



Protocol for Communication with the Session

I. Background:

When delicate matters are presented to either the pastor(s) or elders, it is a challenge to know when, if at all, to communicate some or all of these matters to the full session. While a blanket promise of confidentiality must never be given to those who confide in the pastor(s) or elders, these parties should be given an assurance that, unless it is necessary, confidential matters will not go beyond the bounds of those actually involved in the delicate matter under consideration. On the other hand, certain matters, for various reasons, may need to be known at some point by the session, if not by other members of the congregation or the congregation as a whole. Indeed, the welfare of the whole church may depend on some otherwise “confidential” matters being made known to the proper parties.

The following protocol offers some guidelines for helping pastors, elders, and sessions, know how and when to make information that might otherwise be kept confidential available to the proper parties and for the proper reasons.

II. Protocol:

1. All truly *personal* matters must be kept confidential between the party and the pastor or elders called upon for counsel or assistance. This includes not asking for prayer for this private and personal matter. Otherwise, questions and suspicions and even improper interest may be raised unnecessarily. This is the principle represented in Matthew 18:15, i.e. “*just between the two of you*”, and Galatians 6:1.
2. Matters which are so involved that they, in some way, go beyond that which is exclusively; *personal* and *private* must, of necessity, involve those others who are affected by the issue or problem, cf. Matt. 5:23-26. If true resolution is attained, it is not necessary that the details be made known to the session. It may, however, be prudent for the pastor or elder dealing with the matter to ask the session for prayer for God’s intervention in “a reconciliation matter”. No names should be mentioned at this stage. This is a principle represented in Matthew 18:15f.
3. When there are difficulties in resolving an issue that is not truly *private* and *personal* it would, at that time, be necessary for the pastor or elder dealing with the matter to bring the broad outline of the issue to the session. At this stage it is wisest not to mention the names of the parties involved, unless there is some common knowledge among the session members concerning the issue and the parties. The session’s counsel should be sought regarding procedure to help resolve the issue, cf. Prov. 11:14, 24:6. Specific prayer for the work of the “wonderful counselor” and also for the one representing Him should be offered, to the end that the matter might be resolved in a godly way. The pastor or elder should report back to the session either that the matter is resolved, or that it is not.
4. If, after such consultation and prayer and continued effort to resolve the matter, no progress results, the pastor or elder must inform the session of the necessary details and the parties involved. This must be understood by all involved as the first phase of the application of Matthew 18:17. The session must then agree on the next step or steps to be taken. From this point on, the matter is truly a sessional matter. The parties being dealt with must be informed of this, and be made to realize that if there is not repentance and change in the areas being dealt with, there will be formal disciplinary action by the session.

5. If there is still no progress in correcting the problem or problems, the session must begin implementing the procedures as outlined in the Book of Discipline, chapters III-VI.
6. Once the matter becomes a sessional concern, the session as a body will decide what is to be said when congregation members may inquire about the matter. Likewise, the session will decide what, if anything is to be said to the congregation, and in what forum, e.g. a closed meeting, following a worship service, etc. Any public statements should be written out and agreed upon by the session in advance. It is proper that a ruling elder (ordinarily the clerk) read the statement. This reinforces to the congregation that it is the session that is dealing with the matter.
7. In all cases in which something could adversely affect the church or one or more of its members, e.g. a history of child molesting or other sexual perversion by a congregation member or attendee, a history of, in one form or another, stealing from others, the session must be informed of the circumstances so that it might faithfully exercise its role in watching over the flock, cf. Acts 20:28-30.

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