

Rethinking the Kirk Session Meeting:

A resource providing suggestions for structuring and leading meetings



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

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The Purpose of the Session Meeting

It is the role of Session to “work together with the minister in the oversight and governance of the congregation, for the upbuilding of God’s people in spiritual fruitfulness and holy concord, and for the extension of Christ’s kingdom” (Code of the PCI §30(1))

The majority of the work of the elder is done behind the scenes in “practical witness both within the congregation and in the wider world.... (and) by visitation, private counsel and report” (§ 30 (2&3) see also §35)

However, the work of the eldership is corporate as well as individual, and therefore meetings of Kirk Session are crucial to the spiritual health of any church since it is there that the elders are to exercise godly wisdom, as they fulfill together their responsibilities of spiritual oversight, prayer and discipline

Session meetings, however, can often fail to fulfill these tasks. At best they can simply ensure that the “well-oiled machine” of the institution continues to run smoothly, through effective organisation and troubleshooting; at worst they can become battlegrounds for factions, competing agendas and an arena for the pursuit of petty politics. Often gnats are strained and camels swallowed as the major issues of kingdom work get forgotten amongst trivialities and minutiae.

How can some Sessions regain their spiritual calling without sacrificing their efficiency? How can others become more efficient without appearing to lose their spiritual fervour?

In the following samples we outline how Sessions of different sizes might function and succeed in both conducting their business efficiently and fulfilling their oversight effectively.

Omissions from these Recommendations

There will be issues that fall under the authority of Session periodically and which have not been included. However it should be relatively easy to discern where they should fit in to the basic template. These include:

- decisions on any future elections to the eldership and the timing of congregational committee appointments/elections (strategic);
- decision to appoint staff (strategic);
- procedures to interview/appoint staff (administrative);
- the updating of the communion roll (which should be seen as pastoral rather than administrative);
- specific matters of church discipline (pastoral);
- transmission of appeals/memorials/grievances (administrative);
- commissioning of elders to the courts of the church (administrative);
- invitations from other churches/agencies for involvement in partnership, co-operative or ecumenical events (strategic or administrative, depending on whether or not Session have previously discussed the merit of the proposed event)

Horses for Courses: Recommendations for Different Types of Kirk Sessions

The size and make-up of Session will of course affect the type of goals that are set for Session meetings and the expectations that people will have. For small Sessions (say, seven or less), the goal may be simply to encourage the elders to consider seriously what it means to be a *spiritual overseer*, to *pray* for their flock, to conduct *necessary business* and to look perhaps, at no more than *one major issue* each year and seek to *grow together* in their understanding of that issue before considering its implications for the wider congregation: - the church is unlikely to rise above its leadership!

For medium sized sessions (say, 8 - 25) who may have some full-time, part-time or volunteer staff, the goal may be to *support* these and other *leaders* in their area of service, to draw up, enact and review the *plans and priorities* agreed by the congregation, and to commit to *looking systematically* over a period of years at all the areas of church life with a view to more effective and fruitful witness.

For larger Sessions, or those who have chosen to divide the work of Session into sub-committees and working groups, there will be the need to *listen* and *keep informed* about the wide range of congregational life, yet *trust* the *groups* to do their work and resist the temptation to discuss everything at every meeting of Session. Session could become a time of *prayer, thanksgiving, encouragement* and *support* with the focus being the major *strategic decisions* that need to be made at a given time

Yet Some Commonalities: Common Strands for all Kirk Sessions

Some common characteristics run through all three samples

The **timing** at the side is to be a servant rather than a master. It has been placed there to indicate how the time allocated to various items should reflect their overall importance. Often Session discussions can get bogged down in administrative detail. This may be because elders feel more comfortable speaking about “safe issues” and things they feel qualified to speak on, rather than some of the weightier matters. However, one of the primary goals in the development of any leadership, should be assisting them to understand and fulfill their primary responsibilities. These samples show how the pastoral, spiritual, strategic and oversight responsibilities of Session need to be given more weight than the merely administrative

The **divisions** into Pastoral, Reporting (oversight), Strategic and Administrative keeps the Agenda focused and may prevent Session from getting sidetracked (as some can do) by the introduction of non-Session business (e.g. the conduct of worship - the domain of the minister; or finance and property - the domain of the Congregational Committee)

The place of **Prayer** and **Pastoral** oversight (including admission to the sacraments) reminds us that regardless of location or size, all the other things a Session does must be done in the context of prayer and with the goal of extending the kingdom through the building up of believers and witness to the world.

While the Code only requires a Session to meet a minimum of twice a year, it is difficult to see how the prayer, pastoral oversight and strategic planning aspects of the Session’s remit can be adequately carried out through six-monthly meetings. We would recommend at least quarterly, or preferably bi-monthly meetings.

Perhaps the biggest difficulty in leading and organising Session meetings is finding the balance between maintaining the fellowship and collegial aspect of Session, and transacting business efficiently. The third sample, especially, will require business to be conducted quickly and the danger will be that members may feel excluded and that discussion is stifled – particularly relevant in a large session. The antidote to this is to ensure that the fellowship and camaraderie of session is maintained and bolstered in other ways (regular retreats/socials/prayer times), and that inclusion happens through full involvement of all session in sub-committees, working groups and ministries.

Sample 1: Simple Agenda (for smaller Sessions)

Section 1: Introductory (15 mins) & Pastoral (20 mins)

1. (7.30) Devotions and Opening Prayer
2. (7.40) Apologies
3. (7.41) Minutes of last meeting & matters arising (**Note 1**)
4. (7.45) Elders' Report & Break for Prayer (**Note 2**)

Section 2: Review & Planning (40 mins)

5. (8.05) Discussion on selected area of church life / theme for the year (**Note 3**)
(If Mission Plans need to be composed or reviewed, this would be the place to do it)
6. (8.35) Upcoming events (itemised below) (**Note 4**)

Section 3: Administrative (35 mins) (Note 5)

7. (8.45) Child Protection/Vetting update & report (*Designated person/ elder*)
8. (8.50) Leaders for organisations (**Note 6**)
9. (8.55) Membership Classes/Reception/Disjunctions/Baptisms/
Correspondence (if any) (**Note 7**)
10. (9.00) Wider church issues requiring comment (**Note 8**)
11. (9.05) Any other Business (**Note 9**) and Date of Next Meeting

Notes

1. Minutes of last meeting – read at meeting or circulated in advance.
2. The elders' report is an opportunity for elders to give an update on their district and any immediate issues worthy of follow-up. In smaller churches where most people are known, there may not be anything to report, but it gives the minister and session an opportunity to reflect on the current pastoral needs and pray for the congregation. In churches where elders are not used to or comfortable with group prayer, prayer may be by the minister or by one elder given notice beforehand.
3. If Session are used to dealing mainly with the administrative, then one way to encourage more strategic discussion and involvement of session in the bigger picture might be to take one area of church life per year and give Session time to consider it, reflect on it and come up with proposals as to how to develop it. They could perhaps invite an outside speaker / facilitator to lead their thinking. Possible subjects: Worship; Youth; Fellowship; Evangelism.

Possible template for discussion:

- **Spring** Session meeting: What does the bible say about this issue and how have we engaged with it in the past?
 - **Summer** Session meeting: Discussion led by outside facilitator or a main paper by minister outlining strengths and weaknesses of current practice and encouraging some brainstorming as to how things could be developed;
 - **Autumn** Session meeting: recap on previous discussions and move towards one or two concrete proposals for change; commit to testing out the new ideas on some key congregational members before the next meeting, perhaps present some of the ideas to a meeting of interested parties and get their feedback;
 - **Winter** Session meeting: factor in congregational feedback and set up immediate goals for this area over the next year.
4. There will be events in the diary for the next few months (Harvest/ Christmas/ Easter / Holiday Clubs / Special outreach events that may need brief discussion and/or delegation. This is placed in the Planning/strategy section rather than the administrative because the calendar (and budget!) needs to be subservient to the vision and strategy. Often events exist in the church calendar without any assessment of whether or not they are contributing to the overall

vision and purpose of the church. So the questions here should not just be “When are we having these events, and who is organising what?” but also “Is this event/service still necessary or still fulfilling its original purpose or function”.

5. The timing of this section will obviously depend on the amount of business to be transacted; obviously if there is a contentious issue relating to membership or baptism, or an item of correspondence, then space must be allocated for that. However, the timing is given as a guideline in relation to the other sections, so that the agenda reflects how session’s main role is supervisory, pastoral and in setting priorities, and that administration is secondary.
6. The names of any proposals for leadership, to be passed by Session.
7. Admission to the sacraments is the clear responsibility of the Session §39(2).
8. This could either be a decision on how to deal with anything that has been ‘sent down’ for comment, or an update on church-wide events (training, special rallies /assemblies), that you wish to encourage elders/members to attend.
9. Items to be mentioned to minister or clerk by 6pm on evening of meeting. This is to prevent AOB becoming a place for “curve balls”. If serious issues are to be discussed then they should be placed on the next Agenda in their own right.

Sample 2: Agenda for Small to Medium Sessions (no Working Groups)

Section 1: Introductory (15 mins) & Pastoral (30 mins)

1. (7.30) Devotions and Opening Prayer (*Moderator, unless stated*)
2. (7.40) Apologies (*Clerk*)
3. (7.41) Minutes of last meeting & matters arising (*Clerk*) **(Note 1)**
4. (7.45) Personnel/staff reports (Paper A) **(Note 2)**
5. (7.55) Elder's District Report & Break for Prayer (*Elder*) **(Note 3)**

(Possible prayer in small groups for those mentioned and for general personal prayer needs)

Section 2: Strategic Planning and Thinking (1hour)

6. (8.15) Substantive Discussion Issue (Paper B) **(Note 4)**
7. (8.55) Mission Plan Review (Paper C) **(Note 5)**

Section 3: Immediate Planning (15 mins)

8. (9.15) Upcoming events (itemised below) **(Note 6)**

Section 4: Administrative (30 mins)

9. (9.30) Child Protection/Vetting update & report (*Designated person/elder*)
10. (9.32) Leaders for organisations **(Note 7)**
11. (9.35) Membership Classes/reception of members/disjunctions **(Note 8)**
12. (9.40) Baptism requests
13. (9.45) Correspondence (*Clerk*) **(Note 9)**
14. (9.50) Any General Assembly/Presbytery issues requiring comment **(Note 10)**
15. (9.55) Any other Business **(Note 11)** and Date of Next Meeting

Notes

1. Circulated in advance and taken “as read” unless there are corrections.
2. This is the place for any general update report on work of any youth/pastoral staff of an informational nature. If there are major issues to discuss these should form part of a separate agenda item (e.g. ‘A Review of youth work’).
3. One elder, or in bigger sessions, two or three elders in rota each month, so that each gets the chance to report every couple of years. The parameters and purpose of this are clear: we are NOT looking for confidential information (although anything that is said will still be confidential within Session). The purpose is to share any items for general prayer and particularly to give an update on any new families so that Session can be familiar with who they are, or to suggest follow-up for any families that have not been attending recently. Doing this regularly also assists with the updating of the communion roll when that time comes, as any absentees will have been previously flagged up.
4. Session could take time to look at any number (probably 4 - 8) of significant issues over a period of 2 - 3 years: e.g. Outreach, Youth, Prayer, Worship, Fellowship, Discipleship, Community involvement, integration of members, Facilities, Children’s ministry. An initial paper could be circulated beforehand with the agenda outlining the current situation and some pointers towards development. There could be a couple of key questions put to the session to discuss in a couple of smaller groups. After feedback a couple of decisions could be made on how to move the issue forward.
5. An opportunity to assess and review the Congregational Mission Plan. NB:- this may only need to be done annually.
6. There will be events in the diary for the next few months (Harvest/ Christmas/ Easter / Holiday Clubs / Special outreach events that may need brief discussion and/or delegation. Note that the calendar (and budget!) needs to be subservient to the vision and strategy. Often events exist in the church calendar without any assessment of whether or not they are contributing to the overall vision and purpose of the church. Questions here should not just be “When are these happening, but also “Is this event/service still necessary or still fulfilling its original purpose or function”.
7. The names of any proposals for leadership to be passed by Session.

8. Report on the timeline for next membership classes or a list of those to be received, having completed the class. Admission to the sacraments is the clear responsibility of the Session §39(2).
9. This can include requests for the use of the church premises by outside bodies.
10. This could either be a decision on how to deal with anything that has been 'sent down' for comment or, more often, an update on church-wide events (training, special rallies/assemblies, that you wish to encourage elders/members to attend).
11. Items to be mentioned to minister or clerk by 6pm on evening of meeting. This is to prevent AOB becoming a place for "curve balls". Any serious issues to be discussed should be placed on the next Agenda as issues in their own right.

Sample 3: Full Agenda (For Large Sessions with Working Groups)

Section 1: Introductory (20 mins) & Pastoral (15 mins)

1. (7.30) Devotions and Opening Prayer (*Moderator, unless stated*)
2. (7.35) Apologies (*Clerk*)
3. (7.36) Minutes of last meeting & matters arising (*Clerk*) **(Note 1)**
4. (7.40) Personnel/staff reports (Paper A) **(Note 2)**
5. (7.50) Elder's District Report & Break for Prayer (*Elder*) **(Note 3)**
(Possible prayer in small groups for those mentioned and for general personal prayer needs)

Section 2: Reports (1hour 20mins)

6. (8.05) Presentation of Strategy/Standing Committee Report (Paper B) (*Convener*) **(Note 4)**

For example: (Note 5)

- a. Restructuring our Pastoral Care (3 resolutions)
 - b. Proposed staffing needs (1 resolution)
 - c. Evening Services (1 resolution)
 - d. Inter-church relations and partnerships (2 resolutions)
 - e. Proposed Outreach Weekend (1 resolution)
 - f. Implications of survey "Single people and the church fellowship"
(1 resolution)
 - g. Proposed church plant (1 resolution)
7. (8.45) Presentation of Sub-Committee Reports (attached Papers C-G) (*Conveners*) **(Note 6)**
 - a. Worship (1 resolution)
 - b. Fellowship (no resolutions)
 - c. Evangelism (3 resolutions)
 - d. Discipleship (no resolutions)
 - e. Prayer (1 resolution)
 8. (9.00) Working Group reports and questions (attached Papers H-M) (*Conveners*) **(Note 7)**
 - a. Mission Support (no resolutions)
 - b. Youth (4 resolutions)
 - c. Peacemaking (1 resolution)
 - d. Ad hoc group on Marriage and Family (1 resolution)
 - e. Ad hoc group for Congregational Retreat (no resolutions)
 - f. Ad hoc group on Communications (3 resolutions)

Section 3: Strategic Planning and Thinking (40mins)

- 9. (9.25) Substantive Discussion Issue: (Paper N) (*Relevant Convener*) **(Note 8)**
- 10. (9.55) Mission Plan Update / Review (Paper O) (*Moderator*) **(Note 9)**

Section 4: Administrative (30 mins)

- 11. (10.05) Child Protection / Vetting update & report (*Designated person / elder*)
- 12. (10.12) Leaders for organisations (*Moderator*) **(Note 10)**
- 13. (10.15) Membership Classes/reception of members/disjunctions (*Moderator*)
- 14. (10.18) Baptism requests (*Moderator*)
- 15. (10.20) Correspondence (*Clerk*)
- 16. (10.22) Calendar dates (*Moderator*) **(Note 11)**
- 17. (10.25) Any General Assembly / Presbytery issues requiring comment (*Moderator*)
(Note 12)
- 18. (10.30) Any other Business (*Moderator*) **(Note 13)**
- 19. (10.35) Date of Next Meeting

Notes

1. Circulated in advance and taken “as read” unless there are corrections.
2. These can be on a single page updating the session on the current work and priorities of any staff. Discussion should be limited to any issues not covered later in the Agenda. It is pre-supposed that all these papers and reports will be circulated at least several days beforehand.
3. An update on three or four districts (whatever division will allow every district to be covered over 2-3 years). Emphasis should be on any changes in circumstances (moves / bereavements etc.) or any lapsed or non-attending families. (See comments under Sample 2; note 3).
4. For large sessions with sub-committees and working groups, a Standing Committee / Strategy group is important in order to ensure that the business of Session runs smoothly. This group does not have executive powers over Session and must bring any resolutions to Session, but they are able to discuss and draft some ‘Bigger Picture’ issues, and set the agenda for Session meetings, ensuring all important items are covered.
5. The following items are just examples of some of the issues which the Standing Committee would look at before either bringing them to Session for discussion and ratification (e.g. items a - d; or delegating to a working group or sub-committee for further discussion and planning (e.g. items e - g). Items may be those that have emerged as an urgent need from earlier discussions (e.g. item a, e, g), needs that have emerged at staff meetings (e.g. items b, c), or issues in the wider Christian community that warrant a consideration and response (e.g. items, d, f). Timing discipline is crucial here (as with items 7 and 8). If it becomes clear that an individual item is contentious or requires longer than the allotted 5-6 minutes, it is best to leave it and allocate more time at the following meeting.
6. Sub-committees consist of Session members only (and possibly staff invited to sit and deliberate) while Working Groups may contain a wider group from the congregation, and may even be chaired by a non-elder, so long as there is a reporting elder within the Group. Churches will have different sub-committees according to their current priorities and these may change over time. Since not every sub-committee will have resolutions requiring decisions at every meeting, some reports can be taken ‘as read’, and discussion can be focused around those areas requiring decision. The key is NOT to re-run at the Session all the debate which took place at the sub-committee. Session must trust the sub-committees to do their job. That is where the main discussion takes place.

7. These could be regular working groups or ad hoc groups created to look at a particular area or plan a specific event.
8. In a church with multiple committees and action groups, it will be important that Session does not simply become a place to receive reports and make practical decisions, but that it retains its 'overseeing' mandate and has time to consider some of the substantive issues that lie behind the various groups' tasks. For example, each sub-committee / working group could be invited to present, in rotation, a paper exposing Session to a major issue relating to their work and encouraging discussion. These issues may well set the future agenda of the group. Examples: the Youth WG may ask Session to consider "Young People and Depression". or the Prayer SC may ask Session to clarify a position on "Prayer and Healing"; The Evangelism SC may present a community-needs survey of the local parish; while the Worship SC may want a discussion on the pros and cons of Family Services.

This Agenda item prevents Session from simply discussing and reporting on what is already happening, and seeks to keep abreast of the changing issues in a changing culture. In this Sample Agenda the ad hoc group on marriage and the family may have been set up as a result of a previous discussion of this type brought by the Fellowship. Their resolution, in turn, may be that a regular Working Group on Marriage and the Family be set up.

9. Since vision can easily leak, it is good to revisit the Mission Plan regularly, perhaps highlighting and, if necessary, tweaking any of the goals which have been unmet or which have proved unrealisable. For the occasions when the Plan requires a major rewriting and overhaul more time will be allocated to this item at the expense of the previous one.
10. Approval of new names.
11. Arrangement of specific dates (e.g. Harvest, Carol Services, AGM, etc.) Note that the calendar (and budget!) needs to be subservient to the vision and strategy. Often events exist in the church calendar without any assessment of whether or not they are contributing to the overall vision and purpose of the church. Questions here should not just be "When are these happening", but also "Is this event/service still necessary or still fulfilling its original purpose or function".
12. This could either be a decision on how to deal with anything that has been 'sent down' for comment or, more often, an update on church-wide events (training, special rallies/assemblies, that you wish to encourage elders/members to attend.
13. Items to be mentioned to minister or clerk by 6pm on evening of meeting.