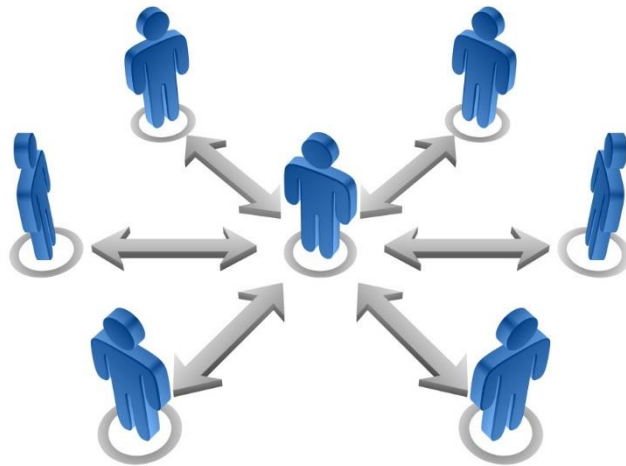


Leading from the Middle

A leadership development resource for ruling elders



'The duty of ruling elders as members of Kirk Session is to work together with the minister in the oversight and government of the congregation, for the upbuilding of God's people in spiritual fruitfulness and holy concord, and for the extension of Christ's kingdom among all people. In exercising this leadership the Kirk Session shall oversee and work along with other members who have leadership roles in the congregation.' **Code 30 (1)**

This resource aims to help ruling elders in their leadership roles as members of kirk session. It was originally produced by the Panel on Leadership and approved by the Committee for Training and Resources in 2014. Further resources on different aspects of leadership by elders are available on the Presbyterian Church in Ireland website.

Introduction

What is 'leading from the middle'?

Leading from the middle means exercising leadership influence without being **individually responsible** for major leadership decisions. In leading the congregation, elders as members of kirk session makes leadership decisions **together**. That could be working out God's vision for the congregation, mission planning or issues to do with organisations, membership, etc. Leading well from the middle refers to how each elder can influence these decisions in a positive, Christlike way.

Why a resource on leading from the middle?

There are many leadership courses and resources available (a list of suggested leadership development resources is available on the Presbyterian Church in Ireland website) but they often assume leadership from the top down rather than from the middle out. There is much to be learned from these resources about leadership in general but it is important to also understand the distinctives of leading from the middle.

Why is understanding how to lead from the middle important?

Ultimately, no one in Christian leadership leads from the top because Christ is always (or should always be) supreme as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The temptation to pursue a different path to that of Christ can be greater for an individual leader. Therefore the Presbyterian form of church leadership (based on the biblical model of the New Testament church) brings a strong element of **accountability**. It also brings together **the combined wisdom and insights** of a team of leaders who each should have God's heart for building up the church.

In the Presbyterian model there can be a temptation to be passive and say, **'I'm only an individual in a group, how can I lead?'** because the picture of leadership in our minds is often a worldly one of someone at the top who calls all the shots. The answer is: you as an elder **can lead from the middle** by the **influence** you have. That is not to say that the kirk session does not govern because of its **authority** to make important decisions like, for example, who can or cannot be a Sunday school teacher. But these governance decisions are normally administrative or even negative (although very necessary). On the other hand, leading by influence normally works in a more positive sense. For example, it could be to encourage people in activities like evangelism, youth work, discipleship, mission overseas or in spiritual growth to name but a few. This resource suggests some ways in which you can exercise that influence to build up the church.

Leading from the middle in the kirk session meeting

The kirk session is where leadership decisions are made concerning the congregation. An individual ruling elder does not have authority to make these decisions outside the kirk session. The ruling elder's leadership role outside the kirk session meeting is to lead by the example they set (a ruling elder may also have another specific leadership role in the same way as any church member might have, for example, as a Bible study leader or youth group leader). Therefore **what happens in the kirk session meeting is of great importance.**

The following ten principles are applied specifically to the kirk session meeting but are also general principles for leading from the middle in any situation:

1. Be well prepared

There is limited time available in any meeting so it is important to be as well prepared as possible. That might mean reading the agenda, previous minutes and any reports or it could be making a phone call and checking if something has been done that needs to happen before the meeting. But preparation is also spiritual. Remember to pray before the meeting and perhaps read through the next nine points to remind yourself of them.

2. Be present!

It may seem obvious but the only way you can lead from the middle is to be present. Not just your physical presence but your positive and Christlike contribution makes a difference.

3. Be centred on Christ

Again it may seem obvious but sometimes in our desire to influence others we forget to first bring our concerns to Christ. Is this what he wants for his church? We need to be careful not to impose our own opinions on our Lord. For example, it is easy to assume that our preference for tradition is also what Christ prefers **or** to assume our preference for what is contemporary is where Christ wants us to go. Therefore, before we can lead from the middle we must first surrender our preferences to Christ and seek his will alone.

4. Be prayerful

God in his grace has given us the hugely influential privilege of prayer. We can lead from the middle by praying for Christ's will to be done in our congregation. Without prayer, we may be building on sand rather than on the rock of Christ. Our own personal prayers are a vital starting point but leading from the middle also means encouraging others to pray too.

5. Lead by Christlike example

Ruling elders lead in two main ways, collectively in the decisions made by kirk session and by their example as they serve the congregation. Remember that the model Jesus gives us is the **servant leader**. If you as an elder wish to have influence in leading from the middle in the kirk

session meeting, walking what you talk will often mean your contribution carries more weight. This does not mean that if you suggest something you should always be the one to do it. That ignores the fact that there may be someone more gifted, experienced and available than you. It does mean, however, that you should be someone who is not all talk and no action.

6. Listen well

We need to listen so that we really understand the issue being discussed and do not make superficial judgements. This may mean not only listening to fellow elders but also to many different people in the congregation to get the overall picture. Listening, if it is to be effective also asks helpful questions to get to the heart of what people think and feel.

7. Be encouraging

It is sometimes wise to exercise leadership in a negative way by saying no to an idea or initiative (see point 8 below). However, if we are always negative, we are not leading but obstructing. Therefore, we should seek to be encouraging about what we support. **Never underestimate the power of encouragement.** A word said in favour of an initiative can give it the boost it needs not to mention encouraging the people involved (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

8. Be wise

We are told to pray for wisdom as a gift from God (James 1:5). Leading from the middle means bringing our wise insights to the discussion. For example, by saying/asking:

- “How will this affect that group of people? How can we help them?”
- “This could **also** have the positive effect of...”
- “We shouldn’t allow the resistance of one or two to hold the rest to ransom **but** we should seek to address their concerns.”
- “Perhaps [insert name of gifted and spiritually mature person] would be a good person to head that up/help out.”
- “It may be better to implement one major initiative at a time. We need to decide what to do first and keep the other ideas on the agenda so that they are not lost.”
- “It seems like a big step, but if this is the right thing for our congregation then God will provide.”
- “This can be both/and rather than either/or if we do it this way...”
- “Does that still serve the purpose it was intended for? If it has run its course we should celebrate what God has done through it and move forward with something else.”

Each of the above statements is **expressed in a positive way**. It can be very easy to offend those who hold certain subjects being discussed dear to their hearts. Wisdom does not ignore emotional attachments but seeks to communicate a way forward while affirming the real depth of feeling people have. Wisdom also knows **when to speak and when to remain silent**. Sometimes we can say too much. Sometimes we need the courage to speak up.

9. Propose ways forward

Leading from the middle does not mean saying “this is what we are going to do”. Instead it says “here is what we **could** do” and explains **why**. A well thought through proposal for a way forward can be very influential in building up the church. The New Testament church was strengthened and grew when practical ways forward were proposed and accepted in response to new challenges (Acts 6:1-7, Acts 15:22-32). Before you make a proposal consider the following:

- Have I prayed for wisdom?
- Am I sure this in line with the Bible’s teaching?
- Is this something I personally really want or is it something that Christ really wants? (Hopefully it’s both! But do pray that God would shows his will to you)
- How will this affect different people?
- Have I asked anyone else’s view beforehand that could be helpful?
- Am I ready for this to be discussed and perhaps changed or even knocked down?
- Can I surrender my proposal for others to do it if they are more qualified than me?

It can be helpful to **give more than one option** in your proposal. One option can seem like a demand, two can seem like a dilemma but three comes across as a real choice. Remember you have had time to think about it but others in the meeting will not have had time to reflect as deeply or come up with their own ideas. If there is a pre-prepared agenda, ask the minister and clerk of session if your proposal can be included (maybe even circulate it in advance). Ask if it is a good meeting for the proposal or if there is too much other business.

10. Stay part of the team when you disagree

Being part of the kirk session means leadership decisions are made collectively. That means **if the decision goes against your personal view you must submit to the group decision**. If you choose to withdraw because of the emotional hurt this causes you by not contributing to other discussions, by lack of attendance or even resigning, you will no longer be leading from the middle. Choosing to submit to the leadership authority of the kirk session and maintaining your influence means you truly are a leader from the middle. Be careful not to keep bringing up the decision that did not go as you would have liked because your negativity could drastically diminish your influence. Instead choose to move forward knowing that in all things God works for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28).

For the decision you wished had been taken, it may be that one of the following applied:

- It was not God’s time for it and you need to be **patient**
- It was a step too far and you need to think about proposing **smaller steps** first
- It was indeed **not** the way forward and you need to humbly accept this
- The wrong decision was indeed made but in the big picture there are so many other ways you can bring Christlike influence (including in your gracious response) and therefore you should **remain involved**.

Leading the whole congregation from the middle

While the kirk session is the place where overall leadership of the congregation is exercised others can be encouraged to show leadership too. This is the strength of leading from the middle because people with influence, not just elders, are not powerless but can be used by God to bless the life of the congregation. However as the table below shows, it is up to the kirk session to encourage this to happen.

Leading the process of putting an idea into practice		
Task	Description of the process	Who is involved?
1. Thinking of an idea	Someone needs to have an idea in the first place! It could be for a new group, a new way to offer pastoral care, a new way to reach out in mission, etc.	Any enthusiastic member of the congregation (not all ideas come from the elders!)
2. Allowing it to happen	The kirk session and the minister have authority to allow initiatives to happen and have control of resources (finances, rooms, allocating people, etc.). They must have a clear vision for the congregation's mission and see how the initiative fits into the vision. They must set goals and measurable outcomes (what they expect to happen). Even if they did not think of the idea themselves they must never be cynical about it but 'own' it with full responsibility .	Kirk session and minister (Note: normally the kirk session makes decisions about initiatives in the congregation but the minister, as the teaching elder, has authority over who preaches in a service or addresses a meeting in the church)
3. Getting it done	Someone or a group of people needs to be appointed by the kirk session to lead the implementation of the initiative otherwise it won't happen. They should report back to the kirk session and give feedback to say if it is going well or if there are challenges to overcome.	Minister or sub-committee of elders or working group of elders and other members of the congregation who can contribute their experience/gifts/etc.
4. Helping it happen	For a large scale initiative , people are needed to be facilitators of the change involved – they act to inform and train people under their influence and gather information on progress. An example of this sort of initiative could be encouraging pastoral care to happen in small groups.	Individual elders, organisation leaders or anyone involved in the initiative.