

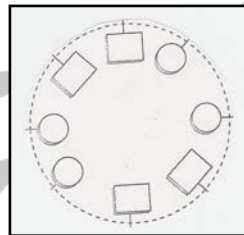


The Session and Congregation as Emotional Systems

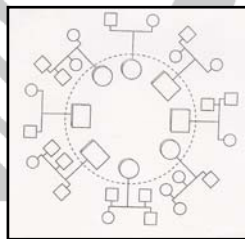
Both teaching and ruling elders are aware that congregational leadership is complex. Congregations expect Sessions to be effective in visioning, planning and implementing “successful” ministries and programs. In order to do so, a Session must act in ways that will not please everyone. The challenge of leadership is how to demonstrate pastoral sensitivity to differences of opinion while making clear and definitive decisions.

Some elders find it disheartening that much of the business of Session seems to be more “political” than “spiritual.” It is helpful for a Session to recognize that every congregation is an *emotional system*. Moreover, it is essential that a Session is aware that it and each of its members are participants in that system.

A Session meeting could be diagrammed like this:



But it really looks like this:



As the diagrams illustrate, each Session member brings relationships of varying intensity and quality to the table. Often, these unseen (and often unnamed) *participants* are given a “voice” at the meeting. They influence attitudes and impact discussion. In addition, elders and ministers bring their own unique and varied values, life experiences, personal prejudices, suspicions and aspirations to Session. The Session can therefore be viewed as one emotional system providing leadership within a congregation that is an even larger emotional system.

As a generalization, a healthy congregation is led by a Session that strives to maintain healthy relationships. Each elder has a role and responsibility for enabling positive process at Session. Self-understanding is a good starting point. Ask such questions as:

- “What personal “baggage” do I bring to Session meetings that could get in the way of good process?”
- “What do I know about myself that needs careful monitoring when I’m in a meeting?”
- “How can I express my point of view without having a negative impact on my relationships with other elders?”
- “In what ways can I contribute to helpful and healthy patterns of conversation and process within our Session?”

Several books published by the *Alban Institute* offer insight regarding the congregation as an emotional system. Consider reading *How Your Church Family Works – Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* by Peter L. Steinke.

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