like marriage, *bar mitzvah*, and the taking of oaths of office as a politician.

It also is a means where the person received public acknowledgement that he, or she, is endowed **by God** with gifts for the distinctive service to the community. These gifts are not magically given by the other people who are elders passing on some mystical knowledge. Instead, it is a time when the process of leaning and development of the individual's call and appropriate gifting are seen in a public declaration by the individual and the community as being in process, which is not immediate, or time constrained., but one which only in retrospect may be obvious. Like a birthday party, or a celebration of a marriage in a wedding reception, or a funeral service and the social gathering thereafter, the service does not actually accomplish the 'birth' or the 'marriage' or the 'mourning process' but holds up the individual and the community to God, and articulates the importance of the changes in the lives of those involved and their implications of difference for the future.

2.4 Spiritual office

This brings us to discussion of the nature of the spiritual office which is often claimed as being a characteristic of the eldership. Certainly the part of becoming an elder that is obviously spiritual is the fact that the vows are taken in the context of Christian worship (there is no provision in the Church for eldership to be a private affair and celebrated without the participation of the company of the congregation). Eldership is not something that happens without the community acknowledging the presence and call of God to the individual **and** the congregation in celebrating the beginning of a process. (This is a beginning only in technical terms as it has to be rooted in past experience and live previous commitment and demonstration of potential). Here the Church acknowledges and accepts that a new time and experience of responsibility has begun that is only possible through the endowment of the person with gifts by God and a willing response from that individual; to act on behalf of the community in exercising the duties of eldership.

The elder has a duty – alongside all the members of the church - to be a prayerful and diligent worshipper undertaking his or her membership with an awareness of the witness that he or she gives in the work in a variety of ways to the Christian faith. It this way the role of elder is not any more spiritual than any other, according to Reformed thinking – and the incarnational nature of service is such that the spiritual is found in the everyday exercise of the gifts of God –which may include teaching, administration, listening, caring, responding to the Word in daily acts of kindness and manifestation of the Gospel imperative of love of neighbour.

Eldership cannot claim to be any more 'spiritual' in this sense, but that its aspects of service come from a desire to bring the Gospel into the lives of others and that they undertake this duty and responsibility for the good order (or well- being and efficient functioning) of the congregation which would be less able to serve in this proclamatory role without their efforts.

2.5 Baptism

In the Church's understanding baptism is a call to, and a means of, entering into the ministry of Jesus Christ as a disciple participating in the on-going life of the Church which is the body of Christ. Therefore it is illegitimate to understand the eldership as having more importance though ordination, than the service rendered by those who have been baptised. It is a means whereby an individual is marked out, or is given some distinction by reason of his or her gifts for some particular form of service to the **community of the faithful** and for the good of the whole community of faith. Elders are

not ordained as elders of a congregation alone, but are ordained to eldership within the Church of Scotland

The links with baptism also suggest that the process of ordination of elders is life long and that it is a gift and calling of God that is nourished by the community as it relies upon individuals to offer their talents and time in the service of the message of the Gospel. The actual type of ministry which eventually appears in the life of a person is not seen necessarily at the time of his, or her, baptism whether at infancy, or adult. Instead, it reflects the conviction that God has called and will continue to sustain that person for service in future and that service may have different forms as the person encounters various environments, challenges and changes of circumstances. The type of service that an individual offers is often determined by his or her family situation, education, business, location and opportunity of engagement. It cannot be predicted categorically, as it relies on the Spirit to direct and detect the particular forms of service which may be undertaken.

2.6 Distinctive Character of Eldership

What then may be some of the distinctive characteristics of the eldership?

- A calling recognised by the community of the Church to a particular form of service.
- A form of service to the church community which is designed and orientated by the need to support the whole community of faith by its exercise. (It might be recognised by asking '*In what way would the body of Christ in this place be the poorer without its presence and activity?*')
- A call to use gifts and to develop skills based on those gifts in the service of the community in ways that enable the individual to recognise a community of faith aspect of his or her service
- An understanding that the call once affirmed by the community of faith, will lead to responsibility in the life of the congregation that is collegial and conciliar in form and will be celebrated by particular forms of worship as a God given opportunity, and will involve recognition by the individual and the congregation of particular gifts and callings.
- A life long journey of faithful service in which develops and supports the ministry of the baptised.
- A form of ministry that includes leadership in its many forms, and is characterised by a wide ranging and inclusive understanding of the nature of leadership.

2.7 Leadership

Leadership in congregations will manifest itself in a myriad of forms, drawn, in part from the experiences of individuals and models which are promoted and encouraged by family systems, business practice and the media. The distinction of leadership in the church ought to be that it is in a form that reflects, and is congruent with, the life of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. In this way we see a number of forms of leadership as biblical and legitimate, some of which are listed below:

- The commander who says 'follow me' and the makes statements like 'you have heard it said, but **I say unto you**'
- The servant who washes the feet of the disciples, taking up the lowest position in the household
- The questioner who engages with people and asks them to ponder on who it is they are prepared to serve as the one in ultimate control of their lives (e.g. the Rich Young Ruler, the woman at the well, Nicodemus, the lawyer asking Jesus to settle an inheritance dispute, the enquirer wanting to know the limits of 'neighbour')
- The actor who puts words into deeds in the cleansing of the Temple

- The challenger of the accepted mores of a society by accepting the tax collector and the fallen woman as those who are included in the loving concern of God
- The philosopher who takes a coin and other objects and uses them as ways of helping people to look at the world differently.

There is no rigid stereotyped form of leadership in this – nor in the accounts of the early church, where Paul and Peter, and the others were able to lead in different ways, and by different methods. The leadership of the church is **not** about suppressing gifts and personalities, but using the gifts that are given by God in a multitude of ways to benefit the Church.

Some – and here we might use reference to the metaphor of the body which was so clearly articulated by Paul – might prefer to lead from the front and analyse challenges into various tasks that have to be performed, others are more subtle in supplying the insight and questions that require to be asked, some will be very practical and get the things done that make any organisation function and well oiled, others may work in the support of the ‘up front’ persons, and others contribute to the group leadership by making astute observations and sharing insights that direct discussion and debate to achieve the purpose of a meeting.

All forms of leadership are valid and not one more important than another and most leaders use a combination of leadership styles to achieve the purposes of an organisation that they are expected to offer leadership for, and this may be true for the Eldership. Many are able to be practical pastoral care givers, or efficient managers of property and finance, and some will be better at strategic thinking rather than carrying out the basic task of administration and effective communication of decisions. Some will exercise a variety of forms of leadership in the many functions they fulfil as elders in a congregation, e.g., representing the congregation at the presbytery, participating in its discussions and debate and being involved in many local groups within the congregation and parish.

There are parallels here to the work of many professions where there are specialists and some more general workers, seen in particular in the medical area where we have General Practitioners, consultants in a variety of specific disciplines, physicians, surgeons, radiologists, palliative care experts and the attendant nursing and additional services that modern medicine depends on to deliver a health care system reflective of the capacities wrought by scientific advances.

Similar variety is seen in the legal profession with a variety of specialists, e.g., solicitors who do work on any type of case, and those engaged in civil, business, family and corporate fields. The aim of such specialism and general service is to be proficient and efficient in delivery of services. Each distinct form of service is able to offer a unique perspective, and, in many instances, each area raises questions for other areas to improve and advance care and attention to those who are the intended recipients.

Perhaps this is the model that may guide us there – is the specialist, or individual with skills in youth work, or work with the elderly, any less or more valuable than those who offer to sit on the Kirk Session, the financial management or property groups and undertake the responsibilities of an elder’s district and who are seen as being the ‘backbone’ of the church? 7 2.8 *Training* This leads naturally to the issue of training of elders. All require to be aware of the ethos of the Church of Scotland, but many will find their expression of eldership requires some practical information and skills training in relation to pastoral visitation, grief and loss, stewardship, mission, social attitudes and mores of culture and the Church’s critique. Others will require more specific knowledge in relation to children and young people, the vulnerable, frail and ill, and the practice of prayer. Some will require to be made aware of the specific issues involved in the conduct of worship in the tradition of the Church of Scotland.

There will be a commitment supporting this of on-going reflection and learning as critical to all discipleship, being shaped by the Word as it engages with the society and the culture in which the Church operates and fulfils its mission.

N. J. Robb
January 2013