



Kirk Session Away Days



Produced by the Panel on Leadership and approved by the Committee for
Training and Resources

1) What is an Away Day?

A Kirk Session Away Day is simply what the name suggests. It is a day or part of a day (or a weekend!) when a Kirk Session travels to a venue away from the congregation to spend time together addressing issues of relevance.

Away Days work equally well for congregational leadership teams (including leaders from Sunday School, Choir, Youth organisations, Presbyterian Women, etc.); congregational staff teams, or even Presbyteries. Away Days or weekends for members of the congregation can also add to the life of a congregation, but these are likely to have different objectives to those of a Kirk Session Away Day.

2) Why have an Away Day?

Away Days provide a Kirk Session with the opportunity to step back from the business of personal, family, work and congregational life and the routine business which dominates Kirk Session meetings, and to focus upon specific congregational spiritual and strategic issues which need to be addressed.

3) Benefits

Away Days have a number of benefits:

- They let Kirk Sessions focus upon important issues without the distractions of time pressure and other pressing business that impinge upon normal business meetings.
- Greater use can be made of the expertise and experience of an outside speaker or facilitator than is usually possible in a business meeting.
- The nature of an Away Day means that elders have more time to relax and to get to know one another better through worshipping, praying, sharing and discussing – and during travelling and over coffee and meals;

- In many ways this process follows the example of how our Lord Jesus Christ and His disciples spent time together informally as well as formally.
- Away Days can be an invaluable tool for “team building” and developing fellowship. They can also be times of reconciliation and renewal of purpose and vision.

Equally if there are divisions within a Session on a particular issue, the possibility of an Away Day should be considered with caution.

4) What can be done on an Away Day?

Quite simply – whatever needs to be done.

This may be addressing a specific issue in the Kirk Session or congregation. Appendix One gives an example of an Away Day during which a Kirk Session focused upon the biblical role of the eldership and how it works out in the twenty first century. Another Kirk Session took the opportunity of Away Days during a vacancy to think through the biblical purpose of the church and the ordained ministry to inform the process of calling a new minister. Appendix Two gives an example of a Kirk Session looking at the mission of the congregation.

Other uses include: developing a strategic vision for the congregation; further mission planning; a day of seeking God in bible study and prayer for a specific issue; a spiritual retreat for personal spiritual refreshment; a day of prayer (and perhaps fasting) for the congregation; training the elders in a specific issue, for example, personal evangelism and leading someone to Christ, pastoral visiting; one to one bible reading, prayer and discipleship.

5) Approaches to Away Days

Responsibility for arranging an Away Day may be undertaken by a small sub-committee of session, operating to a remit agreed by Kirk Session. The minister should be involved in the planning of an Away Day - but he should not be wholly responsible for it! Involving elders in the planning, and also in leading times of worship/prayer and sections of the Away Day is a great way of using/developing the gifts of Kirk Session members, and in creating ownership of the day.

Whilst in many circumstances it will be appropriate for the minister to have an important contribution to the presentations and discussions during an Away Day, there may be other times when outside speakers bring much of value and can help encourage the Kirk Session to think “outside the box”.

Away Days often have times of discussion and feedback and, again, an outside facilitator may be helpful here, or elders who have gifting in facilitating discussion and feedback and are forewarned and prepared for this. There are also a plethora of audio visual resources available which can be helpful.

6) Worshipping Together

We would strongly urge any Away Day to have strong elements of corporate worship. Away Days provide a fantastic opportunity for elders to worship together. If the gifts exist in the Kirk Session, or can be brought in for the appropriate times, the chance for elders to sing, pray, listen to Bible reading and preaching/teaching and sharing together is invaluable.

7) Prayer Cover

Another important element for Away Days is for the Kirk Session to pray for the day in advance and also to encourage other members of the congregation to join with them in doing so, and in praying on the day itself. Thanksgiving afterwards should also be given, without having to disclose any confidential details of the Day.

8) Venue

Whilst it is possible to have Away Days in the congregation's own premises, there are benefits in travelling somewhere else. A change of venue can help break the routine of Session meetings and can often create a helpful sense of newness. It also means nobody is tied up with providing catering – the host venue can provide this.

Asking other congregations – near or far – to host these Away Days is common practice. It also enables elders to see what other churches have in terms of facilities, resources etc. (not that we are noseey!). Some also use hotels or other specialist meeting venues – this creates a sense of importance to what is happening.

9) Practical Considerations

Whilst we must always be open to the Holy Spirit acting as He will, good planning will be helpful. A clear purpose and programme for the day and commitment to it from the whole Session is vital.

It is obviously helpful to have the Away day arranged some time in advance and discussion on date and venue may be necessary to get as many elders there as possible. Consideration of travelling arrangements and catering requirements can prevent problems on the day.

Also, checking in advance with the venue about musical instruments, bibles, hymn books, photocopying facilities etc., and audio visual aids (flip chart stands; pads; pens; laptops, data projectors; screens/suitable walls; and extension leads (always important)) can save problems on the day.

The necessary number of handouts etc. for elders attending should be ensured, as should ways of involving to some degree those elders who may not be able to make the day.

One plea would be not to leave all these things to the minister, especially if he/she is involved in leading the day. It is another good opportunity to use/develop the gifts of other elders.

10) Assessing the Day

It is important to assess the day, on several levels and consider what lessons can be learnt for future Away Days? The following questions will help:

- Did we achieve what we wanted to achieve?
- Did the day help the spiritual formation of the individuals present and also the spiritual growth of the Kirk Session?
- Practical considerations – was the venue, catering etc. suitable?

11) Follow Up

Equally important are the questions – ‘so what?’ and ‘where now?’ It is important for progress made on Away Days to impact the life of the congregation. Is there an action plan of things to do? Are there agenda items for future Kirk Session meetings? Are there further decisions to be taken?

As part of this, how and what will you communicate to elders not present? (Ask specific elders to meet with those not present to share with them?)

What and how will you share with the congregation? (If appropriate ask specific elders to report during a service and lead in prayers giving thanks for the day, praying for future developments; article in bulletin or magazine?)

It is easy to have an enjoyable day that does not really change anything back on the ground in the congregation. If that is the case the Away Day will be looked back on as a talking shop that achieved nothing and this will dampen enthusiasm, not only for future Away Days but also for the role of the session.

12) No Blueprint

Away Days are a useful tool to be used as one of the options open to a Kirk Session. Successful Away Days will not only build the Kirk Session but also successfully impact the life and witness of the congregation.

However there is no “one size fits all” in terms of frequency, venue, agenda or involvement of others from within or outside the congregation. Each congregation and Kirk Session is different and should devise its own programme of Away Days as it sees appropriate for its circumstances and the issues it faces.

Appendix One: Example of an Away Day on the Role of the Eldership

Away Day Focus: the biblical role of eldership and its contemporary outworking in the congregation

Approach

This Kirk Session Away Day was based on the book *The Shepherd Leader* by Timothy Witmer, read by the elders in advance. Biblical passages on eldership and congregational life were taught and studied at Kirk Session meetings in the preceding year.

Outcomes

- 1) Understand the biblical role of elders and the eldership i.e. the macro and the micro levels
- 2) Agree the biblical elements of each level
- 3) Encourage reflection on how we develop to fulfill these biblical roles and elements both collectively and individually
- 4) Commit to developing and implementing a phased implementation of this in the congregation (to be devised by Kirk Session Strategy Group)

Structure of Sessions

- 1) 10 minutes (maximum) of elder presenting a summary of the relevant chapter
- 2) 10 minutes (maximum) of minister presenting additional material, including ways of implementing in the congregation
- 3) 10 minutes personal reflection – each elder asked to produce a personal action plan of things to do / change / continue in his or her role as an elder
- 4) 15 minutes group discussion – feedback from this recorded, to be brought up again at future Kirk Session meetings.

Programme

| | | |
|---------------|--|-------------------------|
| 09.00 – 09.15 | Arrive and set up | |
| 09.15 – 09.45 | Opening Praise & Prayer | Elder 1 |
| 09.40 - 09.45 | Devotional | Elder 2 |
| 09.45 – 10.30 | Session 1 Shepherds know the sheep | Elder 3 |
| 10.30 – 11.00 | Coffee | |
| 11.00 – 11.45 | Session 2 Shepherds lead the sheep | Elder 4 |
| 11.45 – 12.00 | Comfort break | |
| 12.00 - 1.00 | Session 3 Shepherds feed the sheep | Elder 5 |
| 1.00 – 2.00 | Lunch | |
| 2.00 – 2.15 | Praise & Prayer | Elder 1 |
| 2.15 – 3.00 | Session 4 Shepherds protect the sheep | Elder 6 |
| 3.00 – 3.15 | Comfort Break | |
| 3.15 – 4.00 | Session 5 Implications & Implementation | Clerk of Session |
| 4.00 – 4.30 | Praise & Prayer | Elder 1 |

Appendix Two: Example of an Away Day on the God's Mission Plan

Title: **God's Big Story.... and how our little stories connect with God's**

This Away Day was designed to help elders think through the implications of God mission for themselves and their congregation. It was not intended as a formal mission planning process but to help elders engage with the mission plan already in place and to be inspired to develop it further. This Away Day requires a facilitator who could be one of the elders, the minister or perhaps a minister from another congregation.

Suggested Programme

| | |
|-----------|--|
| 1000-1015 | Tea and coffee on arrival |
| 1015-1030 | Opening devotion and prayer |
| 1030-1150 | Spilt into smaller groups for eight short Bible studies with plenary feedback for each (10 minutes each) |
| 1150-1210 | Short talk on the story of our congregation (by a long serving elder) |
| 1210-1220 | Prayer of thanksgiving for God at work in our congregation |
| 1220-1240 | Personal stories of God at work recently (two elders) |
| 1240-1340 | Lunch |
| 1340-1440 | A World Out of Sync with God's Story – the challenges we face in a changing society and the implications our part in God's mission – talk and group discussion |
| 1440-1510 | Personal Reflection Time: My Own Story (see below) |
| 1510-1530 | Prayer time |

Suggested Bible Study Material

God

1. Read the following verses:

- a. **Genesis 1:1**
- b. **Revelation 1:8**

Based on these verses, what are some of the differences between us and God?

2. God is a triune God – three persons in one who love each other perfectly. We too have a loving relationship with God. In light of this, what are some of the ways we can be like God?

Draw out in plenary feedback – the implications for our mission today are: we need to be a loving relational community to show what God is like, we need to let God be God and write the story because he is eternal.

Creation

1. Genesis 1:31-2:1

What did God see about his creation? What does it mean by 'good'?

2. In Genesis 1 and 2 we see that God has given human beings his creation to look after (1:28 and 2:15). In what ways can mission reflect God's intention that we look after his creation?

Draw out in plenary feedback – the implications for our mission today are: we can look after creation by caring for the environment but also for people!

Fall

1. In one sentence try and express what it means that humanity is 'fallen'?

2. Read Genesis 3:8-11...

What are the consequences of the fall from these verses (and the rest of Genesis 3)?

Draw out in plenary feedback – the implications for our mission today are: before the fall, humanity had one mission – to look after the earth. Now humanity itself is fallen, the church has another mission which we shall see unfolding in the next parts of the story.

Promise

1. Read Genesis 22:15-18...

Read **Galatians 3:6-9...**

How do we see this promise of God fulfilled today?

2. Read Isaiah 61:1-3...

What effects of the fall does God promise that the messiah will reverse?

Draw out in plenary feedback – the implications for our mission today are: Jesus himself said he fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 61. There are many other promises in the Old Testament. The fulfilment of these promises is part of God's Big Story today and we play our part in delivering on God's promises when we take part in God's mission.

Incarnation

1. Read John 1:14

What characteristics of God do we see in Jesus?

2. Read John 20:21

What are the implications for mission if Jesus is sending us in the incarnational way that God the Father sent His Son?

Draw out in plenary feedback – the implications for our mission today are: in mission we need to engage with those who are not connected with God – just as Jesus came down into the world and did not stay in the comfort of heaven.

Cross

1. Read **Isaiah 53:4-6**...

Based on these verses, how does Jesus solve the problem, restore the relationship, rescue from the impossible situation?

2. How can we make the atonement central to mission?

Draw out in plenary feedback – the implications for our mission today are: the atonement is what gives us a mission, it's what makes what we do the most significant thing in the world because it is the central part of the most significant story in the world

Resurrection

Read **Ephesians 1:18-23**...

How does Jesus' resurrection show us God's power to do amazing things through his church?

Draw out in plenary feedback – the implications for our mission today are: if God can raise Jesus from the dead then there is no limit to what he can do through us, the church.

Restoration

1. Read **Revelation 21:1-6**...

If God is going to restore everything what is our purpose today?

2. How does knowing how the story will end inspire us today?

Draw out in plenary feedback – the implications for our mission today are: we know the story will end well so we are filled with hope, our purpose is to lead people to Jesus so that they can be part of his happy ending too and also to show something of that happy ending now.

Personal Reflection Time: My Own Story

Spend some time on your own praying and reflecting on the following (you can keep this personal between you and God or share it with someone who will help you be accountable in doing what you believe God is asking you to do):

Personal Commitment: With the Help of God Writing His Story in My Life...

- Today when I get home I will...
- By the end of this coming week I will...
- In one month's time I will...
- In six months' time I will have...

(Each person to write down and keep and then ask some elders to share in six months' time)