



The Four C's of Presbytery: What is the purpose of Presbytery?

By Paul Levy

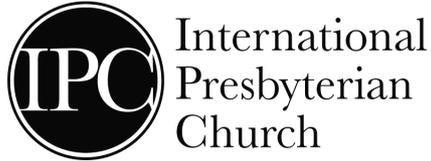
In many peoples minds there is often confusion about the role of Presbytery. Sadly, sometimes elders don't even fully understand the importance of Presbytery, and often it's seen as dull, stuffy, churchy and irrelevant. Nothing could be further from the truth. I am convinced that elders and ministers must speak as positively as they can about their Presbyteries to their people. It allows the congregation to see how much we value and respect the provision of accountability and encouragement in Christ's church. But exactly what should Presbytery be doing? When I was Moderator of IPC (*a period of time we now affectionately refer to as 'The Glory Days'*) I used to talk about the four C's of Presbytery (well, the last one has a C in the word).

1. A Court

There are four occasions each year when I, as a minister of the denomination, could get fired. Presbytery provides accountability for me and all the other elders. Sin is an ever-present reality in the life of the Christian, in the life of the Church and in the life of the elder. Issues and problems will arise in church life, and that is unavoidable. The New Testament gives examples of decisions made by elders that are binding on all the churches. It also speaks of the Presbytery laying hands on Timothy, and so Presbytery is responsible for the training and ordination of ministers. It is also responsible for the disciplining of pastors, if that should ever be necessary. Presbytery acts as a check and a balance on a local eldership. At times, sessions get things wrong and so a congregation can appeal to Presbytery if it is felt that the local elders have acted wrongly. There is a right and proper formal accountability for us as Presbyterians, something which fellowships, associations, networks, partnerships can never have. Presbytery is accountability with teeth.

2. A College

Presbytery has to be a place where men are stretched to think theologically. To have elders and ministers together and not use the time for training and developing our understanding of the faith is surely madness. As well as meeting for worship and preaching, for the last number of years we've had at least a couple of lectures at Presbytery from people like Sinclair Ferguson, Garry Williams, Bob Letham, Donald Macleod, Jose De Segovia, James Eglinton, followed by questions and discussion from the floor. There is a sense in which every member needs to be a learner no matter how theologically literate (or illiterate) they may be. Time is very precious, and yet, by Presbytery setting aside chunks of time to learn and study together, this is setting a right priority that will benefit the congregations.



3. A Catalyst

Presbytery must be a place where ministers and elders want to be. It's why I think having meals together is important. You're forced to sit down and talk to one another, hear about each others' churches and what they are doing. Nearly every good idea is stolen from someone else and, as we share, talk and pray together we will be stirred up to think freshly about church life. Presbytery naturally becomes a catalyst for ministry. We need to beg, borrow and steal good ideas from one another. Often from spending time together, ideas and initiatives proceed. Presbytery must not just be meetings; it must be a band of brothers. The famous quote that 'The Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton', I think could be applied to our Presbytery — 'The little growth we've known is partly because of Presbytery nights at the Drayton Court.'

4. An Encouragement

Church leadership can be lonely and difficult. There needs to be strong friendships formed within Presbytery, hence the need for people to spend time together, eat together. Even part of the fun of traipsing round the country to meetings builds stronger relationships. I'm always struck by the warmth of Paul's relationships with people in Philippians Chapter 1: their partnership in the gospel has created warm friendship and even more than that strong affection. We must strive for the same. All friendship takes work, but we must endeavour for Presbytery to be a friendly place where people are prayed for, encouraged, and where there is mutual care and strengthening of one another.

In conclusion, it takes commitment and prioritising to be Presbyterian in this way. We want to hold fast to theological truth and take the teachings of our Confession seriously, to be theologically rigorous — and that has implications. This will affect the way we run our meetings. Presbytery must never become just a business meeting that drowns itself in motions and counter motions. What all of the above means is that Presbytery is a big deal; it's a big deal for elders and ministers to give up the amount of time that it takes for a Presbytery to function properly. It takes lots of work from the Moderator and Clerk in setting the agenda. Hosting Presbytery becomes hard work for the churches but it's worth it. It's worth it, because, God willing, Presbytery can continue to grow and flourish and be a place elders and ministers want to be.