



International Presbyterian Church

Ordination in the IPC

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1. The importance and function of elders

The International Presbyterian Church is a group of churches committed to proclaiming the unchanging gospel of Jesus Christ. We are theologically committed to a high view of the church: that is, that Jesus Christ applies the blessings of the gospel through the means of grace, which are found in the church. It is through the preached word of God, the visible words of the sacraments, and the right exercise of church discipline, that people chiefly come to faith and grow in grace and Christian maturity. Also the Christian duty of mercy and care for needy brothers and sisters in Christ is chiefly exercised through the church.

All these things depend on ministry of the church's ordained offices. Deacons are responsible for seeing that the needy of the church are provided for. Elders (also known in the Bible as overseers and pastor-teachers) are responsible for teaching, administering the sacraments and pastoral care (including discipline), and are listed by Paul as one of the gifts of Christ to his Church through which she grows to maturity (Eph 4:11). We therefore see the office of elder, and the wise selection and godly accountability of the elders of our churches, as being of very great importance. For this reason the selection procedure is intentionally rigorous and searching. The long-term health of Christ's Church depends upon her elders being wise and faithful to the Church's Lord and the scriptures he has given us.

2. Qualifications for eldership

Elders are required in Scripture to be men of exemplary Christian character who are able to care for Christ's people, who hold firmly to the word of God and have a clear understanding of it, and are able to teach it to the church. These then are the things on which potential elders should be assessed.

3. Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders

In Scripture we find reference to both the ruling and the teaching function of elders, and it is clear that not all elders do both. In the Old Testament the Elders of the people had a chiefly ruling function, that is, the pastoral care of the people. In the New Testament we find that all elders in the church have this ruling function, and all are required to be 'apt to teach' (1 Timothy 3:2); yet it is clear that not all elders had the particular responsibility of teaching in this way (1 Timothy 5:17).

Historically, Presbyterians have taken a variety of views on whether 'Ruling Elders' and 'Teaching Elders' are two functions within one office (a 'Two Office' view – eldership is a single office, the second office being the Diaconate) or two different offices (a 'Three Office' view). In practice the difference is small. Those with a 'Two office' view invariably end up recognising a real functional difference between the two with Teaching Elders having a teaching responsibility Ruling Elders do not have, while those with a 'Three Office' view invariably accept that both offices include the function of ruling and pastoral care.

The IPC has traditionally taken a 'Two Office' view, while nevertheless recognising the difference in role between Teaching elders and Ruling elders. All elders have the same authority in ruling the church as part of the session; all must be able to teach; but those ordained as Teaching Elders have the regular duty of preaching to and teaching the church, and so are expected to have greater theological knowledge and training, and greater teaching gifts, than Ruling Elders are required to have.

In practice this means that Teaching Elders are usually theologically trained, work full-time for the church, and receive a stipend to enable them to do so. They are expected to have both the theological knowledge and clarity, and the teaching skill and interpersonal ability, to be able to preach and teach faithfully and clearly. Ruling Elders are usually chosen from within the congregation, earn their living in a secular job, and are not expected to have had the benefit of full-time theological training. Nevertheless they are expected to have a good knowledge of Scripture and be familiar with central parts of Reformed theology. All elders, being pastors, are expected to be pastorally gifted, mature in their faith, to be living godly Christian lives, and to display godly wisdom.

These differences and similarities between the two offices are reflected in the examination procedures. Prospective Teaching Elders are examined by the Candidates and Credentials Committee of Presbytery, and their ordination must be approved by the presbytery as a whole. Prospective Ruling Elders are examined by members of the C&C Committee acting as a commission of presbytery. The different skills and levels of training and knowledge expected are also reflected in the length of answers candidates are required to give in their application form and in the oral examination.

All elders are presbyterially ordained usually in their own church with presbytery represented by one or more visiting elders.

All elders are entitled to be present at Presbytery. All Teaching Elders have a vote, plus up to two Ruling Elders from each church with up to 100 members, and another Ruling Elder for each additional 100 members (or part thereof) as nominated by that church for that meeting of Presbytery.

4. Process for a candidate for ordination as a Teaching Elder

The underlying principle is the ordination process is that “the local church calls, the presbytery approves and ordains”. Refer also to BCO 5.2.

Stage 1: Local Church or Church Planting Committee

1.1 The Congregation (through the Session) identifies the need for a Teaching Elder and an appropriate candidate. In the case of a prospective church plant, the Church Planting Committee of Presbytery will fulfil the role of a Session.

1.2 If the Candidate requires theological training, this should be undertaken at this point. If the session believes it will be helpful they may wish to arrange for him to meet with the C&C committee to consider having him taken under care of presbytery.

1.3 Once the Session is satisfied that the candidate has had sufficient training and is ready for examination, they should bring the candidate for a vote of the members of the congregation. As the power to ordain lies with presbytery, this is not a final vote on ordination. Rather, the vote is to request presbytery consider him for ordination. This vote shall take place by means of a secret ballot in a Members’ Meeting called for the purpose. A three-quarters majority of a quorate meeting is required.

Where the Church Planting Committee is fulfilling the role of a session, the approval of the committee constitutes the call.

The session, or Church Planting Committee, should then recommend the candidate to presbytery, by filling in the “Ordination Request Form”, and sending it to the C&C Committee.

Stage 2: Candidates and Credentials Committee

2.1 All candidates recommended to Presbytery are referred to the Candidates and Credentials Committee.

2.2 The C&C Committee writes to the Candidate to request

1. CV
2. Link to sermon download (or other format)
3. Three referees.
4. Completed Application Form
5. Completed subscription statement, including exceptions

2.3 Upon receipt of all of these, discussion of the candidate is scheduled for a future C&C meeting. The materials will be circulated to members of the committee. At that meeting the committee will decide whether to invite the candidate for examination. The committee will then write to the candidate either to give this invitation (and explain what form the examination will take, and what preparation is appropriate) or to explain the reasons for not doing so.

2.4 The interview will usually take place at the next C&C meeting. Interviews will normally last approximately 1-2 hours.

The committee will decide its recommendations at the same meeting, after the candidate has left, and the C&C Committee will write to the candidate to communicate the committee’s decision within two weeks. If the decision is to recommend the candidate for ordination, he will be invited to attend the following meeting of Presbytery for his floor examination. If another course of action is recommended (e.g. an internship, or further study) this will be explained. If the decision is to take the application no further then reasons for this will be given.

Stage 3: Presbytery Examination

3.1 At this point C&C will make available to Presbytery the candidate's CV, application form and subscription statement but **not** the references. This will enable Presbyters to prepare possible questions for the floor exam, or raise any issues with C&C.

3.2 At a following Presbytery the candidate will be brought to the floor of presbytery, in open session, for examination. Members of presbytery may ask questions of the candidate. They may also ask questions, in closed session, of the chairman of the C&C committee. Presbytery will then hold a secret ballot. Provided there is a quorum, a candidate shall be approved upon the approval of a three quarters majority of voting members present.

3.3 The result of the ballot will be communicated to the candidate and the session or sponsoring committee without delay.

Stage 4: Ordination

4.1 An Ordination service is organised at the earliest convenient date, with at least one visiting elder present.

5. Process for a candidate for ordination as a Ruling Elder

The process for ordination as a Ruling Elder is the same as a Teaching Elder apart from the following differences:

- C&C act as a Commission of Presbytery.
- Potential REs are not asked to provide sermons, and different levels of training and knowledge expected are reflected in the length of answers required.
- Potential REs are not required to take a presbytery floor exam. In place of a floor exam, C&C will provide a commission (of at least two men) to meet with the candidate for examination. A member of the man's session is permitted to attend the examination, if desired. These examinations will usually last about an hour.
- The candidate's papers will be circulated to presbytery ahead of this exam for presbyters to make any comments or suggest questions.
- The Committee will decide its recommendations within one week. As a commission of presbytery, there is not need for a further vote of the full presbytery.
- C&C will communicate their decision to the candidate and his session.
- If the decision is to approve the ordination, C&C will communicate this to the presbytery, usually at the next quarterly presbytery meeting.

6. Transferral of previously ordained elders (Teaching and Ruling) into the IPC

The processes will be similar to those outlined above, except that there will be of course no ordination at the end of it, and the candidate's experience and previous ministry should be taken into account in the entire process. The level of rigour in the examination process for their ordination will be taken into account in judging what level of rigour is appropriate now.

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