

A Covenant of Session

Grace Commons Church

The Scriptural Foundation for our Session Covenant comes from Colossians 3:17 (NIV):
'And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.'

Regarding prayer and preparedness, we covenant to:

- Pray regularly for our church and session's work
- Make materials available with enough time in advance so that we come to each meeting prepared to discuss and deliberate

Regarding communication, we covenant to:

- Respect the constraints of time and not claim a disproportionate amount for ourselves, keeping a fair balance of time for all to speak
- Listen and speak in a way that respects and encourages the contributions of all
- Keep session communications confidential when deemed as such

Regarding our work together, we covenant to:

- Trust the active role of the Holy Spirit to counsel and lead session
- Honor the best intentions of all as evidenced by our mutual encouragement and support of each other
- Honor our meeting agenda by assuring that it is reasonable in its content and time allotment

Regarding decision-making, we covenant to:

- Follow a careful and deliberate discernment process
- Provide for adequate time in session to reach decisions
- Speak with one voice when session reaches a decision (see additional document: *Role of Session, Role of Individual Elder* for an expansion of this concept)

Regarding our fellowship, we covenant to:

- Commit to celebrating God's work among us
- Celebrate our unity in consistent fellowship and worship

We hold each other accountable to this covenant.

Role of Session, Roles of Individual Elders

In an ECO Presbyterian Church the role of the Session and the Role of the Elders are [explained in part in our polity](#).

Best practices also dictate that when a congregation calls a pastor or pastors and hires staff to carry out the ministry, special care must be taken by the elders and pastors to ensure that their proper roles of governance and oversight are understood and practiced. The analogy of staying in the proper lane has been used. Another illustrative analogy comes from understand which hat to wear.

An individual elder has three hats, the hat of a member of session, the hat of a committee chair and the hat of covenant partner who is serving in a ministry area of the church. It is vital for good governance that the elder knows which hat he or she is wearing at which time.

When an elder is wearing the session member “hat,” policy and governance are their primary roles. The pastor who is called as head of staff by the congregation and installed by the Presbytery is the only staff person over which the board has authority, an authority which is exercised through the Session through a standing committee. The MPT of the Presbytery also has a role in the pastor’s ministry, primarily to ensure that the character and conduct of the ministry conforms with ECO polity, including but not limited to the pastors participation in a pastoral covenant group. (Section 2.0402)

All other staff is responsible to the pastor who serves as head of staff or another supervisor who has been assigned the responsibility to supervise an individual staff member in their area of responsibility. Individual staff members are responsible to the Session and under their authority but that line goes through their immediate supervisor to the Head of Staff and then to the Session. The line of authority never goes to an individual member of Session.

When Session meets and has an item before it that will require a decision, after opportunity for discussion and discernment, “a majority shall govern”. We use the most recent edition of “Robert’s Rules of Order, Newly Revised” (RRONR) as our parliamentary authority. RRONR is a tool that helps us determine the will of the body. Once the will of the body is determined by majority vote, the role of the individual elder, even if they are in the minority, is to fully support the decision of the Session and to support the work of the Pastor, Head of Staff as they execute that decision.

The second “hat” which an elder wears is that of a ministry team elder or committee member or chair (for remainder of this document we will use the words committee and chair)

In this role, the elder is acting in an advisory, encouraging and collaborative role. There is no line of authority over any individual staff. The staff person assigned to the committee is also in an advisory role to the committee and has no authority over the committee. Committees can also include covenant partners who are not serving on Session.

The third “hat” which an elder or other volunteer might wear is that of unpaid staff. In this role the volunteer is performing a program service (e.g. serving food at the soup kitchen or teaching Sunday school) and is directly responsible to the staff person who has been assigned supervisory responsibility for that area of ministry.

Understanding these roles and lines of authority can clarify matters and greatly reduce tension between pastors, church staff and elder members of Session. Session meeting agendas should focus on overall governance and policy responding to motions from elder led committees.

Knowing which hat to wear at what time is not only a big assist but it can release elders into doing the work of ministry in the church in partnership with staff and volunteers.