

Discern and Measure

A Workshop designed by Diana Barber

Description: In G-2.0301, ruling elders are ordained to “discern and measure” the fidelity of the congregation to the Word of God and “to strengthen and nurture its faith and life.” What does that mean, and how do we live out that responsibility, whether or not we are actively serving on session? We are used to running meetings and making decisions, but what difference does it make if we fully accept this charge?

1. Introductions, Expectations, and Community Building

- Name and where you are from (congregation of your membership).
- Connect with one person not presently known to you and see how long it takes you to find a personal connection (e.g. a person you have in common).
- When were you ordained? Group by decades. Share what it was that made you decide to accept the nomination to ordered ministry.
- If you can remember, when the nominating committee talked to you, did they talk about serving on session or being ordained as a ruling elder?

2. Constitutional Expectations: Ruling Elders are ordained to the Ministry of Discernment and Governance. They are specifically tasked to:

As there were in Old Testament times elders for the government of the people, so the New Testament church provided persons with particular gifts to share in **discernment of God’s Spirit** and **governance of God’s people**... Ruling elders are so named not because they “lord it over” the congregation (Matt. 20:25), but because they are chosen by the congregation **to discern and measure its fidelity to the Word of God, and to strengthen and nurture its faith and life**. Ruling elders, together with teaching elders, exercise leadership, government, spiritual discernment, and discipline and have responsibilities for the life of a congregation as well as the whole church, including ecumenical relationships. When elected by the congregation, they shall serve faithfully as members of the session. (*G-2.0301*)

Note that this really has nothing to do with serving on session...

3. The key words: **Discern** and **measure** fidelity to the Word of God **Strengthen** and **nurture** the congregation’s faith and life

A. Discernment is a spiritual activity – to prepare ourselves for discernment we need to nurture our own spirituality and our spiritual gifts. We also need to imagine ways of doing our work that move beyond traditional decision making strategies which have largely been learned in secular and corporate settings.

To discern means

- To separate or distinguish
- To test in crisis or to distinguish good and evil
- To find the authentic and valuable and to recognize the counterfeit
- To see to the heart of the matter with spiritual eyes, from God’s vantage point
- To locate the immediate and particular within a vision of the broad and distant landscape
- To possess immediate and direct insight.

“From humility comes discernment, from discernment comes insight, and from insight comes foresight.” (John Climacus, 6th century.)

For us to be about discerning God’s will, we need to cultivate our ability to ask what God would want/approve of/be honored by instead of what is expedient, popular, successful, or even constitutional.

B. Measuring requires us to determine markers or criteria – the marks on the ruler we will be using. How will we know fidelity to the Word of God when we see it? How will we prepare ourselves, in general and in our unique congregational situations, to be able to recognize faithfulness when we see it?

- Foundations as an overview of what the church is called to be and do.
- Faithful participants in the mission of Christ (notes of the Reformed Church from the Scots Confession as adapted. F-1.0303)
- Great Ends of the Church (F-1.0304)
- Principles of Presbyterian Government (F-3.02)
- Ministry of Members (G-1.0304)

C. Strengthening and Nurturing require us to use the results of our discerning and measuring to lead our congregations toward the full realization of a faithful life according to the Word of God.

A matter of attitude as much or more than action.

4. Necessary Gifts

The Book of Order defines these qualities for all candidates for ordination in G-2.0104:

- Strong faith
- Dedicated discipleship
- Love of Jesus Christ
- A life that is a demonstration of the Christian gospel

Ruling elders in particular are specifically expected to demonstrate (G-2.0301):

- Wisdom
- Maturity of faith
- Skills in leadership
- A compassionate in spirit

How do we identify those gifts and qualities in others?

What could we do in our congregations to help those who are already ordained and those who may be called to be most effective in their service?

5. The most important work for Ruling Elders (in no particular order)

- Bible study
- Prayer
- Listening
- Spiritual Direction
- Reviewing the health of the congregation
- Staying connected in the life of the congregation
- Worship
- And...

And once in a while serving on session when our aptitude for directing the affairs of an organization will come in handy along with our cultivated ability to discern, measure, nurture and strengthen.

G-2.03 **RULING ELDERS: THE MINISTRY OF DISCERNMENT AND GOVERNANCE**

G-2.0301 *Ruling Elder Defined*

As there were in Old Testament times elders for the government of the people, so the New Testament church provided persons with particular gifts to share in discernment of God's Spirit and governance of God's people. Accordingly, congregations should elect persons of wisdom and maturity of faith, having demonstrated skills in leadership and being compassionate in spirit. Ruling elders are so named not because they "lord it over" the congregation (Matt. 20:25), but because they are chosen by the congregation to discern and measure its fidelity to the Word of God, and to strengthen and nurture its faith and life. Ruling elders, together with teaching elders, exercise leadership, government, spiritual discernment, and discipline and have responsibilities for the life of a congregation as well as the whole church, including ecumenical relationships. When elected by the congregation, they shall serve faithfully as members of the session. When elected as commissioners to higher councils, ruling elders participate and vote with the same authority as teaching elders, and they are eligible for any office.

F-1.0303 *The Notes of the Reformed Church (Scots Confession, Ch. XVIII, 3.18)*

Where Christ is, there is the true Church. Since the earliest days of the Reformation, Reformed Christians have marked the presence of the true Church wherever:

the Word of God is truly preached and heard,
the Sacraments are rightly administered, and
ecclesiastical discipline is uprightly ministered.

In our own time, we affirm that, in the power of the Spirit, the Church is faithful to the mission of Christ as it:

Proclaims and hears the Word of God,

responding to the promise of God's new creation in Christ, and
inviting all people to participate in that new creation;

Administers and receives the Sacraments,

welcoming those who are being engrafted into Christ,
bearing witness to Christ's saving death and resurrection,
anticipating the heavenly banquet that is to come, and
committing itself in the present to solidarity with the marginalized and the hungry; and

Nurtures a covenant community of disciples of Christ,

living in the strength of God's promise and
giving itself in service to God's mission.

F-1.0304 *The Great Ends of the Church*

The great ends of the Church are:

the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;
the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;
the maintenance of divine worship;
the preservation of the truth;
the promotion of social righteousness; and
the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

F-3.02 PRINCIPLES OF PRESBYTERIAN GOVERNMENT

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) reaffirms, within the context of its commitment to the Church universal, a special commitment to basic principles of Presbyterian polity:

F-3.0201 One Church

The particular congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) wherever they are, taken collectively, constitute one church, called the church.

F-3.0202 Governed by Presbyters

This church shall be governed by presbyters, that is, ruling elders and teaching elders. Ruling elders are so named not because they “lord it over” the congregation (Matt. 20:25), but because they are chosen by the congregation to discern and measure its fidelity to the Word of God, and to strengthen and nurture its faith and life. Teaching elders shall be committed in all their work to equipping the people of God for their ministry and witness.

F-3.0203 Gathered in Councils

These presbyters shall come together in councils in regular gradation. These councils are sessions, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly. All councils of the church are united by the nature of the church and share with one another responsibilities, rights, and powers as provided in this Constitution. The councils are distinct, but have such mutual relations that the act of one of them is the act of the whole church performed by it through the appropriate council. The larger part of the church, or a representation thereof, shall govern the smaller.

F-3.0204 Seek and Represent the Will of Christ

Presbyters are not simply to reflect the will of the people, but rather to seek together to find and represent the will of Christ.

F-3.0205 Decision by Majority Vote

Decisions shall be reached in councils by vote, following opportunity for discussion and discernment, and a majority shall govern.

F-3.0206 Review and Control

A higher council shall have the right of review and control over a lower one and shall have power to determine matters of controversy upon reference, complaint, or appeal.

F-3.0207 Ordination by Council

Presbyters (ruling elders and teaching elders) and deacons are ordained only by the authority of a council.

F-3.0208 Shared Power, Exercised Jointly

Ecclesiastical jurisdiction is a shared power, to be exercised jointly by presbyters gathered in councils.

F-3.0209 General Authority of Councils

Councils possess whatever administrative authority is necessary to give effect to duties and powers assigned by the Constitution of the church. The jurisdiction of each council is limited by the express provisions of the Constitution, with powers not mentioned being reserved to the presbyteries.

G-1.0304 The Ministry of Members

Membership in the Church of Jesus Christ is a joy and a privilege. It is also a commitment to participate in Christ's mission. A faithful member bears witness to God's love and grace and promises to be involved responsibly in the ministry of Christ's Church. Such involvement includes:

- proclaiming the good news in word and deed,
- taking part in the common life and worship of a congregation,
- lifting one another up in prayer, mutual concern, and active support,
- studying Scripture and the issues of Christian faith and life,
- supporting the ministry of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents,
- demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church,
- responding to God's activity in the world through service to others,
- living responsibly in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life,
- working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment,
- participating in the governing responsibilities of the church, and
- reviewing and evaluating regularly the integrity of one's membership, and considering ways in which one's participation in the worship and service of the church may be increased and made more meaningful.

G-2.0104 Gifts and Qualifications

a. To those called to exercise special functions in the church—deacons, ruling elders, and teaching elders—God gives suitable gifts for their various duties. In addition to possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, those who undertake particular ministries should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world. They must have the approval of God's people and the concurring judgment of a council of the church.

FIRE

What makes a fire burn
is space between the logs,
a breathing space.
Too much of a good thing,
too many logs
packed too tight
can douse the flames
almost as surely
as a pail of water would.

So building fires
requires attention
to the spaces in between,
as much as to the wood.

When we are able to build
open spaces
in the same way
we have learned
to pile on the logs,
then we can come to see how
it is fuel, and absence of the fuel
together, that make fire possible.

We only need to lay a log
lightly from time to time.
A fire
grows
simply because the space is there,
with openings
in which the flame
that knows just how it wants to
burn
can find its way.

Judy Sorum Brown

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Some Books to Get You Thinking

The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II: Book of Order (current edition is 2011/2013 – remember that it changes a year after every General Assembly)

Don't limit yourself to Chapter 2 and the section on Ruling Elders. You'll also want to read the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity. And then there's Chapter 1 on the Congregation and Chapter 3 on the Session...

Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church by Danny E. Morris & Charles M. Olsen (The Alban Institute, 1987).

Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders by Charles M. Olsen (Alban Institute, 1995)

Chuck Olsen was one of the first to lift up the spiritual dimension of leadership and the need to move especially Presbyterian councils toward alternative decision-making practices and a focus on discernment. This includes the concept of "worshipful work."

Book of Common Worship: Daily Prayer (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993)

There are lots of worship resources that can come in handy when you are called upon to lead a short time of worship as well as for personal devotion. Daily Prayer, which comes in a handy 4¾" x 7¾" size, is particularly helpful.

Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home by Richard Foster (Harper San Francisco, 1992)

Practicing Our Faith by Dorothy Bass, Ed. (Jossey-Bass, 1997)

Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives by Wayne Muller (Bantam Books, 1999)

Spirit Windows: A Handbook of Spiritual Growth Resources for Leaders by Ann Z. Kulp [Bridge Resources (PCUSA), 1998] (surely this is out of print, but perhaps you can still find it in a resource center or library)

Many people have written on spiritual practices. These are four that have been most helpful to me.

Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change by Mark Lau Branson (Alban Institute, 2004)

Strategic Planning for Churches: An Appreciative Approach by Charles Elliott (CMR Press, 1997)

I commend these because they begin planning and futuring from a place of considering and affirming the positives and building on those instead of simply determining what is wrong and how to fix it.