

Help! We Need To Have A Session Meeting

By T. J. Malinoski

A whoop or a holler to have a church session meeting with the minister and elders is not a call made too often. Ordinarily, one tends to avoid attending a meeting like one avoids poison ivy or a wet dog. There are so many rules and regulations to keep in your head and there is always one individual who does not seem to pick up on the social cues when they have been speaking too long or too many times. However, this spring has catapulted our congregations into remarkable new territory. Public worship is highly discouraged for health and safety concerns, pastoral care and visitation are being drastically altered and programming of the church is being reformed. In response, church members are turning to their leadership for information, direction and guidance. While much mentioned above has probably been determined by a consensus responding quickly to the effects of COVID-19, Cumberland Presbyterians really do like having structure found in the connectional nature of the Church.

Why session meetings are important

Both ministers and elders share a special calling to care and lead the congregation that they serve. This care and leadership begin with being witnesses to the gospel and by being attentive to those who have not made a profession of faith. This calling also includes visitation, counseling, prayer and encouraging others to participate in worship, bible study and the witness of the gospel. While the calling remains constant, situations and circumstances both within and outside the congregation requires ministers and elders to gather together as a session to examine the life and mission of the church. To meet as a session is extremely important in the current situation that COVID-19 has thrust upon us. Congregations are facing difficulties and questions that require encouragement, guidance and communication. These difficulties and questions can best be met by the minister(s) and elders coming together to make up the session to work towards the care and leading its members in the mission of the church. Below are some suggestions for church sessions to consider:

Topics of discussion to consider

- Examine the current worship opportunities and determine if there are any changes needed. When should public worship resume? Will virtual and online services, mailings and recordings continue to best serve the members? Will these current or new practices compliment public worship in the future?
- Pentecost Sunday is May 31. In what ways can the session lead and encourage the congregation in this upcoming celebration?
- The celebration of the sacraments of the Lord's Supper and baptism are corporate activities of the people's worship. What will the celebration of the sacraments look like in the coming weeks and months for the spiritual care of the members?
- Examine the ways visitation is currently being carried out. Could the responsibility of visitation be shared among the leadership to make phone calls, send cards, and check on the well-being of those connected to the church? What plans are in place when members become sick or when there is a death of a church member?
- Spring and summer months typically include many activities and service opportunities within the church. High school and college graduation parties, mission trips, homecomings, revivals, lock-ins, youth trips, camps, vacation bible schools, cook-outs, etc. What creative ways can the church still provide service opportunities and participate in planned yearly activities while still promoting the health and safety to its members and community?

- Bible study and Christian education are crucial to discipleship. What books, guides, and online resources does the session recommend for individual bible study and prayer? How can regular bible studies of the church and Sunday school lessons, crafts and activities be shared and used by the members of the congregation?
- Stewardship is the mutual sharing of all the good gifts God has given to each. How can the session encourage faithful stewardship through tithes and offerings? In what ways can digital and online giving help? How can denominational campaigns such as the Stott-Wallace Missionary Offering be promoted? Our United Outreach? Presbyterian dues?

The importance of communication

By no means are these suggested topics exhaustive. The intent is for meetings of sessions to begin considering and grappling with some ever present and forthcoming quandaries. Deciding on next steps will depend upon the gifts, talents and abilities of the leadership, the situation and circumstances of the time. As elected and called leaders of the church, remaining in contact with the people you are serving is crucial to discover the needs, hopes, and longings for the congregation. Communicating the determinations and decisions of the session is crucial, as well. Not just for posterity sake of having minutes for presbytery to review but as a form of accountability to God and to the members. Communication keeps everyone informed of the decisions made. Publishing and posting the minutes of the session meeting in a newsletter, email, webpage, Facebook, etc. keeps us connected to the life of the church and reminds us of its mission. Some sessions have already been meeting and may have addressed many of these questions. It is always good to review and celebrate what is working and let go of what is not. However, not all sessions have met since COVID-19 has changed humanity. Sometimes it is helpful to have a starting place for a session meeting to occur. While it is not often that we whoop or holler to have a church session meeting there are times when information, direction and guidance are needed for encouragement and communication. The Spring of 2020 is one of those times.