

Sessional and Diaconal Cooperation

Workshop

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Sessional and Diaconal Cooperation

Agenda

-
- The Two Leadership Bodies
 - The “Why?” of Cooperation
 - The “How?” of Cooperation
 - Case Study Exercises
 - Case Study Debriefing
 - Summary



Sessional and Diaconal Cooperation, *continued*

Workshop Overview

Helping deacons develop strategies for working in concert with their elders in diaconal ministry.

By the end of this workshop you will be able to:

- Describe the ***nature*** of diaconal ministry in relation to the Session
- Describe the biblical ***basis*** for elder- deacon cooperation
- Identify ***formal structures*** of elder-deacon cooperation
- Identify ***informal patterns*** of elder-deacon cooperation
- Recognize ***levels of cooperation*** required by various situations



Presbyterian Church Leadership

Definition

There are two leadership bodies in the Presbyterian church, each with distinct but related duties:

- Session
- Diaconate

The name “Presbyterian” refers to the fact that elders (presbuteros) are the ultimate authorities over the church; however, the elders share their leadership and ministry with the Diaconate.

What can happen if these two bodies don’t work well together?

Presbyterian Church Leadership, *continued*

Workshop Focus

- **Why** elders and deacons *must* cooperate.
- **How** elders and deacons *can* cooperate.



Notes



Presbyterian Church Leadership, *continued*

Why Cooperate?

#1. The primary reason elders and deacons should cooperate is grounded in the reason that deacons exist: to be assistants to the elders.



"Deacon" comes from the Greek word diakonos meaning "servant."

Acts 6: 1-6 (ESV)

¹ Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

Notes



Presbyterian Church Leadership, *continued*

Why Cooperate?

continued

In the early part of Acts, the young Church was experiencing “growing pains.” Many in the church were donating large amounts of money to church leaders. This apparently gave rise to a situation in which the apostles were regularly distributing to widows. But certain widows were being left out, for a variety of reasons, and this situation created hurt and discord.

The apostles acknowledged, “We have been trying to do too much, and we need to stop. Our main calling is to the ministry of Word and prayer, and we need to focus on that. So let’s make arrangements for other men to take on this ministry of “serving tables” (vs. 2).

Note: The word here for “serve” is the word for “deacon.” We should not think of those “serving tables” as waiters, but more likely those serving at money tables (i.e., to distribute money to those in need).

Thus, we are right to think of these seven men as the first deacons of the New Testament church. And they came into existence in order to assist the elders in their work.

The elders recognized that the Church’s care of widows was ultimately their responsibility, but they needed help in carrying out this work.

Point: Consider the implications of this for cooperation between elders and deacons.

If the whole purpose of the Diaconate is to provide assistance to the elders, then there needs to be a close working relationship to maximize that assistance.

Notes



Effective Delegation Requires Cooperation

Diaconal Responsibilities

The various tasks of the Diaconate are responsibilities delegated from the Session.



In the rest of the New Testament there is comparatively little specific information about diaconal responsibility (especially compared to that of the eldership).

Why? Diaconal responsibilities are very broad: they must do whatever is necessary to enable the elders to focus on the Word and prayer.

It is for this reason that Presbyterianism views the diaconal office as including a very broad range of practical and administrative functions that the elders would otherwise be involved with:

- financial matters: budgeting, reports, disbursing funds, etc.
- buildings and facilities: maintenance and improvements
- church operations and activities: Sunday preparations, etc.
- civil and legal matters affecting the church
- the security of the property

As an illustration from Calvin's church in Geneva, one of the deacons was responsible to "remove from the place those who loiter."

Therefore, there must be a close working relationship in order for elders to delegate things to deacons. The most effective delegation comes in a close working relationship.

Notes



Effective Delegation Requires Cooperation, *continued*

Why Cooperate?

#2. The second reason cooperation is needed is because of what deacons do: they lead in a ministry of **deed** that is inseparable from a ministry of **Word**.

Mercy ministry = ministry of deeds: caring for the material needs of the members of the church, and beyond. The Diaconate is particularly concerned for the physical needs of people.

1 Peter 4:10-11 (ESV)



As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: ¹¹whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies--in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

The two "arms" of Christian ministry are word and deed; these are represented by the two offices of elder and deacon.

- The office of elder embodies the church's responsibility to preach and teach the gospel.
- The office of deacon embodies the church's responsibility to show compassion and generosity to the needy.

Notes

Effective Delegation Requires Cooperation, *continued*

Word and Deed Ministry

Each of the offices has its respective focus, but it is not an exclusive focus. Word and deed ministry can be distinguished, but they cannot be separated in true Christian ministry. Thus:

- Elders address spiritual needs...but also demonstrate love in tangible ways.
- Deacons address physical needs...but also give words of encouragement and counsel.

1 John 3:17-18 (ESV)



¹⁷But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

Notes



Formal Means of Session – Diaconate Cooperation

How Can the Session and Diaconate Cooperate?

There are both formal and informal ways the Session and the Diaconate can cooperate in their respective ministries.

There should be formal, structured ways in which the two bodies regularly communicate with each other in order to coordinate their ministry efforts – this can be called “formal cooperation.”

There should also be patterns of more informal, spontaneous communication between individual elders and deacons in response to specific ministry situations – this can be called “informal cooperation.”

The primary examples of *formal cooperation* are listed below:

- regular diaconal reports to the session
- a sessional liaison at deacon meetings
- joint meetings of elders with deacons

In what formal ways does your current diaconate work with your session?

Notes

Formal Means of Session – Diaconate Cooperation, *continued*

Formal

- Regular Diaconal reports to the session
- Sessional liaison at all deacon meetings
- Joint meetings of elders with deacons



In what ways (formal or informal) does your current diaconate work with your session?



Regular Reports to the Session

The *purpose* of regular reports is simply to keep the Session informed.

Two ways of keeping the Session informed are:

- Sharing meeting minutes
- In-person reports on specific issues, such as recent ministry activities, financial disbursements, and potential pastoral needs

A basic way to promote cooperation between elders and deacons is for deacons to bring regular reports to the Session on the work of the Diaconate.

If the whole reason for the existence of the Diaconate is to assist the Session in its ministry leadership, then the Session should be regularly updated on the work of the deacons. This is a key responsibility of the Diaconate. One very basic mechanism of reporting is for the Diaconate to maintain minutes of all of its meetings, and to provide copies of those minutes to the Session after each meeting.

An even more intentional mechanism for reporting is for the Diaconate to send a representative from its number to each Session meeting, for the purpose of bringing a report on the work of the Diaconate.

Such a report should include a summary of the recent ministry activities of the diaconate, the financial disbursements that have been made and to whom, and particularly an indication of those diaconal situations that also entail pastoral needs.

Delivering this report in person allows the Session to ask questions of and provide input to the Diaconate through its representative.

See Appendix A for a sample of a Diaconal report to Session.

Notes



Formal Means of Session – Diaconate Cooperation, *continued*

Session Liaison

Another way to facilitate cooperation between the Session and Diaconate in a structured way is for a member of the Session to attend all deacon meetings.

The origin of the Diaconate in Acts 6 indicates that in an ongoing way the Session will, in the pursuit of its business, need to delegate to the Diaconate certain ministry needs. This in itself will call for ongoing communication from the Session to the Diaconate, which is best done through a personal representative of the Session.

Additionally, such a liaison can serve to update the Diaconate on the broader work of the Session about which all the officers of the church should be aware. It is particularly ideal for maximizing the communication between the two bodies if the Sessional liaison to the Diaconate is the pastor.

The liaison serves as a point of contact for two-way communication between the two offices.

Notes



Formal Means of Session – Diaconate Cooperation, *continued*

Joint Elder-Deacon Meetings

One other way to facilitate cooperation between Sessions and Diaconates in a structured way is simply to schedule joint meetings on a regular basis.

At some regular intervals of time it is extremely valuable for elders and deacons to meet together for prayer, and to discuss the broader ministry of the church.

Such “officer meetings” serve to promote the camaraderie necessary to ongoing cooperation in leadership, and also provide excellent opportunities to grow together in leadership.

Joint meetings of this kind should be held at least once a year, and, preferably, more often. The agenda can vary and may extend beyond simply discussing specific cases. For example, it could include the following:

- Prayer
- Presentations
- Book discussions
- Brainstorming
- Etc.

Notes

Formal Means of Session – Diaconate Cooperation, *continued*

A large blue rounded rectangle with the word 'Informal' in white text.

Informal

- Conferring in ministry
- Pairing up for ministry
- Teaming up for ministry



In what informal ways does your current diaconate work with your session?



Informal Means of Session – Diaconate Cooperation, *continued*

Conferring in Ministry

The first and most basic form of informal cooperation between Sessions and Diaconates is found in the ongoing, private consultations that should take place between individual elders and deacons.

It is important that every member of the congregation who is receiving diaconal assistance have a designated elder who is aware from the beginning of the diaconal assistance administered.

Many Sessions have provided for effective shepherding through a division of the congregation into shepherding groups, each overseen by a designated elder. *See the article “The Ingredients of a Successful Oversight Program” in Appendix B.*

When such a shepherding model is in place, the diaconate is able, as each diaconal need arises, to confer with the appropriate shepherding elder about the best course of action.

This is extremely valuable in two ways: it enables elders to consider and address from the beginning the pastoral needs that may be present, and it provides deacons the guidance they need at times in addressing rather complex situations of need.

There are, of course, diaconal needs that arise that require less pastoral attention. In such cases the involvement of a shepherding elder may be minimal; the deacons may simply report to him on assistance given. In other cases, however, deacons will be wise to consult with a shepherding elder before any diaconal assistance is given, in order to have at least some level of pastoral involvement from the beginning.

The purpose of this conferring in ministry is to promote a broader perspective on each case. Conferring allows the elder to provide advice to the deacon, as well as an awareness of other issues affecting the individual that can help in planning how to best minister to them.

There are several ways an elder and deacon may confer:

- The deacon may simply provide updates
- The two might meet to discuss actions the deacons are taking
- The deacon may request guidance on how to approach a difficult situation

See Appendix B for the article “The Ingredients of a Successful Oversight Program” for a fuller explication of this model.

See Appendix C for an example of working principles for Sessional Diaconal cooperation.



Informal Means of Session – Diaconate Cooperation, *continued*

Pairing Up in Ministry

A second and more robust form of informal cooperation between Sessions and Diaconates takes place when an elder and a deacon resolve to work together as a pair to address complex material and spiritual needs.

Many situations of deep and even chronic diaconal need have very complex pastoral needs lying behind them. When deacons encounter such situations, it is important for them to enlist the involvement of an elder responsible for those involved from the outset.

Such pairing up by elders and deacons is important for ongoing meetings with the ministry recipients, planning of long term assistance, and especially for overseeing the specific kind of instruction that is called for.

For example, chronic indebtedness may call for stewardship training on the part of the deacons; however, it may also call for basic Christian discipleship and accountability on the part of an elder.

Between the Session and the Diaconate there should be a “culture of cooperation” that makes such ad hoc, informal pairing up of elders and deacons very common.

An elder and a deacon may collaborate by:

- Meeting jointly with the individual
- Working out plans for ministry, support, and discipling
- Working together to provide instruction (to individuals or even the congregation at large)

Notes



Informal Means of Session – Diaconate Cooperation, *continued*

Teaming Up in Ministry

The third kind of informal cooperation between Sessions and Diaconates takes place when elders and deacons together recruit church members to assist in particularly challenging ministry situations.

Both elders and deacons should consider themselves leaders in ministry, not the sole conductors of ministry. Gifts for ministry of word and deed are found in the whole congregation, and officers in the church should have an eye toward enlisting the members of the church in ministry.

In the case of obvious material or financial hardship, deacons will often be the first to respond to needs in peoples' lives. However, it sometimes becomes apparent not only that there are spiritual needs requiring pastoral assistance, but also that the total magnitude of the needs goes beyond the capacities of the officers of the church.

In such situations, the deacons and elders together will need to facilitate a larger team of willing and spiritual church members to provide ongoing, multi-faceted assistance to the needy. The plans and progress of such ministry teams should be overseen by the elder -and -deacon pair, but much of the assistance in word and deed should be carried out by the broader body of Christ.

The elder-deacon pair may augment the ministry team by organizing teams for ministries to achieve a greater impact through

- Service
- Encouragement
- More resources

Notes



Case Exercise

Session-Diaconate Case Overview

The cases that follow provide an opportunity to evaluate and decide the appropriate level of Session-Diaconate cooperation.

You will be given five case studies taken from real ministry situations. As you evaluate each one, ask yourself the question, “How much cooperation between the Session and Diaconate does this case require, and what should that look like?”

Do not focus on devising a plan of assistance; rather, focus on the kind of cooperation that is called for between the Session and Diaconate.

Note: There is room for disagreement about what level of cooperation is called for in each case. Include the rationale for your decision, and we will debrief to discuss them. This will help prepare you for actual situations which occur in which Session-Diaconate cooperation is needed in your local ministry.

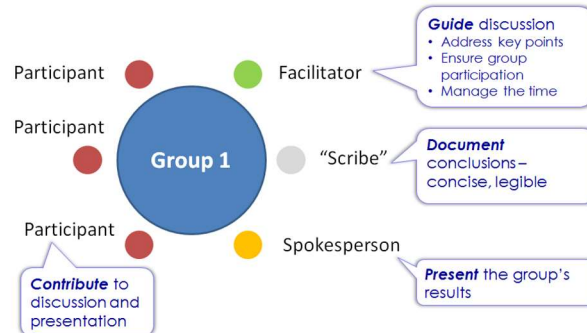
“How much cooperation is called for, and what should it look like?”

Instructions

1. Break into groups of five to seven people.
2. Imagine you are a board of deacons in a local church.
3. Take a minute to read the first case. Then, discuss and decide the level of Session-Diaconate cooperation that is warranted, based on the levels presented previously. Note also the group’s reasoning. Ideally, try to reach consensus; however, if you cannot do so quickly, note the primary answers and reasons and move on – there really is not enough information provided to support a detailed debate.
4. Repeat Step 3 with the next case. Try to complete them all within the allotted time.
5. Reconvene with the full workshop group to discuss the results.

Roles

It may help to organize your group using the roles below.





Case 1 Debrief: **Scott**

Level of Support

-
- ☐ Reporting to a shepherding elder on assistance given
 - ☐ Conferring with a shepherding elder prior to and during assistance
 - ☐ Pairing up with a shepherding elder in ongoing financial and pastoral counseling
 - ☐ Assembling a team of members, in addition to an elder-deacon team, to provide assistance
 - ☐ Referring a need to the Session as one primarily pastoral in nature

Rationale

Notes



Case 2 Debrief: **Tom**

Level of Support

-
- ☐ Reporting to a shepherding elder on assistance given
 - ☐ Conferring with a shepherding elder prior to and during assistance
 - ☐ Pairing up with a shepherding elder in ongoing financial and pastoral counseling
 - ☐ Assembling a team of members, in addition to an elder-deacon team, to provide assistance
 - ☐ Referring a need to the Session as one primarily pastoral in nature

Rationale

Notes



Case 3 Debrief: **Jake**

Level of Support

-
- ☐ Reporting to a shepherding elder on assistance given
 - ☐ Conferring with a shepherding elder prior to and during assistance
 - ☐ Pairing up with a shepherding elder in ongoing financial and pastoral counseling
 - ☐ Assembling a team of members, in addition to an elder-deacon team, to provide assistance
 - ☐ Referring a need to the Session as one primarily pastoral in nature

Rationale

Notes



Case 4 Debrief: **Frank**

Level of Support

-
- ☐ Reporting to a shepherding elder on assistance given
 - ☐ Conferring with a shepherding elder prior to and during assistance
 - ☐ Pairing up with a shepherding elder in ongoing financial and pastoral counseling
 - ☐ Assembling a team of members, in addition to an elder-deacon team, to provide assistance
 - ☐ Referring a need to the Session as one primarily pastoral in nature

Rationale

Notes



Case 5 Debrief: **Cheryl**

Level of Support

-
- ☐ Reporting to a shepherding elder on assistance given
 - ☐ Conferring with a shepherding elder prior to and during assistance
 - ☐ Pairing up with a shepherding elder in ongoing financial and pastoral counseling
 - ☐ Assembling a team of members, in addition to an elder-deacon team, to provide assistance
 - ☐ Referring a need to the Session as one primarily pastoral in nature

Rationale

Notes



Workshop Summary

Cooperation Level

The level of cooperation is always a judgment call – but the question can only be answered if it is first raised!

“Does this case call for elder involvement? If so, how much?”

Next Steps

Since your elders are not here to participate in this discussion, what can you do to initiate or improve Sessional-Diaconal cooperation?

Suggestions for moving ahead with this vision of elder-deacon cooperation:

1. Bring a report to your Session on this summit, and this specific seminar.
Distribute the materials from this seminar to your Session.
2. Bring a proposal (or several, over time, if necessary) to your Session regarding increased formal cooperation, such as:
 - a. Regular diaconal reports to the Session
 - b. A sessional liaison at all deacon meetings
 - c. Joint meetings of elders and deacons
3. Begin to solicit input and assistance from individual elders in the many informal ways outlined in this seminar. This is the kind of cooperation that counts!!!

Notes



Appendices

	Appendix	Description
A	Appendix A: Sample Session-Deacon Report	Example of a summary report of diaconal activities to the session
B	The Ingredients of a Successful Elder Oversight Program	Article by Nathan Trice (published in <i>Ordained Servant</i>) describing the role of the elder in shepherding individuals in the church
C	Joint Ministry by Elders and Deacons, A <i>Statement of Matthews Orthodox Presbyterian Church</i>	An example document containing a series of guidelines and directives regarding the scope and practice of diaconal ministry.