

Glasgow Presbytery Conference on Recharging the Eldership

5 March 2022

Comment on Eldership, Ordination, Leadership and the Importance of Ordination Vows

Introduction

Those who responded to the initial questionnaire all reflected on their invitation to be Elders in their Congregations. Every Elder begins his or her Eldership by answering 'Yes' to the undernoted questions (or a similar form of questions)

Question to Elders on Ordination and Admission as determined by the General Assembly:

Do you believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith?

Do you promise to seek the unity and peace of this Church?

Do you promise to uphold its doctrine, worship, government and discipline?

Do you promise to take your due part in the administration of its affairs?

Every Elder begins his or her Eldership by answering 'Yes' to these questions or similar questions.

The Formula established by the General Assembly is:

I believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith contained in the Confession of Faith of this Church. I acknowledge the Presbyterian government of this Church to be agreeable to the Word of God, and promise that I will submit thereto and concur therewith. I promise to observe the order of worship and the administration of all public ordinances as the same are or may be allowed in this Church.

Every Elder is required to sign that Formula at his or her Ordination and Admission to a Kirk Session

Ordination

Ordination for centuries the Church has ordained some of its members to specific and limited service with focused functions and recognition of specific responsibilities. Services of ordination in the Church of Scotland **do not**, unlike those of the Roman Catholic Church, confer an indelible mark, or character, on the individual, but celebrate the call of God, and the endowing by God with gifts to fulfil their obligations, of the individuals so ordained.

While the parallels may be a little difficult to accept, there is something in the service of ordination that is related to various 'rites of passage' in the way that they acknowledge change in the individual and the relationship of the community to the individual, like marriage, *bar mitzvah* and the taking of oaths of office as a politician. It also is a means where the person receives public acknowledgement that he, or she, is endowed by God with gifts for the distinctive service to the community.

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Gifts

These gifts are not magically given by the other people who are elders passing on some mystical knowledge. Instead, it is a time when the process of learning and development of the individual's call and appropriate gifting are seen in a public declaration by the individual and the community as being in process, which is not immediate, or time constrained., but one which only in retrospect may be obvious. Like a birthday party, or a celebration of a marriage in a wedding reception, or a funeral service and the social gathering thereafter, the service does not actually accomplish the 'birth' or the marriage' or the 'mourning process', but holds up the individual and the community to God, and articulates the importance of the changes in the lives of those involved and their implications of difference for the future.

This emphasises the nature of the spiritual office which is often claimed as being a characteristic of the eldership. Certainly the part of becoming an elder that is obviously spiritual is the fact that the vows are taken in the context of Christian worship (there is no provision in the Church for eldership to be a private affair and celebrated without the participation of the company of the congregation). It is vital to recognise that the vows are 'vows' taken before God and made to God in public worship before the congregation. They are **not** statements of intent or expressions of weak commitments, or optional intentions. They lay solemn and legally binding obligations (under Church Law) on the elders who take them and are as significant the vows of Ministers of Word and Sacrament.

Community

Eldership is not something that happens without the community acknowledging the presence and call of God to the individual and the congregation in celebrating the beginning of a process. (This is a 'beginning' only in technical terms as it has to be rooted in past experience and live previous commitment and demonstration of potential). Here the Church acknowledges and accepts that a new time and experience of responsibility has begun that is only possible through the endowment of the person with gifts by God and a willing response from that individual in order to act on behalf of the community in exercising the duties of eldership.

Duty

The elder has a duty – alongside all the members of the church - to be a prayerful and diligent worshipper undertaking his or her membership with an awareness of the witness that he or she gives in the work in a variety of ways to the Christian faith. It this way the role of elder is not any more spiritual than any other, according to Reformed thinking – and the incarnational nature of service is such that the spiritual is found in the everyday exercise of the gifts of God – which may include teaching, administration, listening, caring, responding to the Word in daily acts of kindness and manifestation of the Gospel imperative of love of neighbour.

Eldership cannot claim to be any more 'spiritual' in this sense, but that its aspects of service come from a desire to bring the Gospel into the lives of others and that they undertake this duty and responsibility for the good order (meaning well-being and efficient functioning) of the congregation which would be less able to serve in this proclamatory role without their efforts.

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Baptism

Baptism, in the Church's understanding, is a call to, and a means of, entering into the ministry of Jesus Christ as a disciple participating in the on-going life of the Church which is the body of Christ. Therefore it is not legitimate to understand the eldership as having more importance through ordination, than the service rendered by those who have been baptised. It is a means whereby an individual is marked out, or is given some distinction by reason of his or her gifts for some particular form of service to the community of the faithful and for the good of the whole community of faith. Elders are not ordained as elders of a congregation alone, but are ordained to eldership within the Church of Scotland.

The links with baptism also suggest that the process of ordination of elders is lifelong and that it is a gift and calling of God that is nourished by the community as it relies upon individuals to offer their talents and time in the service of the message of the Gospel. The actual type of ministry which eventually appears in the life of a person is not seen necessarily at the time of his, or her, baptism whether at infancy, or adult.

Instead, it reflects the conviction that God has called and will continue to sustain that person for service in future and that service may have different forms as the person encounters various environments, challenges and change of circumstances. The type of service that an individual offers is often determined by his or her family situation, education, business, location and opportunity of engagement. It cannot be predicted categorically, as it relies on the Spirit to direct and detect the particular forms of service which may be undertaken.

Distinctive Character of Eldership

What then may be some of the distinctive characteristics of the eldership?

- A calling recognised by the community of the Church to a particular form of service.
- A form of service to the church community which is designed and orientated by the need to support the whole community of faith by its exercise. (It might be recognised by asking 'In what way would the body of Christ in this place be the poorer without its presence and activity?')
- A call to use gifts and to develop skills based on those gifts in the service of the community in ways that enable the individual to recognise a community of faith aspect of his or her service.
- An understanding that the call once affirmed by the community of faith, will lead to responsibility in the life of the congregation that is collegial and conciliar in form and will be celebrated by particular forms of worship as a God-given opportunity, and will involve recognition by the individual and the congregation of particular gifts and callings.
- A life long journey of faithful service which develops and supports the ministry of the baptised.
- A form of ministry that includes leadership in its many forms, and is characterised by a wide ranging and inclusive understanding of the nature of leadership.

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Leadership

Leadership in congregations will manifest itself in a myriad of forms, drawn in part from the experiences of individuals and models which are promoted and encouraged by family systems, business practice and the media. The distinction of leadership in the church ought to be that it is in a form that reflects, and is congruent with, the life of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. In this way we see a number of forms of leadership as biblical and legitimate, some of which are listed below:

- The commander who says 'follow me' and the makes statements like 'you have heard it said, but I say unto you'.
- The servant who washes the feet of the disciples, taking up the lowest position in the household.
- The questioner who engages with people and asks them to ponder on who it is they are prepared to serve as the one in ultimate control of their lives (e.g. the Rich Young Ruler, the woman at the well, Nicodemus, the lawyer asking Jesus to settle an inheritance dispute, the enquirer wanting to know the limits of 'neighbour').
- The actor who puts words into deeds in the cleansing of the Temple.
- The challenger of the accepted moral code of a society by accepting the tax collector and the fallen woman as those who are included in the loving concern of God.
- The philosopher who takes a coin and other objects and uses them as ways of helping people to look at the world differently.

There is no rigid stereotyped form of leadership in this – nor in the accounts of the early Church, where Paul and Peter, and the others were able to lead in different ways, and by different methods. The leadership of the church is not about suppressing gifts and personalities, but using the gifts that are given by God in a multitude of ways to benefit the Church. Some – and here we might use reference to the metaphor of the body which was so clearly articulated by Paul – might prefer to lead from the front and allocate challenges into various tasks that have to be performed. Others are more subtle in supplying the insight and questions that require to be asked. Some will be very practical and get the things done that make any organisation function and well oiled. Others may work in the support of the 'up front' persons, and others contribute to the group leadership by making astute observations and sharing insights which direct discussion and debate to achieve the purpose of a meeting.

All forms of leadership are valid and not one more important than another and most leaders use a combination of leadership styles to achieve the purposes of an organisation that they are expected to offer leadership for, and this should be true for the Eldership. Many are able to be practical pastoral care givers, or efficient managers of property and finance, and some will be better at strategic thinking rather than carrying out the basic task of administration and effective communication of decisions. Some will exercise a variety of forms of leadership in the many functions they fulfil as elders in a congregation, e.g., representing the congregation at the Presbytery, participating in its discussions and debate and being involved in many local groups within the congregation and parish.

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There are parallels here to the work of many professions where there are specialists and some more general workers, seen in particular in the medical area where we have General Practitioners, consultants in a variety of specific disciplines, physicians, surgeons, radiologists, palliative care experts and the attendant nursing and additional services that modern medicine depends on to deliver a health care system reflective of the capacities wrought by scientific advances. Similar variety is seen in the legal profession with a variety of specialists, e.g. solicitors who do work on any type of case and those engaged in civil, business, family and corporate fields.

The aim of such specialism and general service is to be proficient and efficient in delivery of services. Each distinct form of service is able to offer a unique perspective, and, in many instances, each area raises questions for other areas to improve and advance care and attention to those who are the intended recipients. Perhaps this is the model that may guide us there – is the specialist, or individual with skills in youth work, or work with the elderly, any less or more valuable than those who offer to sit on the Kirk Session, the financial management or property groups and undertake the responsibilities of an elder's district and who are seen as being the 'backbone' of the church?

Vows of Ordination

1. Do you believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith?

Here there is a clear commitment to the faith that is celebrated by baptism, (infant or adult), and confessed anew in front of the congregation. Elders are not being asked to make a statement beyond that of other members – this is a reminder that there is no promotion to a 'higher status' involved by becoming an elder, but an emphasis on the faithful discipleship and belief that it is the obligation laid upon all who claim the promises of Jesus Christ. It is also a way of seeing the eldership as not a part of a social club which has no basis in religious conviction and experience, and one which demands self-examination and reflection.

2. Do you promise to seek the unity and peace of the Church?

This phrase identifies the corporate responsibility of eldership. However, it does not mention, or imply, that the person ordained as an elder has the duty, or the responsibility of membership of the Kirk Session. Rather, it demands that the person is aware that the Church is not a segregation of saints, but a gathering of sinners who are inclined to argument, dispute and division like all other forms of human society. It lays obligations on them to be those who create an environment of inclusion and listening – and this may be done in a variety of ways from the leadership and support of groups within the congregations, to ensuring that the hurts and wounds, alienation and isolation of some individuals in the congregation are attended to and responded to as the Gospel would demand.

This encourages the idea that elders are those who are given the maintenance of the ethos of the congregation as part of their role, and they are to be held accountable for its atmosphere of friendship, support and care which it exhibits.

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It does **not mean** - if we are to be true to the accounts of the early Church in Acts and in the Gospel narratives relating to the disciples - the suppression of debate, discussion and diversity in the congregation's life. Unity is not uniformity, and peace is more than the absence of conflict, but the creation of an environment where the good of the body is more important than the supremacy of an individual, or group, and the perspective of Jesus is the critical factor in determining the policy, provision, or decisions required. The vow does not indicate the necessity of eliminating of healthy disagreement, but acts as an instruction and insistence on respect and toleration of each other in the way prescribed by Jesus in his earthly ministry.

3. To uphold its doctrine, worship, government and discipline

Again there is no direct instruction to become part of a Kirk Session, and any elder may fulfil this part of his, or her, vows by involvement in a range of opportunities of service in a range which may include the Bible Study group, the Guild, the Sunday School, the Youth group, pensioners lunch club, the visitation of the sick, the outreach programmes to the parish of all kinds and regular participation as a worshipper in worship services (and the leadership of them on occasion). The 'upholding' is done by more than mere voting on an issue, but on a life style and demonstration of commitment to the ways of Jesus, and surely is not to be narrowly, or exclusively, interpreted. It is to accept that the eldership is an office in the Presbyterian form of church government, or the conciliar system, and that decisions made by the courts of the church are binding and not options for choice (e.g. Safeguarding).

It declares that an elder accepts that the Presbyterian form of polity or church government is 'agreeable to' (if not prescribed by) the Word of God. By this phrase an individual accepts or reaffirms his or her willingness to be shaped and to shape the community of the Church in the local congregation as suggested by following Jesus on the pathway of discipleship.

It also reminds all present that there is a distinct and important relationship between discipline and discipleship. Both are rooted in the work of Jesus with the original twelve disciples. Some of the disciples had very unsteady periods. All of them knew within their experience and minds that they had the capacity to betray Jesus, as we recall they all asked '*Lord is it I?*', when Jesus predicted his betrayal by a disciple at the Last Supper.

It is incumbent on all members to be under authority and the nature of discipline in the Church of Scotland – while often seen in a very negative manner in the past, is crucial to its original self-understanding (as one of the three 'marks of the Church' as reformed by Knox alongside 'the right preaching of the Word' and the 'right administration of the sacraments'). Discipline is one of the signs of the Church in its corporate existence, which encourages the positive and creative while urging the exclusion of that which is destructive and negative.

4. To take your due part in the administration of its affairs?

This is the one part of the vows which could be directly argued as indicating the need for elders to be part of the Kirk Session. However, it could also be alleged that the elder is able to act in accordance with this by supporting the Kirk Session in carrying out its decisions, by working with young people, the Guild or in the committees of the church concerned with fabric and finance. In light of the Incarnation it is difficult for a Reformed understanding of faith to see any role in the support of the whole Christian community as being merely 'temporal' and each area may be seen to enjoy a spiritual dimension as it 'builds up the body of Christ'. To eliminate a person from the office and responsibility of eldership because he or she is prevented by family circumstances, or work commitments, from attending the Kirk

Session meetings, while he or she contributes to the leadership of the congregation in a multitude of other ways seems to suggest a hierarchical structure and an exclusive attitude that are unhelpful and lacking in creativity and imagination.

Commentary

I believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith contained in the Confession of Faith of this Church.

This reflects the historical allegiance to the expression of the reformed faith as it has been understood from the time of John Knox and, in particular, the expression of faith [principles or essentials as agreed at the Westminster Assembly of Divines in 1647. While many controversies and debates have surrounded this expression of faith and its historically shaped language and understanding of the atonement and nature of the grace of God, it is still a guiding definitive and approved statement of the faith of the Church. Subscription to this is seen as asserting loyalty and commitment in defending the Christian faith as expressed.

I acknowledge the Presbyterian government of this Church to be agreeable to the Word of God, and promise that I will submit thereto and concur therewith.

As commented on above, the term is 'agreeable' as this does not assert a divine blessing or total support, as some would argue in Roman Catholicism or Episcopalians, which is given to episcopal ordination and church orders. It opens the Church to the principle of growth and development in future.

It makes clear that elders, as are ministers, are under the discipline of the courts of the Church. This is important as it is designed to protect members, elders or ministers from, bullying and persecution in the exercise of their office which may occur.

I promise to observe the order of worship and the administration of all public ordinances as the same are or may be allowed in this Church

This statement allows freedom in the way the Church may worship in future as guided by the Holy Spirit, but does not allow the introduction of practices which are contrary to the decision and direction of the General Assembly. This preserves the past heritage of Reformed worship in the Church of Scotland, and prevents, with the assertion of disciplinary processes against any introduction of discriminatory activities (e.g., the exclusion of women from all participation in worship, chanting in Latin during the sacraments, or the introduction of Roman Catholic concepts of the Mass) This asserts a commitment to an adherence to worship which traditionally in the Presbyterian Church should be conducted 'decently and in order'.

The Westminster Confession of Faith

In a conference on the topic of recharging the eldership, it should be noted that in the General Assembly of 1986 the Westminster Confession of Faith was altered as a result of the intervention of an elder from Stirling. He proposed, and these changes were adopted, that hostile, negative and condemnatory references to the Pope and the Roman Catholic system of Church life, should be removed from the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Surely this points to the possibility of the important impact the eldership may make in formulating, expressing and changing the Church of Scotland as it enters this new challenging era of its life and witness.