

Coming Alive in Christ:

Training for PC(USA) Ruling Elders and Deacons

Based on the Constitutional Questions

This resource has been created for the purpose of providing teaching elders/ministers of Word and Sacrament and other congregational leaders with content to adequately train ruling elders and deacons in their ministries with God's people. Based on the questions that each of the church leaders affirms when ordained, as found in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), it is hoped that those in ordered ministries study these beliefs that are central to our lives in faith and in community with each other.

A note about style for the leader:

With content on the major themes of each question, sections were written by a variety of ruling elders and teaching elders from across the PC(USA). While each includes their voice and perspective, it is hoped that you make each one your own. As you train the leaders of the congregation, add connections to your own congregation and community. Use the content here as a jumping off point and enhance it with your knowledge of those with whom you serve.

A *Monthly Leader Guide* is available and includes a design to be used at the beginning of meetings of the session and/or board of deacons. Use these as a way of presenting the content provided for each question and studying together the questions affirmed in ordination.

A *Retreat Leader Guide* is also available in a three-lesson format to be used in training ruling elders and deacons prior to service in a retreat setting. The whole content of the resource can be made available to the congregational leaders in other ways as well.

Supplemental visuals in the form of PowerPoint slides are designed to help you lead the group or individual as you study and learn together. These can be used as a presentation as you meet and talk together or can be used to spark those in your midst who may need reinforcement of the content through images.

Discussion questions are provided periodically within the content of each session. Use those provided, questions of your own, or those provided within the leader guide in communications with church leaders.

Additional resources are included in many of the sessions. These can be made available for those who want to go further in their study or can be added to the session content for the group.

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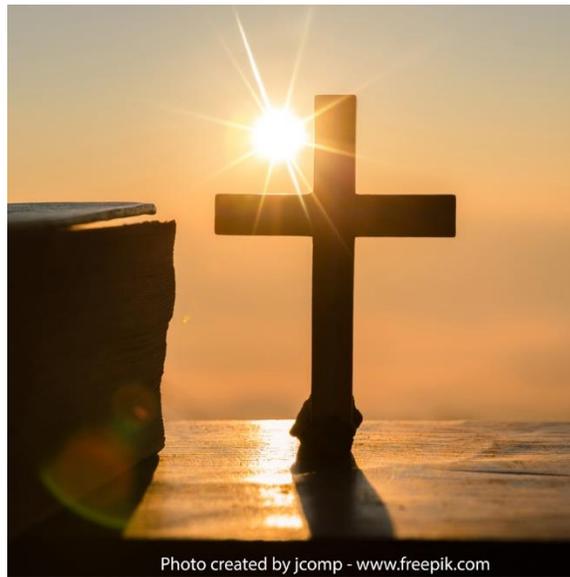


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Coming Alive in Christ: Training for PC(USA) Ruling Elders and Deacons Based on the Constitutional Questions

INTRODUCTION—Baptism, Call, and Membership

Introduction

Before leaders are called to serve within a congregation in ordained ministry, they profess their faith and make commitments about becoming a member of Christ's church reflected in their community. Within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), membership includes promises about living within the congregational community.

The PC(USA) *Book of Order* says this about membership, "In Jesus Christ, God calls people to faith and to membership in the Church, the body of Christ" (G-1.0301). The *Book of Order* also states:

... A faithful member bears witness to God's love and grace and promises to be involved responsibly in the ministry of Christ's Church ...

proclaiming the good news in word and deed,

taking part in the common life and worship of a congregation,

lifting one another up in prayer, mutual concern, and active support,

studying Scripture and the issues of Christian faith and life,

supporting the ministry of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents,

demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church,

responding to God's activity in the world through service to others,

living responsibly in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life,

working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment,

caring for God's creation,

participating in the governing responsibilities of the church, and

reviewing and evaluating regularly the integrity of one's membership, and considering ways in which one's participation in the worship and service of the church may be increased and made more meaningful. (G-1.0304)

F-1.0301 The Church Is the Body of Christ

The Church is the body of Christ. Christ gives to the Church all the gifts necessary to be his body. The Church strives to demonstrate these gifts in its life as a community in the world (1 Cor. 12:27–28):

The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life.

The Church is to be a community of hope, rejoicing in the sure and certain knowledge that, in Christ, God is making a new creation. This new creation is a new beginning for human life and for all things. The Church lives in the present on the strength of that promised new creation.

The Church is to be a community of love, where sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down.

The Church is to be a community of witness, pointing beyond itself through word and work to the good news of God's transforming grace in Christ Jesus its Lord.

Letty M. Russell, a twentieth century Presbyterian theologian, recognizes that some churches do not take seriously the purpose of the church or the call of individual

members when they do not affirm the full humanity of all people. She envisions a church that empowers members and recognizes Christ as the host. The metaphor she uses is that of a *round table* in a “household of freedom”¹ where all people gather around as partners in ministry connecting to the world and each other in faith and for a life of reflection and action. The table is “a symbol of hospitality and a metaphor for gathering for sharing and dialogue.”²

Russell describes *leadership around that table* in terms of 1 Corinthians 12 and a Pauline understanding of a distribution of spiritual gifts in the community of faith. Each gift comes with power, not one greater than the other.³ Leaders, in this interdependent paradigm, have authority of purpose rather than authority of position. The community identifies and empowers leaders and “assist(s) members of the congregation in making use of their gifts in the service of Christ’s love in the world.”⁴ The power the leader with *purpose* exercises, in this model, is in personal relation. It is power that is grounded in concepts like interdependence, intentionality, and persuasion.⁵ Leaders with authority grounded in purpose humbly recognize that they are servant leaders not leaders with servants.⁶

Think about some of the roles that you have held in your life, volunteer and paid, chosen by self and chosen by others, and the stories remembered vividly from those roles. Consider some abilities or learnings in one or more of those roles.

Identify a time in your life that clearly embodies when you have “come alive” and/or pleased yourself and God. What did you notice? What stands out to you about that experience?

Baptism

Baptism is the Reformed theological affirmation that each person is a gift from God, beloved and chosen for service. Through baptism we become a part of a *priesthood of all believers*, a concept developed by Martin Luther during the Reformation. A priesthood of all believers might now be best understood as an interdependent network of people of faith, each commissioned for service for the common good.

G-1.0301 The Meaning of Membership and Baptism

In Jesus Christ, God calls people to faith and to membership in the Church, the body of Christ. Baptism is the visible sign of that call and claim on a human life and of entrance into the membership of the church. The baptism of children witnesses to the truth that God’s love claims people before they are able to respond in faith. The baptism of those who enter the covenant of membership upon their own profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior witnesses to the truth that God’s gift of grace calls forth a response of faithfulness. Thus, the triune God, incarnate in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, gives to the Church not only its mission but also its understanding of membership.”

¹ Letty M. Russell, *Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1987), 25–26.

² Letty M. Russell, *The Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993.), 17.

³ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵ Anna Case-Winters, *God’s Power: Traditional Understandings and Contemporary Challenge*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 211–12.

⁶ Russell, *The Church in the Round*, 67.

The Sacrament of Baptism, pp. 404–406 in the Book of Common Worship

Obeying the word of our Lord Jesus,
And confident of his promises,
We baptize those whom God has called.

In baptism God claims us,
And deals us to show that we belong to God.
God frees us from sin and death,
Uniting us with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection.

By water and the Holy Spirit,
We are made members of the church, the body of Christ,
And joined to Christ's ministry of love, peace, and justice.

Let us remember with joy our own baptism,
As we celebrate this sacrament.

On behalf of the session,
I present N., (son, daughter) of N. and N.,
To receive the sacrament of Baptism.

(to Parents) Do you desire that N. and N. be baptized?
Relying on God's grace,
So you promise to live the Christian faith,
And to teach that faith to your child?

(to Congregation) Do you, as members of the church of Jesus Christ,
Promise to guide and nurture N. and N.
By word and deed,
With love and prayer,
Encouraging them to know and follow Christ
And to be faithful members of his church?

Think about your own baptism. This may be based on stories you have been told about the day or you might have been of an age to be able to recall the day.

In what ways is the Sacrament of Baptism the beginning of our call to service in Christ?

How do your baptism and church membership connect directly to the call and ordination as a ruling elder or deacon in the church?

Vocation

1 Corinthians 12:4–12

This Scripture reveals an understanding of vocation as the gifts each person is given that are needed for common good. The audience of 1 Corinthians was quite diverse economically, socially, ethnically, educationally, theologically, and, therefore, culturally.⁷ On numerous occasions in the letter, Paul addresses conflict in the Corinthian church by appealing to the metaphor of the body of Christ.⁸ Paul's first letter to the Corinthian

⁷ Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim, *United by Faith: The Multicultural Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (Oxford: University Press, 2003), 30–31.

⁸ Charles B. Cousar, *The Letters of Paul* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1996), 142–43.

church is clear: the church is the body of Christ, not *like* the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27).⁹ The church is one body with many members (1 Cor 12:12). Each member is needed and each needs the others.¹⁰ C.K. Barrett highlights that the allotment of the gifts is done with great intention. According to Barrett, when Paul uses the Greek word *diakrisis* in 1 Corinthians 12:4, “differences” or “varieties” are not as helpful a translation as “distribution.”

Paul thinks of the gifts as given. ... The main point is ... gifts are shared out among Christians; all do not receive the same gift, but all the gifts come from the Spirit, so that there is *no room* for rivalry, discontent, or a feeling of superiority. ... Gifts are not occasions for boasting, but opportunities for service, to the community and through the community to the Lord.¹¹

Presbyterian pastor, Gary Charles, reveals the possibilities of an interdependent community of faith, grounded in baptism and connected with vocational discernment of spiritual gifts. He thinks that 1 Corinthians 12:1–13 is a call to “all baptized who drink of the same Spirit”¹² to break down hierarchies and cultural norms of individualism and to create a community of diversity able to establish an enduring unity by believing that “each member is gifted and invaluable to the spiritual health of the community.”¹³ Charles reaffirms vocations theological grounding in baptism and the discernment or calling forth spiritual gifts of each community member.

Reformed Theology of Vocation: Discerning God's Call in Community

Vocation and the journey it implies are understood in a variety of ways. The word *vocation* is derived from the Latin *vocare*, meaning *to call* or *to summon*; it “suggests that vocation is a calling from someone to someone for some purpose.”¹⁴ Taking seriously the distinctiveness of this term in contrast to language of careers, occupations, placements, or even *jobs*, we are invited “to reflect on the theological meaning of our chosen daily work by emphasizing how we serve and give ... rather than on what we receive for our labors.”¹⁵

Humanists understand vocation as a question of identity or integrity. Hasidic Jews call this a search for the spark of the divine. Buddhists talk about exploring our original nature or big self. Quakers describe the journey of discovery of the self as seeking the inner light or inner teacher. Catholic theologian Thomas Merton encouraged students and readers to find their true selves.¹⁶ Reformed theologians like John Calvin urge persons to search for

⁹ George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Bible, Volume 10: Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1953), 156.

¹⁰ C.K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 283–84.

¹¹ *Ibid.* *Emphasis added.*

¹² Gary W. Charles, “1 Corinthians 12:1–13,” *Interpretation* 44 (Ja 1990): 68.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁴ Richard M. Webster, “Considering Your Call and Vocation: Study to Enrich Inquirers and Candidates” (Louisville: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) SEIC Resource #101, 1992), accessed August 2, 2005, available from <http://www.pcusa.org/prep4min/call.html>; Internet, 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Thomas Merton discusses this also as *vocation*. The “root meaning of spiritual direction ... [is] ... a continuous process of formation and guidance, in which a Christian is led and encourage in *his special vocation*, so that by faithful correspondence to the graces of the Holy Spirit he may attain to the particular end of his vocation and to union with God.” Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1960), 5.

their vocation;¹⁷ the searching, the journeying, the seeking, the exploring and the discovering all constitute a process of discernment.

Discerning one's vocation is not merely an economic inquiry, nor is it fully addressed as an educational problem. Discerning vocation is a personal, spiritual, religious, and theological journey, and, for Reformed Christians, it is a communal process. Ideally, each member of the community travels with the others. God's call begins as we are called into life as infants. In the Christian community, our first call is publicly recognized in baptism. Through the Presbyterian practice of infant baptism, the Christian community vows to nurture each child's call, including her or his faith in Jesus Christ. God's call is something lived out in solidarity. Christians live out their call in discipleship wherever they find themselves at work and at play, in word, in thought, and in deed. So where do we hear God's call? God's call is to be experienced through life and worship in the community of faith. Our call is by God through our community and into community.

In addition to affirming that God's call is discovered in community, Presbyterians have also noted that it is a way to overcome barriers, including cultural ones. "The Confession of 1967," one of the twelve confessions in the PC(USA) *Book of Confessions*, confirms these theological and practical beliefs.

... The church is called to bring all [persons] to receive and uphold one another as persons in all relationships of life: in employment, housing, education, leisure, marriage, family, church, and the exercise of political rights. ...¹⁸

When Presbyterians fail to uphold one another in all relationships; when the community of faith fails to "bring, receive, and uphold" one another in our vocational process, we are refusing to practice what we say we believe about who God is and who God intends for us to be. When the church does not distinguish the gifts of marginalized peoples it is missing the mark and falling short of a summons by God.¹⁹

A Presbyterian Ecclesiology: A Community of the Called

The Reformed Tradition has a communal ecclesiology. Throughout our history, this point has been reaffirmed. The sixteenth-century Reformers defined church as "an assembly of the faithful called or gathered out of the world; a communion, I say, of all saints"²⁰ They assumed that church was a community of people who were called. Thus, our Reformed notion of church is interwoven with questions of vocation, what God calls or summons us to do and to be as individual members of a larger community.

H. Richard Niebuhr grappled with the relationship of ecclesiology to vocation. In *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, he defines church and what it means to be called by God. For Niebuhr, the Church is more of a community directed to God through Jesus Christ. The Church is local and universal, Protestant and catholic.²¹ All seeking Christians

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 725.

¹⁸ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "The Confession of 1967" in the *Book of Confessions* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 1996), 9.44, 294.

¹⁹ Mary R. Sawyer, *The Church on the Margins: Living Christian Community* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), 4–9.

²⁰ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "The Second Helvetic Confession" in the *Book of Confessions*, 5.125, 109.

²¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1956), 17–27.

find their call as they learn from the church to love God and neighbor. The individual Christian's quest is linked to the church being able to fulfill one's call.²²

The New Testament vision of community is of *koinonia*, that is, a *community of belonging*, not a society of opposition and competition. A Reformed theological perspective of the church as a community of believers values each person's individual gifts and helps each member of the community to express her or his gifts fully and freely to the betterment of the whole.

The 216th General Assembly (2004) commissioned a study on the relationship of baptism and ministry.²³ Specifically, the assembly approved an overture to “create a study document that would set forth [a] Reformed-Presbyterian understanding of the relationship between Baptism and the ministry of all church members both ordained and not ordained. ...”²⁴ The rationale for the action states that

Vocation—our God-given calling—is not measured by the particular occupation we choose or by the so-called “productive years” of our lives. Our baptismal vocation encompasses our whole lives for our whole lives.

The New Testament teaches us that *gifts are given to each for the common good*. Each of us is an important part of God's mission in the world regardless of whether we are an ordained minister or a non-ordained minister. Every Christian is a minister by virtue of his or her baptism into Christ Jesus. A greater awareness of our baptismal vocation of being Christ's ministers is deeply needed within our church. We need to again contemplate what it means to find our identity in our *belonging*—in body and soul, in life and in death—to the God revealed in Jesus Christ made known by the Holy Spirit. This would be greatly assisted by a biblically informed and theologically grounded understanding of our *baptismal vocation* as the basis of our common ministry as Christians. ...²⁵

Look at what our own *Book of Order* says about participation in Christ's ministry and the ordered ministries of the church by reviewing and reading G-2.0101, G-2.0102, G-2.0103, and G-2.0104.

What does it mean to be called as a ruling elder or deacon in the body of Christ, the Church?

Identify a mentor who has served as a spiritual leader in your life. What are some qualities that they possess? How can you keep these qualities in mind as you go out to serve as a ruling elder or deacon, serving in the leadership of Christ's Church?

About the writer:

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²² Ibid., 64.

²³ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). *Minutes of the 216th General Assembly (2004)* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2004), Item #08-11, 618.

²⁴ Ibid, 618.

²⁵ Ibid. 619. *Emphasis added.*

Additional Readings and Reflections

An Altar in the World, by Barbara Brown Taylor—Chapter 6: “The Practice of Encountering Others: Community” and Chapter 7: “The Practice of Living with Purpose: Vocation”

Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for Searching People, edited by Dorothy Bass, Chapter 9: Shaping Communities by Larry Rasmussen.

Additional Content

1) In 1937, the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., published a poem by the Reverend Howard Thurman, an African American Baptist minister, professor of theology, and dean of the chapel at Howard University. The title of the poem was “O God, I Need Thee.” Thurman poetically describes our need of God’s sense for time, order, and future.

“O God, I Need Thee”

I Need Thy Sense of Time

Always I have an underlying anxiety about things.

Sometimes I am in a hurry to achieve my ends

And am completely without patience. It is hard for me

To realize that some growth is slow,

That all processes are not swift. I cannot always discriminate

Between what takes time to develop and what can be rushed,

Because my sense of time is dulled.

I measure things in terms of happenings.

O to understand the meaning of perspective

That I may do all things with a profound sense of leisure—of time.

—Howard Thurman (1899–1981), in *Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans*

In 1953, Thurman published *Meditations of the Heart*, the second in a volume of meditations that were originally written for personal and congregational use at Church of the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco, where he served as co-pastor from 1944–1953 with Alfred G. Fisk, a European American Presbyterian minister and professor of philosophy. Both Thurman and Fisk were deeply concerned about building bridges of understanding among varied races, cultures, and faiths, and their multicultural congregation embodied this hope. The purpose of the meditations is, as Thurman puts it, “[T]o focus the mind and the heart upon God as the Eternal Source and Goal of life.” One hundred and fifty-two short meditations in this 210-page book provide a significant source of insight, centering prayer, and nourishment for faith journeys. *Meditations* are the type of sustenance that fed civil rights leaders, including the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who was mentored by Thurman.

2) A community of discernment/mentoring community:

Sharon Daloz Parks, a faith development expert and director of leadership for the New Commons, discourages competition in the discernment process and encourages communities of support and nurture as opposed to communities that adopt competitive models for vocational discernment. Families, churches, and even worksites can be *mentoring communities*. She believes that a mentoring environment and culture is essential for young adults to discover their vocation.²⁶ Mentoring environments provide “network[s] of belonging ... [and] promise a place of nurture for the potential self.”²⁷ According to Parks, young adults in 2005 understand the church as local and not as a national entity. She makes this point in *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young*

²⁶ Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 126.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith. Drawing on the best sociological, psychological, and faith development theories, Parks boils down the adult questions to one of trust.²⁸ Answering this question of who and what is authoritative in life is the journey into young adulthood. In fact, she says, "One becomes a young adult in faith (at whatever age) when one begins to take self-conscious responsibility for one's own knowing, becoming, and moral action, even at the level of ultimate meaning making."²⁹ In other words, adults in search of purpose and meaning and, ultimately, vocation, have to decide for themselves whom they will trust. They cannot be told in whom and what to trust. Parks is convinced that young adults trust mentoring communities such as colleges, professional educators, workplaces, travel, the natural environment, families, and religious faith communities. In other words, a whole culture of mentors already exists with the potential to nurture the Christian vocational discernment of young adults.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

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a. Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

Introduction

This constitutional question for ordination may have a familiar ring. Perhaps you recognize it as an echo of the affirmation of faith found in the Nicene Creed, one of the oldest creeds of the universal church and a foundational confession of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

- “We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty ...” (*Book of Confessions*, 1.1)
- “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God ...” (*Ibid.*, 1.2)
- “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life ...” (*Ibid.*, 1.3)

Or perhaps you recognize it from the Apostles' Creed, the affirmation of faith declared during baptism. These words are spoken by adults or youth baptized upon profession of their faith, or by the parents or guardians of those who are baptized as infants or children. In fact, when we celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism, the whole congregation is invited to reaffirm their faith through these ancient words. The act of baptism with water “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” is yet another echo of our faith in the Triune God—a way of signing and sealing the new believer with the name of the Trinity.

While baptism and ordination may seem as though they are individual rites of passage, they are better understood as acts of the church, a communal experience of the whole people of God. They are meant to be witnessed and affirmed by the congregation in order that membership and service is entered into with humility. Christ's call to leadership in the church is a summons to service in and for Christ's body. Ordination is a public recognition of our commitment to this service and a celebration of the particular gifts of the Spirit who equips us for this ministry. We undertake these things in the spirit of prayer “so that [our] faith might not rest on human wisdom but on the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:5).

Trinity

Like the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds and the liturgy for baptism, this ordination question points us toward the doctrine of the Trinity, our belief in one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

A colleague from Korea remembers hearing this story from his mother when he was a child. It has been used to explain the Trinity in a children sermon:

Do you see the sun up in the sky? We look to it for many things—light, warmth, comfort. Even in the nighttime, we may not see the sun, but we know it is there. That, child, is how I want you to think of the Trinity. God is always there no matter what. Jesus is the brilliant light that shines blessings on the earth. The Holy Spirit is the rays of warmth we feel that keeps us warm and makes our food grow to sustain us. Whenever you look to the sky and see the sun, know the light that shines over the earth, feel the rays as they touch your skin ... you can be reminded of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, three in one, always with us.

Analogies such as this cannot fully demonstrate the three expressions of the Divine or exhaust the mystery of the Trinity. We can, however, benefit from exploring the ways in which we relate to the God as Three-in-One.

Christ gifted the church with the Holy Spirit as our Comforter and Advocate. As servant leaders of the church, we are called to be in relationship with the Triune God through this same Spirit. The Holy Spirit helps us to guide our church through our Constitution and our Confessions, with all their ramifications and growing edges. The Holy Spirit is the one who lifts our Constitution and Confessions off the paper to reveal their very real and living nature. It is the Holy Spirit who acts as the voice of God in our deliberations and discernments. As such, we are guided in our leadership by the Holy Spirit acting on behalf of the Triune God here in our midst.

For more information about what Presbyterians believe about the Trinity, read the article "[The Triune God—the doctrine of the Trinity is not irrational.](#)"

In this way, the Holy Spirit is Advocate and Revelator, revealing God's plans for our work, while revealing the intentions of our work to God. In the words of the old spirituals, the Holy Spirit is the conductor on "the highway to heaven"³⁰ where "there ain't but one train on that track, it goes to heaven and then right back."³¹ It is quite the image that the Holy Spirit gives us this very real spiritual access to the counterparts of God and Christ in the Trinity. It reminds us that the work we do is of God and not simply a human endeavor.

This claim is affirmed in our *Book of Order*:

The Holy Spirit manifests God's gracious action and empowers our grateful response. The Spirit gathers us for worship, enlightens and equips us through the Word, claims and nourishes us through the Sacraments, and sends us out for service. To each member of Christ's body, *the Spirit gives gifts for ministry in the Church* and in mission in the world. (W-1.0105, italics added for emphasis)

How you have experienced the ways in which "*the Spirit gives gifts for ministry in the Church*" in your calling to serve as a leader?

How have you identified and related to the Trinity within your faith journey? How have the aspects of the Three-in-One been present in your ministry?

Lordship of Christ

During the time of the Roman Empire the word "lord" shifted in understanding over many years. The word had a myriad of meanings—everything from sir, master/owner, husband, idol, etc. However, when Julius Caesar died, his adopted son, Octavian, declared himself "Son of God." At first, then, "Lord" was a sign of entitlement; after it had been taken over by the house of Caesar, it became a title of deference to the Emperor. Why this short history lesson? The church's affirmation of the Lordship of Christ, as evident in the writing of early New Testament texts, occurred within this historical context. Naming Christ "Lord" was a quite rebellious act—a direct contradiction to the claiming of that title by the house of Caesar. When we study the New Testament in light of the Empire, we can

³⁰ "There's A Highway to Heaven," Spiritual.

³¹ "Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit," Spiritual.

appreciate how treasonous and dangerous this language becomes to the Roman agenda.

God, however, confers Lordship upon Jesus Christ. In the *Book of Confessions*, the Westminster Confession of Faith explains:

The Lord Jesus in his human nature thus united to the divine, was sanctified and anointed with the Holy Spirit above measure; having in him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, in whom it pleased the Father that all fullness should dwell: to the end that being holy, harmless, undefiled, and full of grace and truth, he might be thoroughly furnished to execute the office of a Mediator and Surety. Which office he took not upon himself, but was thereunto called by his Father; who put all power and judgment into his hand, and gave him commandment to exercise the same. (6.045)

The confession then goes on to teach that the Lordship of Christ is the very title by which his adversaries recognize him and become subject to him. And while the sons of Caesar title themselves the “Sons of God,” hear how the demons address Jesus: “... What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? ...” (Mark 5:7). In fact, in every encounter with those suffering with demons, even the evil spirits recognize Jesus as the Son of God, thereby affirming his Lordship. For the church, it is gracious and merciful that the power afforded by the title Lord ascribed to Jesus is Mediator and Guarantor (Heb. 7:22). As mediator, he acted on our behalf. As guarantor, he absorbs our debts and faults. This is indeed the good news and reward for our own recognition of the authority of Christ.

How does the benevolent Lordship of Christ influence ways we might lead?

Consider the ways that you might explain the Lordship of Christ to a new Christian.

Inclusive Language

The words of the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed—those historically used to represent the Trinity—are gender-specific in nature. However, if one were to ask an Internet search engine, “How many names are there for God in the Bible?” the answer would range from a bit more than 20 to 953, just at a quick glance. This demonstrates humankind’s desire to understand God in ways that are personal, familiar, powerful: one who provides anything humanity may ever need. This desire to name God is also a spiritually creative way in which God can be represented in diverse cultures around the world. Remembering the multitude of names for God gives us access to the insights and experiences of others, and increases our ability to claim the church as connectional.

In worship the church shall strive to use language about God that is intentionally as diverse and varied as the Bible and our theological traditions. Language that appropriately describes and addresses God is expansive, drawing from the full breadth and depth of terms and images for the triune God in the witness of Scripture. Language that authentically describes and addresses the people of God is inclusive, respecting the diversity of persons, cultures, backgrounds, and experiences that flow from God’s creative work. Such language allows for all members of the community of faith to recognize themselves as equally included, addressed, and cherished by God. (W-1.0302)

Inclusive language for humanity is often mistaken for political correctness. However, as seen above, the intent is not to give in to the politics of the day. The intent is to help leaders and churches to offer an invitation for others to have full relationship with the God whom each of us experience in a unique way. This is a very real example of servant

leadership: when hospitality is offered, and the church can be a place in which an encounter with God is offered to all.

Another important aspect of the statement above is its call is not to simply use inclusive language for humanity, but to use **expansive language** for God. Such language seeks to provide a multiplicity of ways in which to see and interact with the triune God. The joy of using expansive language for God is that it liberates us from the limits of our humanity—in which God is often trapped by our own inability to imagine the boundless ways in which God presents God's self to us. Expansive language also helps us to recognize that God calls us to act in new ways.

As an example, this prayer of confession, based on Psalm 23, images God as a shepherd:

We are but sheep in your pasture, good Shepherd. You lead us to plush meadows and cool water. And yet, in our midst are the weak, the small, and those whose blemishes are there for all to see. Too often, they are left hungry, thirsty, and left to die as prey for the sly foxes, who are just waiting and watching. We confess, that instead of sheltering them in the midst of the flock, far too often we push them aside to the margins of our fold. Teach us to be like you, Jesus, so that we may tend to the least of these, as you care for us.³²

A downloadable brochure on inclusive and expansive language is available at https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/pw/pdfs/wellchos_enwords.pdf.

What are some examples of how you might imagine God in new and expansive ways?

How has thinking about God in expansive ways assisted you in your own faith journey? How do you see this making a difference in the lives of others and in your leadership?

Salvation

Finally, what does it mean to claim Jesus Christ as Savior? A story from the book of Acts can help us understand this affirmation:

The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, *what must I do to be saved?*" They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God. (Acts 16:29–34; italics added)

In this passage, we find a jailer afraid of the consequences of the supernatural release of those in his charge. It is so distressing that he is ready to fall upon his own sword for failing in his responsibility—in anticipation of the consequences that will come from his superiors when they learn of his failure. Finding Paul, Silas, and the other prisoners still in their cells allows the jailer to recognize a healing grace that cannot be given from the empire but can only be experienced from the life-saving actions of those who he would otherwise destroy. This passage is a model of how God's grace is given, free and clear, to those who would just believe.

³² McQueen, Derrick, St. James Presbyterian Church in the Village of Harlem, N.Y., November 26, 2017.

While being “saved” has many theological implications, it should be noted that the Greek root of the word for salvation theology, Soteriology, is *Soter*. Like “Lord,” this word was also used as a title for Caesar, the “Savior” of the world. When we embrace Jesus as Savior, we reject the oppressive powers, or “Caesars,” of the world. Claiming Jesus as Savior means that destruction, ill intent, and evil are not for us. We are choosing to separate ourselves from that suffering, instead reinforcing the hope that we can be saved by God. Salvation gives us a sense of hope that something different can and will happen. Our own salvation is intertwined with God's acts of grace:

God acts with grace; we respond with gratitude. God claims us as beloved children; we proclaim God's saving love. God redeems from sin and death; we rejoice in the gift of new life. This rhythm of divine action and human response—found throughout Scripture, human history, and everyday events—shapes all of Christian faith, life, and worship. (W-1.0102)

Systematic theologian Christopher Morse once taught students that “sin is simply humanity's separation and hiding from God.” It started in the garden when the first humans withdrew from God to hide after eating from the Tree of Life. With grace, we strive to move back into that close relationship with God.

If what God eternally rejects throughout all creation, with the fire of a love that remains unquenchable, is every opposition to our being loved into freedom, including our own, then the hellfire and damnation of Judgment Day is precisely the one true hope of all the earth. The old question of whether or not grace is “irresistible” only becomes a problem when theology forgets Who it is whose judgment is confessed to be coming. What else is the Crucifixion if not the resistance to grace? What finally does a Resurrection faith refuse to believe, if not that the resistance to grace is ever its cessation?”³³

What does it mean to think of grace as “being loved into freedom”?

In your leadership, how have you understood or experienced salvation as coming into better relationship with God?

About the writer:

Derrick McQueen earned his B.A. in Theater Arts from Drew University, an M.Div. in Theology and the Arts, and his Ph.D. in Homiletics and New Testament, the latter both from Union Theological Seminary. Derrick is currently serving as the interim pastor of the historic St. James Presbyterian church in Harlem. He also serves as the associate director of community partnerships for a new center at Columbia University, the Center on African American Religion, Sexual Politics, and Social Justice (CARSS). CARSS is a project that advances research, education, and public engagement at the nexus of religion, race, and sexuality, in general, but with a particular focus on black communities, both in the United States and the wider African Diaspora. He has been with the project since its inception as it tries to navigate and promote conversations around sexuality with a focus on historic black churches. Derrick is also a spiritual multimedia artist and for over a decade has toured a one-man production on the life of Paul Robeson for the East Lynne Theater Company.

³³ Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press, 1994; 2nd ed., 2008), 340-41.

**Coming Alive in Christ:
Training for PC(USA) Ruling Elders and Deacons
Based on the Constitutional Questions**

b.—Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word to you?

Bible Overview

The Bible is an amazing anthology of books with contributions from different writers, representing different time periods, utilizing different genres, and reflecting different cultures. But the Bible is more than being a self-contained library of ancient writings. It is a sacred conversation. As Karl Allen Kuhn writes, scripture can be understood as an “ongoing dialogue between God and God’s people, and of God’s people with one another, as they sought to know God.”³⁴ We join this sacred conversation every time we encounter God’s word in scripture.

Old Testament

The Protestant version of the Bible begins with the five traditional books of the Torah, or **law** of God: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. This set of biblical writings is also known as the Pentateuch (“five scrolls”).

Most Bibles label the next section “**History**.” This section contains what we often refer to as the work of the Deuteronomic Historian: Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 & 2 Kings. While some aspects of these accounts can be verified in other ancient sources, it’s important to remember that this is different from contemporary historical writing. Ancient writers tended to extract stories and details that serve to make the theological points that they were seeking to communicate. This section of the Old Testament also contains Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 & 2 Chronicles (products of the Second Temple period that followed the defeat of the Neo-Babylonians by the Persians) and Ruth and Esther, novellas probably from the same era.

These are followed by the books of **poetry** that include Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon. Many of these texts are referred to as “Wisdom Literature” and reflect a tradition of both passing on advice on how to live a moral and productive life, and the exploration of the big questions like “why do bad things happen to good people?” and “what makes life worth living?”

The next group of books contains the **major prophets**, each large enough to fill an ancient scroll: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel; Protestant Bibles also include Lamentations (traditionally ascribed to Jeremiah) in this section. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are large collections of poetic oracle and narrative. Isaiah includes writings from at least three different time periods in Judah, the first being during the period of the Divided Kingdom, before the Northern Kingdom was captured by Assyria with the latter being the years following the return home of the Babylonian exiles. Jeremiah was mostly written during the final days of Judah existence before the Neo-Babylonians, under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar, destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, and then

³⁴ Kuhn, Karl Allen. *Having Words with God: The Bible as Conversation*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press (2018).

continuing into the period after the exiles were taken away from the perspective of one left behind. Lamentations is a book of poetic laments for the destruction of Jerusalem. Ezekiel appears to be prophetic writings by a prophet in exile to a people in exile. Daniel is a text that may be better characterized as Apocalyptic Literature, likely dating from the time when Antiochus IV ruled Judea prior to the Maccabean revolt.

The final section of the Old Testament is referred to as the 12 **minor prophets** (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi), all of which will fit on one scroll due the brevity of their texts. All of these, except the narrative folktale of Jonah, are varied prophetic texts that speak about immoral behavior, inappropriate worship, and the judgment of God.

New Testament

The New Testament begins with the four **Gospels** (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). "Gospel" means "Good News." Mark is believed by most scholars to be the first written, and a source for both Matthew and Luke. John is the last written and the most different from the others, emphasizing the divinity of Jesus. The Gospels are followed by the Acts of the Apostles and is written by the same author that wrote the Gospel of Luke and carries many of the same literary themes with the apostles Paul and Peter, instead of Jesus, being the primary protagonists.

Next follows the thirteen **epistles** ascribed to Paul, who according to modern critical scholarship, appears to have unquestionably authored at least seven of these (Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon). Scholars debate Pauline authorship of Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians, as well as the pastoral letters of 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus. Additional epistles and one sermon that are not ascribed to Pauline authorship follows (Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John, and Jude).

The final book of the New Testament is another example of **Apocalyptic Literature**, titled the Revelation (or Apocalypse) of John.

What parts of the Bible do you know best? With which are you less familiar? Which biblical books have most shaped your faith and relationship with God?

Identify a time that you have relied on Scripture. How has it given you comfort? How has it challenged you? What questions do you have?

Biblical Canon

The term canon derives from a Greek word for measuring stick. As applied to the writings of scripture, it refers to the universally accepted books of the Bible. The texts of the Hebrew Bible were likely written down and edited over a thousand-year period with the last book, Daniel, dated to the period of Hellenization that followed the conquests of Alexander the Great (c. 167 BCE). Texts that were written after this period can be found in the canon of some Christian communions but are considered by Protestants as "Apocrypha." While recognized as worthy of study, these books are not sanctioned for use by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as appropriate texts to read as scripture in worship. Tradition suggests that the final designation of Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) texts as canonical was determined at the end of the first century CE, possibly at a

council of the Sanhedrin that had been relocated to Jamnia following the destruction of Jerusalem.

It took a long time for the New Testament canon to stabilize as there were many books being used by the many early church communities. It is likely that some books were simply more available to some communities, and that some books were deemed more useful. Of the canonical Gospels, the Gospel of John appears to be the book most copied by scribes and Mark appears to be the least copied, judging from the texts that have been found to date. This may indicate that the early church communities found John to be more useful. Most scholars associate the earliest list of New Testament books declared as authoritative that matches today's New Testament, with a letter that was written by Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria, in the year 367 CE.

The following were some of the criteria or attributes used to determine whether an ancient text belonged in the biblical canon:

Ancient and Apostolic Authorship—A book had to be written by an apostle or a close associate of an apostle, which also meant that it had to be an ancient text and not a contemporary re-interpretation of an older writing. For example, tradition suggests that the gospel of Mark was written by a person named John Mark, who was not an apostle but was thought to be a close associate of the Apostle Peter. This ascription of authorship was generally accepted by the early church of the 3rd and 4th century as the final New Testament canon was being finalized into a version that reflects what we have today, even though the oldest manuscript of the Gospels does not specifically reference any particular author.

Theological Orthodoxy—A book had to support a perspective that a majority of the faithful would agree was consistent with the content of divine revelation in other scripture. In the case of the New Testament, the book needed to reflect the accepted understanding of the character of the person and work of Jesus Christ and consequently agree with the existing apostolic writings.

Universality—The book should be accepted as authoritative by a majority of the faithful in communities across the known world. It needed to be a book that was helpful, inspiring, and instructional, and one being read and used in the churches throughout the Body of Christ.

What surprises or puzzles you about the long process of developing the Bible?

What criteria would you use to determine whether something belongs in scripture?

Why is it important for churches to agree on a certain set of biblical texts?

Biblical Languages and Translations

With the exception of a few chapters in the books of Daniel and Ezra that were written in Aramaic, most of the Old Testament texts were originally written in Hebrew. The New Testament was written in Greek. Simply saying that the Old Testament was written in Hebrew fails to acknowledge that most scholars believe that there are at least three versions of Hebrew reflected in our Old Testament. The oldest Hebrew texts may date back to the earliest part of the Iron Age and are exemplified by the Song of Miriam in

Exodus 15 and the Song of Deborah in Judges 5. The idioms and word meanings from these older texts when compared with the more recent Hebrew of the Second Temple Period demonstrate that all language evolves over time. Thus, we should never forget that there can be no perfect translation from the original languages into languages of the modern world.

Translations of biblical texts date back to antiquity. During the reign of Ptolemy II in Alexandria, Egypt, more than seventy Jewish scholars were assembled to translate the Hebrew Bible into Greek so that the Hellenized world could read it in their common language. This translation, known as the Septuagint, is the version of the Old Testament that most Greek-speaking New Testament writers would have used. Other translations of note were the "Targum," a translation into Aramaic, and the "Peshitta," a translation into Syriac. St. Jerome created a translation into Latin in the 4th century, known as the "Vulgate," which became the dominant text for medieval Catholicism.

A modern understanding of approaches to translating ancient texts reflects a spectrum, ranging from "Formal Equivalence" (rendering words from the original language into the modern language with an effort to retain word order and sentence structure) and "Functional or Dynamic Equivalence" (rendering thought for thought to convey meaning of an original text into a modern language with less emphasis on word order or matching sentence structure). An example of the first approach is the New Revised Standard Version, while an example of the latter approach is the New International Version.

An alternative to translations from ancient languages is the "Paraphrase" approach, which starts with a translation and attempts to reword in simplified or easier to understand verbiage. An example of this approach is the Living Bible. Many Bible readers think of paraphrased Bibles as being more removed from the original texts and thus, inferior to translations.

Interpreting Scripture

Most readers of the Bible acknowledge that understanding the historical context of the original writers is useful, if not critical, to glean meaning. This means that we would be wise to try and learn who wrote it, what was happening in their world as they were writing, and to whom they were writing. However, we should acknowledge that some biblical texts, like the inspiring poetry of many of the prophets, can legitimately communicate a meaning to the original audience and yet inspire a reader from a different time and culture to find a different meaning appropriate to his or her worldview. For example: In Chapter 7 of the book of Isaiah, the prophet is warning King Ahaz of the dangers of pursuing alliances with foreign nations and suggests that he seek a sign from God such as the hopeful perspective of a young woman who would select for her newborn child a name that means "God is with us." First century messianic Jews who believed that Jesus was the long-awaited messiah saw in these words a prediction of how Jesus could embody the very nature of God in their midst. Today, during Advent, we read these verses and sing our hymns calling for Emanuel to come to us, recognizing that both interpretations consistently testify of a God who longs to be present in our lives.

Authoritative Witness

Some suggest that the Bible is authoritative by virtue of its "supernatural origin" and think of God's involvement as one of "dictating to human secretaries." An alternative and more helpful perspective is that God inspired human writers to discern the divine intent and presence in the passing of ancient stories and in the reporting and interpreting of

observed events. Likewise, we, by way of the Holy Spirit, practice our own discernment as we read the scriptures seeking inspiration. Accepting the Scriptures as unique and authoritative means acknowledging this twofold understanding of biblical inspiration: that God's Spirit (1) guided the ancient writers and (2) continues to guide contemporary readers.³⁵

For some, thinking of scriptures as authoritative conjures experiences of the Bible used to coerce and judge. But the Bible is, above all, an authoritative witness to the amazing grace and liberating love of God exemplified in Jesus Christ. Indeed, the church has had a long tradition of interpreting scripture according to the "rule of faith" and the "rule of love." The former holds that the witness of scripture must be consistent with the basic teaching of the church through history; the latter insists that the interpretation of scripture must never conflict with the commandments to love God and neighbor.³⁶

The WORD of God

When many of us hear the phrase, "the Word of God," we immediately think of the opening verses of the Gospel of John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The Word was with God in the beginning. Everything came into being through the Word, and without the Word nothing came into being. What came into being through the Word was life, and the life was the light for all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light. (John 1:1–5, CEB)

"Word" here is the Greek word "logos." In common language, it carries a variety of meanings: an account or reckoning, and argument, principle, reason, or thought. Among the Greek philosophers, "logos" came to mean the rational principle that gave order to the cosmos and was therefore equated with God. In John, "logos" is certainly a reference to Jesus himself, the wisdom of God that became incarnate.³⁷ The implication seems to be that the best way to understand who God is, what God thinks, and what God wants to say to us, is to look at the person of Jesus. This is clearly manifest in our confessional tradition as exemplified in the Confession of 1967:

"The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written. The Scriptures are not a witness among others, but the witness without parallel. The church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as prophetic and apostolic testimony in which it hears the word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated."³⁸

So, if we want to know God's word, we should look to Jesus. And the best way to do that is to look to the Bible, which contains the best witness to Jesus and God's intentions. Thus, many Presbyterian churches use the liturgical expression following the reading of scripture in worship: "The word of the Lord." This expression is reminding us that this

³⁵ Migliore, Daniel L. *Faith Seeking Understanding*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1991, 44–63.

³⁶ *Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture*, 123rd General Assembly (1983) of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (1983).

³⁷ Studylight.org online dictionary.

³⁸ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). *Book of Confessions*, "The Confession of 1967," 9.27, 291.

mysterious idea of God's Word is not the words on the page, but in the message in the texts.

Theologian Karl Barth proposed the notion of the "Threefold Word of God." Barth taught that the revealed word, the written word, and the proclaimed word are considered to be three different, yet unified forms of the Word of God. Barth compared the simultaneous independence and unity of these forms of the Word of God to the Trinity. To the extent that proclamation really depends on revelation attested in the Bible, it is no less the Word of God than the Bible. And to the extent that the Bible really attests revelation, it is no less the Word of God than revelation itself. Barth believed we should never try to understand the three forms of God's Word in isolation. So, we can find God's Word by looking to Jesus, and by reading the scriptures, and by listening to proclamation or preaching that is derived from the scriptures and influenced by the work of the Holy Spirit. Barth believed that preaching becomes the Word of God, not because of something we do, but according to God's direction. Likewise, we become proclaimers of the WORD, when we allow the Holy Spirit to guide our thinking, our speech, and our daily behavior, as we live in the world³⁹ (CD I/1, 90–121).

When we affirm this constitutional question, we acknowledge that God alone is the source of all life and wisdom, and we commit ourselves to be open to God's direction by intentionally engaging the resources that have been provided to us by God.

Consider the ways in which God's Word has come alive for you.

In your service as a ruling elder or deacon, where do you encounter Jesus as the Word of God?

When do you spend time with the written word of scripture?

About the writer:

Kevin Burns has been a ruling elder for more than twenty years at Highland Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky. He currently serves on the session and chairs the Christian Education Committee and the Adult Education Sub-Committee. Additionally, he teaches a youth Sunday school class with a Bible survey curriculum that he developed. In his professional life, he is the founder and president of a twenty-five-year old architectural design firm named Architectural Investments, Inc., and is the owner and principal broker of a commercial real estate company named AI Real Estate, LLC.

Additional Recommended Readings:

A Guide to Bible Basics, written by Tyler D. Mayfield, published by Westminster John Knox Press, 2018.

Essay "**The Word as Event: Barth and Bultmann on Scripture**," written by David W. Congdon, published in *The Sacred Text*, by Gorgias, 2010.

Who Wrote the Bible, by Richard Elliot Friedman, published by HarperOne, 1997

³⁹ Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*, Volume 1, 90–121.

Coming Alive in Christ: Training for PC(USA) Ruling Elders and Deacons Based on the Constitutional Questions

c.—Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?

Confessions of OUR Church

A confession is a public declaration of what a church believes. Individual Christians may and should confess their own personal faith, but a confession of faith is more than a personal affirmation of faith. It is an officially adopted statement of what a community of Christians believe. ... Whatever their form, confessions of faith express what a body of Christians believe in common.⁴⁰

The confessional statements of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are included in the Constitution of the denomination. Part I of the Constitution is the *Book of Confessions* and contains the creeds, catechisms, and confessions that have been adopted by the PC(USA), stating what we, as a community of faith, believe. Part II of the Constitution is the *Book of Order*, which includes the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, the Form of Government, the Directory for Worship, and the Rules of Discipline. Together, these two volumes of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) unite us in our life together and in the mission of the church.

More information about the confessions and the confessional nature of the church can be found in the *Book of Confessions*.

What is meant by “essential tenets”?

Within the Reformed faith, there is not a checklist of required doctrinal positions with which to agree in order to qualify as “Reformed.” There are two related reasons.

First, the Reformed faith values freedom of conscience, encouraging the people of God—as members of the priesthood of all believers—actively to discern the will of God in each new day. In this sense, every believer is charged to “figure out for him or herself what Christianity is about,” as Kathryn Tanner puts it.⁴¹ (xiii)

Ordained persons are free to be “instructed,” “lead,” and “continually guided” by the confessions without being forced to subscribe to any precisely worded articles of faith drawn up either by the General Assembly or by a presbytery. ... Presbyteries (in the case of ministers) and church sessions (in the case of ruling elders and deacons) are free to decide for themselves what acceptable loyalty to the confessions means in their particular situation without being bound to any “checklist” prescribed by higher governing bodies of the church.⁴²

⁴⁰ “Confessional Nature of the Church Report,” *Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2016) vi.

⁴¹ Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001, xiii.

⁴² *Book of Confessions: Study Edition-Revised* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017) 448–49.

Second, the Reformed faith is itself subject to revision by the living Word of God, revealed in Jesus Christ and borne witness to in the Scriptures through the testimony of the Holy Spirit. The reason our *Book of Confessions* is open is, in part, to make corrections and additions to our understanding of what constitutes the Christian faith. Our church's teachings about women's ordination, for example, have changed just in the last half century.⁴³ Finally, to have a strict list of beliefs would be to compromise on our identity, which is founded not in doctrines but in our relationship to the living Lord.

That said, the language of "essential tenets" as used in this question reminds us that the Reformed faith has authoritative, if not rigid, doctrinal content. While considered "subordinate standards" to the Word of God revealed in Jesus Christ and written in Scripture, the confessions of the church "may not be ignored or dismissed," according to the *Book of Order [BOO]* (F-2.02). Ministers of Word and Sacrament and ruling elders and deacons agree to be guided by these confessions as the church uses them to "instruct, counsel with, [and] even to discipline" them (BOO, F-2.02).

Some Essential Tenets of the Reformed faith, as Expressed in the Confessions

While there is no definitive checklist of Reformed doctrines, the following seven theological affirmations are good examples of what is meant by "essential tenets." This is not intended to be an exhaustive list.

The Sovereignty of God

The idea that God is the sovereign governor of all creation is a central tenet of Reformed theology. It is emphasized in nearly every confession and catechism in our *Book of Confessions* and is consistent with the character of God as it is borne witness in Scripture. The psalmist testifies again and again that God has oversight over everything that happens in the cosmos, marveling at God's beauty, majesty, goodness, and grandeur. The Westminster Confession celebrates God's sovereignty and describes our appropriate response to it:

The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all; is good, and doeth good unto all; and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. ... (*Book of Confessions [BOC]*, The Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.1.12)

The point of confessing that God is sovereign is not to warn us that God gets to do whatever God wants, so we'd better watch our step—although people often get this wrong idea about the divine sovereignty. As Lynn Japinga notes, "the Reformed tradition has been stereotyped as particularly fearful through much of its history."⁴⁴

There is a *Far Side* cartoon by Gary Larsen that depicts God looking at a computer screen, where a man is standing underneath a piano that is hoisted above his head.

⁴³ The *Book of Confessions*, The Scots Confession (1560) argues that "the Holy Ghost" does not "permit" women to preach or baptize (3.22) while A Brief Statement of Faith (1983) holds that the Holy Spirit "calls women and men to all ministries of the Church" (11.4).

⁴⁴ Lynn Japinga, "Fear in the Reformed Tradition," *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*. Eds. Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones. Nashville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

God's finger hovers over a button on the computer keyboard labeled "smite."⁴⁵ Reformed theology holds, by contrast to this way of thinking, that the sovereign God always acts consistently with who God is. Karl Barth called this "the divine freedom," arguing that God never exercises God's power in ways that contradict the truth that God is love.⁴⁶

The sovereign God is triune—not a monolith, but a community (see *BOC*, Confession of Belhar, 10.1). Reveling in the mystery of the Trinity, the Reformed tradition celebrates and contemplates the implications of the truth that the one who is incomprehensibly one is at the same time "distinct in three persons" (*BOC*, Scots Confession, 3.01), with each person being "of the same substance and equal in power and glory" (*BOC*, The Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.051, 6.183). A Brief Statement of Faith testifies, for example, that we know we "belong to God" "in life and in death" by way of God's particular acts in each of the three particular trinitarian persons (see *BOC*, A Brief Statement of Faith, 11.2–11.4).

Reflection on the sovereignty of God naturally gives way to consideration of God's power and its relationship to the power of the creature. We commonly confess that God is omnipotent, or all powerful, but Reformed traditions remind us that this does not mean God has all the power and we have none. God, then, is not a God of "sheer power" but a God who shares power with us.⁴⁷ God does this by entering into powerlessness with us in the person of Jesus Christ (see Philippians 2) and exalting us, with him, to the life of the triune God. In Question 32, the Heidelberg Catechism recognizes that God's sharing of power with us shapes Christian life:

Q: But why are you called a Christian?

A: Because by faith I am a member of Christ and so I share in his anointing. I am anointed to confess his name, to present myself to him as a living sacrifice of thanks, to strive with a free conscience against sin and the devil in this life, and afterward to reign with Christ over all creation for eternity (*BOC*, The Heidelberg Catechism, 4.032).

How have your beliefs about the sovereignty of God evolved over time?

How might you explain God's sovereignty to a new Christian or someone new to the Reformed faith?

The Centrality of Jesus Christ

Another tenet of Reformed theology is that Jesus Christ stands at the center of all things. As the one who is fully divine as well as fully human, Jesus Christ participates in the divine triune life. He is "... eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light ..." (*BOC*, Nicene Creed, 1.2; cf. Apostles' Creed, 2.2). He, with the Father, sends the Holy Spirit to comfort and empower us (*BOC*, Nicene, 1.3). As the one who is fully human as well as fully divine, Jesus Christ participates in creaturely existence, showing us who God created us to be and what God is redeeming us for.

⁴⁵ This comic strip can be viewed at <https://thebarkingfox.com/tag/smite-button/>. (Last Accessed 7.29.19).

⁴⁶ See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, §28.

⁴⁷ See Daniel L. Migliore, *The Power of God and the gods of Power*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

The confessions hold that there is no salvation apart from Jesus Christ, and that salvation in Jesus Christ is more than just “fire insurance”—it includes living with a perception “of our being in him” that nurtures abundant life and compels grateful service. Calvin emphasizes that Christ saves us as the “prophet” who shows us the way of God, as the “priest” who sacrifices his life for us, and as the “king” (or “victor”) who includes us as full participants in God’s redemptive work (cf. *BOC*, *The Shorter Catechism* 7.023).⁴⁸

Jesus Christ also stands at the center of all our interpretive and discerning work.

... When controversy arises about the right understanding of any passage or sentence of Scripture, or for the reformation of any abuse within the Kirk of God, we ought not so much to ask what [our forebears] have said or done before us, as what the Holy Ghost uniformly speaks within the body of the Scriptures and what Christ Jesus himself did and commanded. ... (*BOC*, *The Scots Confession*, 3.18)

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death. (*BOC*, *The Theological Declaration of Barmen*, 8.11)

When we call this one who stands at the center “Lord,” the Reformed tradition argues, we are able to identify the “lordless powers” of the world and take a prophetic stand against them. As Jacqueline Grant writes, “to claim Jesus as Lord is to say the white slaveholder isn’t.”⁴⁹

The Movement of the Holy Spirit

An additional tenet of Christian faith in the Reformed tradition is the conviction that the Holy Spirit lives and moves in the lives of individuals, communities, and the world. The Holy Spirit works in spheres both private and public; the Spirit is at once both reassuringly reliable and breathtakingly surprising.

The Heidelberg Catechism argues that the Holy Spirit works in the lives of believers and believing communities by creating “... wholehearted trust ... by the gospel” (*BOC*, *Heidelberg*, 4.021). Calvin insists, along the same lines, that it is “through the Holy Spirit” that Christian believers have “firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward them.”⁵⁰ In the eucharistic feast, the Spirit joins believers to the body and blood of Christ which is now in heaven (*BOC*, *The Scots Confession*, 3.21).

The Brief Statement of Faith also emphasizes that the Holy Spirit is not confined to working within the visible church but is “everywhere the giver and renewer of life” (*BOC*, 11.4, line 53). This means Christian believers need constantly to be on the lookout for what the Spirit is up to and how they can participate in the work of God. One professor was known to exclaim, recognizing the challenge of this, that trying to ascertain the movement of the Spirit “is like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall!” Thankfully, the Spirit assists us with our perception, inspiring “the prophets and apostles” (*BOC*, 11.4, line 59) and giving believers “courage ... to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace” (*BOC*, 11.4, lines 66, 71).

⁴⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Editor John T. McNeill. Louisville: Westminster Press, 1960, I.15.

⁴⁹ Jacqueline Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, Volume 64, *American Academy of Religion Academy Series* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutes* III.2.7.

How have you been on the lookout for what the Holy Spirit is up to? How has this led you to participate in the work of God?

The Gift of Creation

A tenet of Reformed theology, and one that is often overlooked, is that creation is “all good” because the sovereign God who made it out of nothing is supremely good. There are many important implications of this for our lives of faith. First, the fact that we human beings are made as part of God’s good creation means that we, too, were made wholly “good.” A saying on a child’s t-shirt makes this point nicely (albeit with poor grammar!): “God made me, and God don’t make no junk!”

Second, the fact that we were made good by God means sin is a big problem. It violates God’s creative intention, which is why Calvin calls it an “aberration.”⁵¹ When we sin, we are turning not only away from God, but away from those whom God created us to be.

Third, creation is a gift that is to be enjoyed and cherished. The Second Helvetic puts it this way: “everything that God had made was very good, and was made for the profit and use of [humanity]” (BOC, The Second Helvetic Confession, 5.032).

Serene Jones argues, along these lines, that when we contemplate the beauty of the doctrine of creation, it begins to form us as people, “shaping our imaginations and desires.”⁵²

Fourth, Calvin helps us remember that this does not mean we, as human creatures, are authorized by God to hoard, damage, or use up God’s gift. He understands the freedom of the Christian to entail “using God’s gifts for God’s purposes,”⁵³ not for just anything that strikes our fancy. A Brief Statement of Faith suggests that this “planet” has been “entrusted to our care” (BOC, 11.3, line 38). Enjoying it requires caring for it.

The Devastation of Sin

A central tenet of the Reformed faith is that our “[rebelliousness] against God” and our “[hiding] from our Creator” has a devastating impact on us and our world (BOC, A Brief Statement of Faith, 11.3). “The Fall brought upon [humanity] the loss of communion with God” (BOC, The Larger Catechism, 7.137).

There is absolutely nothing we can do, in and of our own strength, to overcome or overwhelm sin and its consequences. We in ourselves are “so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined toward all evil” (BOC, The Heidelberg Catechism, 4.008).

“By [humanity’s] transgression, generally known as original sin, the image of God was utterly defaced in [humanity], and he and his children became by nature hostile to God, slaves to Satan, and servants to sin” (BOC, The Scots Confession, 3.03).

⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutes* II.1.10.

⁵² Serene Jones, “Glorious Creation, Beautiful Law,” in Pauw and Jones, 24.

⁵³ *Institutes* III.19.1.

There is an old joke about someone who asked directions and was given the answer: “You can’t get there from here.” The doctrine of “total depravity” is the teaching that we cannot get from our broken condition to God—which is why God entered into our broken condition to claim us.

We are surrounded by examples of humans abusing the gift of creation and “the loss of communion” with God through sin, in both personal and systemic ways (see *BOC*, The Confession of Belhar, 10.8; see also *BOC*, 7.137). **How do the confessions help you confess and lament your own sinfulness and recognize the challenges and consequences of sin in our world?**

The Promise of Redemption

Reformed theology insists God will keep God’s promise to redeem all of creation. This central tenet is built on the others—that the sovereign God governs all things; that the event of Jesus Christ (including his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and Second Coming) reorients and transforms everything; and that the Holy Spirit’s renewing work is ongoing and pervasive.

“Already God’s reign is present as a ferment in the world, stirring hope in [people] and preparing the world to receive its ultimate judgment and redemption” (*BOC*, The Confession of 1967, 9.55).

Redemption includes, according to the confessions, the forgiveness of sins, the intercession of Christ on our behalf, knowledge of the “mysteries of salvation,” the working of the Spirit who assists the redeemed in believing and obeying, and even the “overcoming ...[of] enemies by [God’s] almighty power and wisdom” (*BOC*, The Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.050). It also looks ahead to the day when we will “behold the face of God in light and glory” and experience “the full redemption of [our] bodies” (*BOC*, The Larger Catechism, 7.196).

A theology student once shared in class, the feeling that “all of me is broken.” The promise to that seminarian—and to each and all of us—is that our healing will be whole and entire, body and soul (*BOC*, The Heidelberg Catechism, 4.026).

The Calling of the Church

Finally, an additional tenet of the Reformed tradition is that we, as members of Christ’s body, have particular calling in the world.

“Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him” (*BOC*, The Heidelberg Catechism, 4.001).

To discern our calling, we look to Christ:

The life, death, resurrection, and promised coming of Jesus Christ has set the pattern for the church’s mission. ... His service to [human beings] commits the church to work for every form of human well-being (*BOC*, The Confession of 1967, 9.34).

The particular tasks to which we are called might range from taking care of our own children and households, to “prayers, fasting and almsgiving” (*BOC*,

The Second Helvetic Confession, 5.250), to “delivering the message of the free grace of God to all people in Christ's stead” (BOC, The Theological Declaration of Barmen, 8.26).

Any work engaged in faithful obedience is “holy and truly good” (BOC, Second Helvetic, 5.250), but provisional in the sense that redemption will not be complete until Christ's Second Coming. The church lives and acts, therefore, “even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth” (BOC, A Brief Statement of Faith, 11.4, Lines 75–76).

You have been called by God. Reflect upon what this call has meant in your life. How might you explain your call to an unchurched friend?

Additional Resource:

“A Quick Guide to Essential Tenets” by Dr. Jack Rogers from “Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church” <https://www.drjackrogers.com/2008/06/a-quick-guide-to-essential-tenets.html>.

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**Coming Alive in Christ:
Training for PC(USA) Ruling Elders and Deacons
Based on the Constitutional Questions**

d.—Will you fulfill your ministry in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions?

Is it me?

Presbyterian churches across the country include in their worship materials or print in church directories and on their signs: “Ministers: All members of the church.” If one were to pause and think about its meaning, it would pose a challenge to the understanding of call for each person sitting in worship—whether they are sitting among the congregation or in the chancel area. From the congregation, worshippers often see themselves as passively engaged in the “action” during the service. From the chancel, leaders often seem to embrace a hierarchy of religious importance.

Our theological confessions challenge this division: “In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God’s new heaven and new earth, praying, ‘Come, Lord Jesus!’” (BOC, A Brief Statement of Faith, 11.4, Lines 72–76). It is important to note that the writers of A Brief Statement of Faith, approved at the reunion of the northern and southern streams of the Presbyterian church, intentionally said, “we,” without distinguishing between role and responsibilities within the church. Too often the pastor of a congregation is seen as the only one who has a ministry. They’ve been educated at a seminary, taken the necessary exams, and passed through the oversight of a presbytery committee to be ordained. They’ve made service to the church a professional vocation. Many who have not gone through this process see it as a higher calling to which they, themselves, cannot commit.

It is important to remember that all people are called to be a part of the body of Christ, serving as valued members of the whole with the gifts and talents bestowed by God. We believe that each member is necessary to the body; we simply cannot function without each part working together, no matter the supposed hierarchical value that is placed on one’s contributions.

With this in mind, what would it look like to focus time with church leaders on deepening one’s own spiritual journey and continued discernment of call: a focus on the journey thus far? How might this kind of reflection allow ruling elders and deacons to think about their whole life as a journey, bringing them to this place and time to serve the congregation and communities around them? Would this reflection encourage continued, individual growth as they fulfill their vocation?

Discernment is a lifelong process, one that is often illuminated through hindsight and reflection on what has been, in order to see where God has called us in the present as well as where we might be heading in the future. Training congregational leaders in discernment allows them to hone in on the gifts and experiences God has bestowed, and will bestow, to make them the servants that God calls them to be. An investment in leadership allows deacons and elders to see their work as *ministry*, first and foremost.

In what ways have you engaged in practices of discernment; listening for the ways in which God is calling you? How might your community of faith assist you in beginning or continuing this practice?

What are some ways that your session of board of deacons can engage together in strengthening your spiritual lives together as you serve?

What does it *really* mean to obey Jesus Christ?

A church outside of Seattle experienced a break-in the week before Christmas. The individual shattered the glass at the front entrance and found their way into the main office, which prompted the security alarm to go off. The intruder fled empty-handed to avoid a confrontation with the police.

It is easy to imagine that the church leadership took the typical responsible steps: arrived at the church, assessed the situation, swept up the glass, boarded up the windows, and considered how to better protect their building. Perhaps they even grumbled about the non-budgeted expenses that they would now have to incur because of this “outsider.”

But on Sunday morning, the pastors approached the communion table with a vase full of broken glass and said, “This past week, someone broke into our building. Someone needed something that we had here and was desperate enough to push their way in. So now they are a part of our community. They are a member of this church.”

That Sunday, as well as many Sundays that followed, the congregation prayed for their newest member. The vase of broken glass remained on the communion table as a reminder of who the congregation was called to be.

A few years after the incident, one of the pastors said this, “... nothing more came from that specific situation—other than a decision to change our alarm company. However, it did launch us into an all-church, and all-neighborhood, intentional discussion to support houseless folk. It’s been a rough year trying to change culture, both in the church and in the community. For example, it all came to a boil when we allowed a guy to live in his RV in our parking lot. But because of that, we have an even stronger relationship with our police department who send people to us who we can support. We also created a Community Assistance Plan, which includes a team and a designated fund. Best part—we got some non-churchgoing neighbors to be on our team with us!”

The Confession of 1967 compels us to consider a life that eagerly seeks transformation: “With an urgency born of this hope, the church applies itself to present tasks and strives for a better world. It does not identify limited progress with the kingdom of God on earth, nor does it despair in the face of disappointment and defeat. In steadfast hope, the church looks beyond all partial achievement to the final triumph of God” (BOC, The Confession of 1967, 9.55). This call was as central to Christ’s ministry as it is to us today: he ministered to the sick, poor, outcast, marginalized, and forgotten people around him. While he had a fair number of followers and admirers, he also had critics who did not like the ways he bent the rules to embrace love. Yet Jesus did not allow the negative responses to persuade him to turn away from the neighbors whom he saw as the most in need.

This suburban church possessed an unrelenting response of abundant, boundless love in the midst of challenge. The willingness to remain open when someone broke into *their* space, bearing a response that illustrated the wideness of God's mercy, is the same kind of upending love that we are called to reflect in our own lives. Obedience to Jesus Christ shows our willingness to get out of our own way, letting go of what we believe to be possible, right, or lawful, for a reality that God knows to be true.

While your congregation may not have experienced the trauma of a break-in, what experiences have you had together that have led you to look at your life in ministry together in a transformative way? What are some ways that you can move forward in transformation together?

Why does the past matter?

During the celebration of the 100th anniversary of a congregational women's guild, the pastor called the children up during worship and began describing a time when women could only serve churches in guilds or were resigned to the traditional female roles of hospitality, running socials, and cooking.

But a young boy sitting in front of the pastor interrupted and shouted out, "WHAT?! Why did they stay? Why didn't they just go down the street to another church?"

It sounded ridiculous to him that women would remain with a church that did not allow them to fully serve in the ways that he was so familiar. He never knew a world where women couldn't be elders, deacons, or pastors. He couldn't fathom a space where women would resign themselves to stay and fight for equality because, in his eyes, they could do anything their male counterparts could.

The [Presbyterian Historical Society](#), the National Archives of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), provides access to the widest historical collection of the PC(USA) and its predecessor denominations.

This story is a reminder of the significance of knowing and sharing history from one's congregation, the denomination, and the Christian traditions from which Presbyterians draw their roots. The blessings of the church are to be celebrated alongside the challenges and hard-won victories of life together. The confessions represent pieces of the church's history and responses to the contextual needs of people of faith at that time. When we claim these documents as an important part of the story of our faith, it doesn't mean we affirm or condone the social circumstances in which they were written. Instead, we are to be guided by the confessions as a means through which we can understand where we came from and where we strive to go.

The word order of this ordination question is just as important as what it requires of its respondents. The ordained are to be obedient to Christ, standing under Scripture's authority, and then guided by the confessions. Jesus was continually criticized for not following the mandates of his faith found in the Hebrew Scriptures and yet he continued to act in seemingly contradictory ways to show a life lived with compassion and love. In this way, we should be familiar with the Old and New Testaments, but not let a strict interpretation result in actions that exclude, ignore, or hurt others. Finally, the confessions act as windows into our faith: reflections of who the church believes itself to be and the injustices it has overcome to seek the kingdom of God in its life together.

Keeping in mind that “the confessions represent pieces of the church’s history and responses to the contextual needs of people of faith at that time,” what confession are you interested in learning more about?

What Scripture passages have been foundational in your faith journey?

Called to lead: But, where?! How?!

Rachel Held Evans was a Christian writer and blogger who said, “Imagine if every church became a place where everyone is safe, but no one is comfortable. Imagine if every church became a place where we told one another the truth. We might just create sanctuary.”⁵⁴ What a wonderful challenge as churches seek to minister to the community, neighborhoods, nation, and the whole world around them. The church is one of the places in people’s lives where they should be able to fully be who they are. It is a sacred space where everyone should be able to bring their strengths and brokenness, struggles and triumphs, all without fear of judgment. This is certainly a gift in a society that regularly tells people to act, dress, and be a certain way. The outer pressures are mounting and yet, Christian sanctuaries should be a relief from the worldly pressures as well as laboratories to explore who we are called to be.

Healthy congregations today are able to adapt to the needs that are around them. Congregations often reminisce about the mid-twentieth century heyday of American Christianity: a time when the doors would open, and people simply walked in wearing their Sunday finest. It was a time when denominational ties were an important identity marker and, for the most part, everything shut down when Sunday morning worship took place. Perhaps these easy successes led to the complacency to equip leaders, gauging relevancy and vitality simply by annual membership and attendance numbers rather than discipleship and ministry.

This changing Christian landscape requires an expanded understanding of ministry—one that makes use of the unique gifts, talents, and possessions bestowed to each person. The church will be led to new places when they are willing to follow the Spirit, hearing the voices of all God’s people (including those who share visions that seem impossible, improbable, and outright crazy), and responding with trust to God’s call in their life together. If anyone can make the impossible possible, surely it is God!

New Covenant Presbyterian Church in Albany, New York, realized that, though several different community groups utilized their building each week, they didn’t know much about them. They looked at their assets and realized that their large parking lot could be more than simply a place for cars. They dreamed up the idea of a farmer’s market as a place to tie together all of these communities and groups. In the first summer they welcomed 50–60 people each week. More than eight years later, hundreds come through their parking lot to connect with and fellowship alongside others in the community.

The farmer’s market not only connected the church with those who use their building, but it also drew them out into the neighborhood. It pushed them outside of the sanctuary

⁵⁴ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*.

walls into the lives of those around them. It succeeded not only in adding to the church's ministries, but also creating spaces for all who walk onto the parking lot to dream of the ways they contribute to the community.

One Sunday morning at a church in New Jersey, a seven-year-old boy hesitantly approached the front of the sanctuary in the line for communion. As he neared the front of the line, the pastor knelt down and looked him right in the eye with a smile, "Jonathan, this is the body of Christ for YOU!"

He took a tiny crumb (as so many adults before him had) and started to walk toward the chalice, aware that he shouldn't hold up the line behind him. But the pastor said urgently, "Take more! A piece as big as God's love for you."

He skipped away with a smile on his face and two big hunks of bread dripping in grape juice in either hand.

Even the youngest among us have a place at Christ's table.

Ordained leaders—whether deacons, ruling elders, or pastors—are the front line that invests in the lives of the youngest to the oldest, the long-standing member or the first-time visitor, and every single person who walks through the church's doors. They are called to encourage them to seek the life to which they are made in Christ, just as they seek to do the same in their own. Elders do this with attention to worship, education, and governance of the whole congregation. Deacons focus on the spiritual and physical needs so that people can be whole. Pastors preach, teach, and lead in ways that equip and engage those around them.

One's call can be as big as planning a farmer's market or as simple as reminding a child that there is a seat at Christ's table for them, too. It can be just as daunting as it is exciting and inspiring to say, "Yes, I will serve!" What comes after the commitment to the ordination vows before the gathered congregation in worship is a testimony to the beliefs, hopes, dreams, and faith of the one who offers their service.

No one walks this journey alone. Fellow ruling elders and deacons can discern the way forward together, walking through the boundaries of committees' autonomy and efficiency to engage in collaborative ministry with others. The pastor or pastors serve as resources and guides for the church's vision, both in the present and for the future. Presbytery and national office leaders can provide denominational resources and trends that may enhance your ministries. All leaders should pray often, read Scripture as a daily practice, and familiarize themselves with the history, confessions, and polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). These acts will be foundational to the call to serve the church for such a time as this.

The encouragement Paul offered to the church in Ephesus is a touchstone for all Christians, but especially congregational leaders: "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (Eph 4:1).

How might your community of leaders engage in collaborative ministry and engage in this ordination vow together?

About the writer:

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Additional Resource:

Reyes, Patrick B. *Nobody Cries When We Die: God, Community, and Surviving to Adulthood*. Chalice Press: St. Louis, 2016.

**Coming Alive in Christ:
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e.—Will you be governed by our church's polity, and will you abide by its discipline? Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God's Word and Spirit?

Presbyterian

The very name of our denomination, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), points to our polity—and specifically to the value of shared leadership in our system of government. We can trace this principle to the Hebrew Scriptures. Jethro recognized that Moses, his son-in-law, was carrying a burden of leadership that was too heavy for him. Jethro suggested that Moses appoint elders to help him—"able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain" (Exodus 18:21). Because these leaders were older men, they were called elders. The Greek word for elder is "Presbuteros." While our elders no longer include only men, this is the concept from which our type of polity—and the name of our denomination—are derived.

Among a few others, [Merriam-Webster](#) defines polity as "4(a) the form or constitution of a politically organized unit (b.) the form of government of a religious denomination."

The three types of polity are **congregational**, **episcopal**, and **presbyterian**. In congregational polities, authority lies in the congregation. This is a pure democracy with the principle of one person, one vote. Congregational and Baptist churches are examples. In episcopal polities authority is lodged in individuals, usually called bishops, whose authority is specific to their level in the hierarchy. Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, and Roman Catholic churches are examples of episcopal polity. Presbyterian polity is marked by shared authority and is a representative democracy. Its roots are in the Reformation and John Calvin's understanding of governance, practiced in Geneva. The Church of Scotland and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have presbyterian polities.

The first "trademark" of presbyterian polity, referenced in our name, is that we are governed by presbyters—teaching elders (also called ministers of the Word and Sacrament) and ruling elders. Ruling elders "rule" not with crown and scepter but with a measuring tape—they measure the spiritual health of the congregation they serve and seek to "strengthen and nurture its faith and life" (*Book of Order [BOO]*, F-3.0202).

Deacons and presbyters are called by God to a particular form of service in the church, or "ordered ministry." Their call is confirmed by the vote of a congregation (for ruling elders, deacons, and pastors) or another "community of God's people" (*BOO*, G-2.0103). They are prepared for that ordered ministry under the oversight of an appropriate council (session for deacons and ruling elders, presbytery for teaching elders) and ordained by that council.

Councils

Presbyterians do not place much authority with individuals because we believe that humans are sinful and prone to “idolatry and tyranny” (BOO, F-2.05). Therefore, presbyters gather in “councils,” the governing units of the denomination, to make decisions and connect us to each other. These four councils, from the most local to the most inclusive, are called session, presbytery, synod, and General Assembly (BOO, F-3.0203). At meetings of the presbytery, synod, and General Assembly, we strive to have equal numbers of teaching elders and ruling elders.

[Interactive map of synods and presbyteries](#)

Councils exist to help congregations and the whole church “be more faithful participants in the mission of Christ” (BOO, G-3.0101). This faithfulness is expressed by the notes of the true church found in The Scots Confession (*Book of Confessions* [BOC], 3.18). The true church, it teaches, is found wherever

the Word of God is truly preached and heard,
the Sacraments are rightly administered, and
ecclesiastical discipline is uprightly ministered. (BOO, F-1.0303)

The *Book of Order* assigns particular responsibilities to each of the councils (F-3.0203) framed in light of the notes of the church (above). For instance, the **session** is the council responsible for the life of a congregation. Only the session can determine the program and budget of its congregation and ordain ruling elders and deacons. The **presbytery** is composed of churches and ministers of the Word and Sacrament within a certain district. Only the presbytery can ordain teaching elders. The **synod** is an intermediate council supporting the work of presbyteries within its region. The role of synods varies greatly across the denomination. The **General Assembly** is the most inclusive council, leading and guiding the witness of the whole church and adopting constitutional interpretations. Though the councils are distinct, the action of one of them is an act of the whole church (BOO, F-3.0203). For instance, a ruling elder ordained by one session is a ruling elder for the whole church; a teaching elder ordained by one presbytery is a teaching elder for the whole church.

When presbyters are gathered in councils, they are called commissioners, not representatives or delegates. They seek together to discern and carry out the will of Christ, not simply the council or congregation from which they come (BOO, F-3.0204). Because of this principle—and unlike our secular governments—we do not keep voting records of our commissioners. Desiring to seek Christ’s will, each meeting of a council or congregation opens and closes with prayer (BOO, G-3.0105).

When councils meet, decisions are made by majority vote after an orderly process that allows for discussion and discernment (BOO, F-3.0205). The most recent edition of *Roberts’ Rules of Order, Newly Revised* is the tool we use to guide the conduct of our meetings (BOO, G-3.0105).

There is no assumption that presbyters will hold the same opinion on a topic. Since 1788, our constitution has contained language admitting that we do not always agree—“... there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other” (BOO, F-3.0105, The archaic use of “men” to refer to people in general is a reflection of the eighteenth century origin of this

quotation). The Form of Government provides a means by which we can register our differences with the decision of a council in which we have voted. "Dissent" expresses disagreement with a decision made. "Protest" alleges that a council made a decision that was in error and supports that position with written reasons (BOO, G-3.0105a and b).

Presbyterians believe that

"... God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. b. Therefore we consider the rights of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable ..." (BOO, F-3.0101). Nevertheless, we recognize that for the health of the church those who serve in ordered ministries must "adhere to the essentials of the Reformed faith and polity as expressed in this Constitution (BOO, G-2.0105). It is up to each council to determine whether a particular matter of conscience is a departure from these essentials of faith and polity (BOO, G-2.0105).

In your background, have you had experience with other forms of church polity? What are the significant differences that you have noticed?

What do you see as benefits to the councils of the PC(USA)?

The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Another characteristic of our polity is that we are constitutional. Our polity grows out of our theology. Hence, Part I of the *Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* is the **Book of Confessions**, a collection of creeds, catechisms, and other statements of faith in which the church expresses "... who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do" (BOO, F-2.01). Part II is the **Book of Order**, which includes four sections, each designated by a letter:

- The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity (F)
- The Form of Government (G)
- The Directory for Worship (W)
- The Rules of Discipline (D) (F-3.03)

Material in the book is designated by a section letter followed by a dash then chapter number, a period, and section and paragraph number. For example, the meaning of membership in the PC(USA) is found at G-1.0301: The Form of Government, Chapter 1, Section 3, Paragraph 01. Only in recent editions of the *Book of Order* have pages been numbered.

Presbyterians believe that our life together is most faithful to God's will when it is lived with "... a disciplined concern for order in the church according to the Word of God" (BOO, F-2.05). Our *Book of Order* helps us to honor the covenants we have with each other as congregations and between councils.

There are some rules for using the *Book of Order*. It is not to be used as a weapon to bring people with whom we disagree in line. It is a tool that helps us go about our mission and ministry in an orderly way. Like Scripture, it should not be interpreted by lifting out snippets as proof of one's position or the conclusive answer to questions. Each section must be interpreted in light of the whole. In addition, there are authoritative interpretations of certain sections of the *Book of Order* that have been made by the General Assembly or

its permanent judicial commission (*BOO*, G-6.02). These may be found by using an *Annotated Book of Order*.

Readers and interpreters of the *Book of Order* must pay close attention to the verbs. In the Preface you will find the following explanation of verb usage:

- (1) "Shall" and "is to be/are to be" signify practice that is mandated,
- (2) "Should" signifies practice that is strongly recommended,
- (3) "Is appropriate" signifies practice that is commended as suitable,
- (4) "May" signifies practice that is permissible but not required.
- (5) "Advisory Handbook" signifies a handbook produced by agencies of the General Assembly to guide synods and presbyteries in procedures related to the oversight of ministry. Such handbooks suggest procedures that are commended, but not required.

The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity section is theological primer, laying out the principles that undergird our life together. You have already seen many references to that section of the *Book of Order*. When we understand this foundational material, we have a better grasp of the reasons for the practices and requirements of the remaining three sections of the *Book of Order*. "The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity" is a worthy text for study and discussion.

The Form of Government specifies the ways we work together across the church. It is here we most often look to learn what is allowed or not allowed with regard to meetings, calling a pastor, selling property, and so forth. In 2011, the PC(USA) adopted the Foundations and our current Form of Government (which is still sometimes called the "new Form of Government," or NFOG). This Form of Government is meant to be lean and provide flexibility for local determination of the conduct of mission and ministry. It does not speak on every topic. Where something is not prohibited, it is presumed to be allowed.

The Directory for Worship provides constitutional guidance for our theology and practice of worship. It says in its preface that it "... is not a service book with fixed orders of worship and collections of prayers. Rather, it describes the theology that underlies our worship, outlines appropriate forms for worship, and highlights connections between worship and Christian life, witness, and service" (W-Preface). The Directory for Worship was revised in 2017 in keeping with the same principles that guided the recent revision of the Form of Government.

The Rules of Discipline is the fourth and final section of the *Book of Order*. The fifth ordination question asks if the one to be ordained "will abide by [the church's] discipline." This tells us that we take discipline seriously. According to Chapter 1 of the Rules of Discipline, the Preamble, discipline is for guidance, control, and nurture of the church; and constructive criticism of offenders. We sometimes abbreviate this section "RoD" which provides an apt association. Psalm 23 tells us that God's rod and staff comfort us. We humans are most secure when we have boundaries and guidance, depicted by the psalmist as the rod and staff. Another scripture suggested in the Preamble is Ephesians 4:11–16, with its emphasis on building up the body of Christ, the church, in love.

In our society, the word “discipline” often has the connotation of punishing someone for doing something wrong. It may feel like being sent to the principal's office. We should remember that “discipline” is related to the word “disciple” and is, in part, about learning Christ's way and submission to Christ's authority, through the church. We only have to think for a few seconds to remember instances in which leniency or ignoring allegations of misconduct on the part of professionals has done irreparable harm to individuals, congregations, and the church.

As early as The Scots Confession the church recognized that for the church of Christ to truly exist there had to be “ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God's Word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed and virtue nourished” (BOC, 3.18). Presbyterians continue to strive to carry out this ministry in a faithful and compassionate manner.

The Rules of Discipline are a detailed manual of definitions and procedures. There are two types of disciplinary process. The first is **remedial**, in which there has been a complaint of irregularity or delinquency on the part of a lower council of the church or an entity of the General Assembly. The second is **disciplinary**, in which there has been an accusation made against a church member or person in ordered ministry (D-2.0102).

Like most of our ordered life, the processes of discipline are carried out by groups and not left to single individuals' judgment or prejudices. There are procedural safeguards and due process. Each council conducts disciplinary process as need arises. The session itself hears and decides cases against church members. Presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly each have permanent judicial commissions that hear and decide cases in their respective jurisdictions.

Church discipline does not replace the secular legal system. It does not compensate victims. Its purpose is

- to honor God by making clear the significance of membership in the body of Christ;
- to preserve the purity of the church by nourishing the individual within the life of the believing community;
- to achieve justice and compassion for all participants involved;
- to correct or restrain wrongdoing in order to bring members to repentance and restoration;
- to uphold the dignity of those who have been harmed by disciplinary offenses;
- to restore the unity of the church by removing the causes of discord and division; and
- to secure the just, speedy, and economical determination of proceedings. (D-1.0101, format mine)

While using the processes of church discipline may be costly, neglecting to use them when warranted is more so.

Take some time to practice looking up items in the *Book of Order*. The table of contents in the front, as well as the index in the back, are helpful in looking for specific references.

How do you see the *Book of Order* as beneficial to our covenant to live together in community?

How does the church's polity connect to your own faith and beliefs?

Relational Ministry

Another characteristic of Presbyterian polity is that we are relational. We do not exist as individuals, congregations, or councils in "silos" separate from each other. In Scripture, one depiction of this is the image of the "body of Christ" found in 1 Corinthians 12. We sometimes call this interconnected church the "church universal." Chapter 1 of the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity speaks of the relationship of the Church to Christ and of the unity of the parts of the Church. "... To be one with Christ is to be joined with all those whom Christ calls into relationship with him" (BOO, F-1.0302a). The *Book of Order* specifies ways that congregations and councils relate to one another, strengthening these relationships.

As individuals, too, we are connected to each other in this body. The ordination question asks, "Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God's Word and Spirit?" Those in ordered ministries are to develop relationships and be in community with others in ordered ministry.

Ruling elders and deacons work with others in the church they serve but should also seek opportunities to develop relationships with their counterparts in other congregations. This might be done by serving on a committee or commission of a higher council, when invited. Sometimes presbyteries have established ministry areas or regions that offer educational or mission events for the region. Those in ordered ministries learn from those in other churches and gain a broader vision of the church in their region. In many presbyteries clerks of session gather periodically for training and review of records. Clerks often find these relationships helpful to them in their particular setting.

Perhaps it is especially tempting for teaching elders who may serve alone in that role and apart from other teaching elders to become used to keeping their own counsel and not having a group of colleagues with whom to be in relationship. Collegial relationships are important for mutual support and accountability, and sometimes for friendship. These groups might be organized around the study of biblical texts, prayer and spirituality, or mission activities, and they might be within one's own denomination or across denominations in a particular community. Statistics show that ministers of the Word and Sacrament who are in colleague groups are less likely to suffer from burnout or violate boundaries in their ministries.

Ministers of the Word and Sacrament are members of a presbytery, not a congregation. As ruling elders and deacons serve on committees and work groups in their congregations, ministers should serve on presbytery committees, commissions, and task forces. Such service is considered part of their responsibility under this ordination question. Sessions should encourage their pastors to serve on presbytery, synod, and General Assembly entities or to be commissioners to synod and General Assembly.

Sometimes such participation requires alternate scheduling in the congregation a minister serves.

Our denomination is known by its polity. In our theological tradition, we believe that abiding by this polity sets us free to serve God more faithfully. Our polity is not meant to disrupt or limit the life of the church at any level. Instead it is a foundation that supports our mission and ministry by helping us to honor our covenants with each other as individuals, as deacons and presbyters, as congregations, as councils, and as the wider church.

Consider the ways in which becoming involved in the various councils of the church can make ministry come alive for you.

In your service as a ruling elder or deacon, how can you cultivate your relationships with your colleagues?

About the writer:

Alyson Janke is a ruling elder with a lifelong interest in church polity. A member of First Presbyterian Church, Westfield, Wisconsin, she has been the stated clerk in the Presbytery of John Knox since 1995. She taught Presbyterian Polity at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary for eighteen years. Janke has served on the Advisory Committee on the Constitution from 2004–2010 and from 2016–2020. She received the C. Fred Jenkins Constitutional Services Award in 2012. Janke is also commissioned to pastoral service in Wild Rose, Wisconsin, by the Presbytery of Winnebago, and served as interim stated clerk there for one year. She and her husband have three adult children and five grandchildren. They are retired dairy farmers.

Recommended Resources:

The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Parts I and II

Regarding Ruling Elders: A Monthly Series for Serving Faithfully,
<https://www.pcusa.org/browse/news-post/departments/ruling-elders/>.

**Coming Alive in Christ:
Training for PC(USA) Ruling Elders and Deacons
Based on the Constitutional Questions**

f.—Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?

The Confessions

As the third question introduced, the confessions are a resource for the church's unfolding understanding of what it means to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love our neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world. For Presbyterians, and particularly for those who are ordained as deacons, ruling elders, or pastors, the confessions are lived. Through study of the confessions, we gain insight into the historical moment for each of these statements of faith, as well as learn about who we are called to be as followers of Jesus Christ. Some confessions, particularly the Confession of Belhar and The Confession of 1967, as well as The Theological Declaration of Barmen, are important because they stated the convictions of the Christian faith in the face of a controversy or proclaimed the identity of the church during great social change. We believe that God continues to work. It is a "Reformed obligation to confess the faith in each time and place."⁵⁵

Even though we do not live in apartheid South Africa, or in the rapid social change of the 1960s United States, we believe that Christians of different times and places are able to provide a witness to one another.

The Confession of Belhar

The Confession of Belhar arose from The Theological Declaration of Barmen in conversation with the realities of apartheid South Africa. It was adopted in 1986 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa, and then by a series of churches in South Africa and the United States. This moment in the life of church is one of particular shame, as the church was integral to the creation and maintenance of apartheid, much as the church has been integral to the colonization of what came to be called the Americas, and as it has been a central player in the creation and justification of Native American removal and cultural genocide, chattel slavery, and Jim Crow laws.

Unity is not just meant to be spiritual and a matter of worship practice, but also tangible. Unity must be real and cannot be achieved if legal separation exists.

This confession is relevant today because separation persists through less blatant legal, economic, and cultural means. It took two efforts in the PC(USA) to include this confession in our Constitution, which speaks to the divisive nature of race in the United States. However, to follow Jesus, love one's neighbors and work for reconciliation demand we acknowledge the real and powerful divisions between us.

⁵⁵ Small, Joseph. *To Be Reformed: Living the Tradition*, Louisville: Witherspoon Press (2010), 3.

The Confession of 1967

Following decades of conflict over doctrine and essential tenets of the faith, dispensationalism, the fundamentalist-modernist conflict, the advent of neo-orthodoxy, splits and mergers, the church determined it needed a modern confession, after an overture to the PC(USA) came asking for updated language for the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Naturally, there was a great deal of controversy over the new confession. Revisions were made, including a concession that created a new item on personal morality (in regards to sexual behavior and relationships), and the modifications made the confession more likely to pass and be accepted.

The confession is divided into sections on reconciliation and equality, in the context of racial discrimination, international conflict, persistent poverty, and gender equality.

What surprises you about the history of either the Confession of Belhar or The Confession of 1967?

Why do you think it is important for us to provide a witness by having these confessions as a part of our church's constitution?

Reconciliation

The confessions are not simply historical documents. While they arose from specific circumstances, we as a community believe they continue to contribute in a meaningful and ongoing basis to the life of the church, and, indeed, the world. Nor are the truths of the confessions confined to our Sunday morning lives. We who are Presbyterians, particularly as those who have taken ordination vows, believe they shape the entirety of our lives.

Reconciliation has the potential to become a watered-down nice term for getting along. It might mean a white congregation and a black congregation swap preachers once a year. It might mean two people in a broken relationship struggle to come back together.

When my brother and I fought as children, our mother insisted we talk through the conflict. She mentioned to me recently that it was painful for her to make us do that because we had hurt each other, and "talking it out" required we verbalize how we had been hurt and how we had inflicted that hurt. As the eldest and more verbal child, I tended to say things that hurt. My brother quickly grew to be physically stronger than I was and inflicted hurt in other ways. But regardless of how difficult it was, our mother kept it up because she believed that it was better to say the wrongs out loud than allow them to simmer, at least in the long run as we developed into adults and as two humans in a lifelong relationship.

My brother and I did not have structural advantages and disadvantages. The kind of reconciliation called for in the confessions is much more serious than two little ones working through a conflict. This is because the confessions speak to times and places where the conflicts are happening in the midst of structural oppression, resulting in some groups having legal, cultural, theological, and economic advantages, and others navigating society with the inverse disadvantages.

It is too easy for us to look at the contexts of the Confessions of Belhar and 1967 and believe we live in such different times that the confessions are unnecessary, hold no sway over our lives, or just do not apply. But consider these facts in just three of the modern-day issues of God's people:

Incarceration

- Black South Africans during and immediately following apartheid were incarcerated at a rate of between 612–851 per 100,000.⁵⁶
- Black Americans in 2017 were incarcerated at a rate of 1,549 per 100,000.⁵⁷
- Hispanic Americans in 2017 were incarcerated at a rate of 823 per 100,000.⁵⁸
- White Americans were incarcerated that same year at a rate of 272 per 100,000.⁵⁹

The causes of incarceration are not about inherent levels of criminality. Black Americans are more likely to be incarcerated in part because black neighborhoods are more heavily policed than white neighborhoods, due to segregation and persistent beliefs resulting in biased policies and procedures. Black people are also more likely than white people to be stopped by police. In fact, black drivers are three times more likely than white drivers to be stopped, even though white drivers are more likely to be carrying something illegal.⁶⁰

Creating Illegality

When my white Jewish great-grandparents arrived in the U.S. from eastern Europe, and my Japanese great-great-grandparents arrived in the U.S., they came before “illegal” was a term used to describe the processes of migration.

My great-grandmother Kimiko was born in the U.S. and was therefore a citizen. When she married my great-grandfather Shuichi, who was not a citizen (because it was illegal at the time for Asians to become naturalized citizens), she was subject to a law that stripped citizen women of their citizenship when they married men ineligible for citizenship. She lost her citizenship rights, effectively becoming stateless from the time of their marriage in 1924 until 1952, when the McCarran-Walter Act changed how the U.S. treated migrants from Asia, and my great-grandfather was allowed to become a citizen. At the time, a set of laws known as the Alien Land Laws prevented Asian immigrants ineligible for citizenship from owning property. Additionally, they lost whatever they and their children had during World War II, when they were interned in a concentration camp in Arizona.

⁵⁶ <https://www.politifact.com/punditfact/statements/2014/dec/11/nicholas-kristof/kristof-us-imprisons-blacks-rates-higher-south-afr/>.

⁵⁷ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/30/shrinking-gap-between-number-of-blacks-and-whites-in-prison/>.

⁵⁸ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/30/shrinking-gap-between-number-of-blacks-and-whites-in-prison/>.

⁵⁹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/30/shrinking-gap-between-number-of-blacks-and-whites-in-prison/>.

⁶⁰ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/10/27/police-are-searching-black-drivers-more-often-but-finding-more-illegal-stuff-with-white-drivers-2/?noredirect=on>.

Contrast these accounts with some of my white friends' stories. Their ancestors passed through Ellis Island, and were given the opportunity to go west and claim land from which Native Americans had been removed. They could become citizens, own property, vote, and begin accumulating wealth without the government removing their entire ethnic group and causing massive loss as a community.

Today, the immigration system has set up concepts for "legal" and "illegal" immigration. While legislation no longer expressly prohibits migration from China, or prohibits noncitizens from ever becoming citizens, immigration policies and processes have created virtually untenable situations for people seeking documentation for migration, and criminalizes people who, just a few decades before, could have crossed freely between countries.

Sexism and Gender Discrimination

Now that we see more women in positions of leadership, it is possible for us to be unaware of the ongoing gender inequalities in the church and in society. In 2016, the PC(USA) released a study showing stark differences between how women and men in the church experience discrimination.⁶¹ Eighty-four percent of women teaching elders report experiencing gender-based harassment or discrimination, whereas only 32 percent of men teaching elders report experiencing gender-based harassment.

Society continues to face ongoing inequality between men and women, reflected in pay gaps, wildly unequal representation among elected officials and top corporate leadership. Additionally, women continue to bear the brunt of unpaid labor in the form of elder and childcare, as well as household responsibilities.⁶²

What does "reconciliation for the world" mean to you? How might you describe it to someone who is discerning a call to ordination?

What other examples might you offer about ways in which our world is in need of reconciliation?

Ordination

Ordination is not something that is easily given or taken away. It is a role that is special, and requires congruence in one's entire life, not just church life. Those who are called to ordered ministry as deacons, ruling elders, and pastors have roles that are distinct, yet equally important in the life of the church and world.

To fully love our neighbors, we must work to grasp what it is that holds people back from abundant life, including the structural restrictions of racism, sexism, segregation, and xenophobia. As God acts for justice for those most vulnerable, so must we align ourselves with the God who calls and claims us in our baptism and also in our ordination. To follow Jesus is to seek reconciliation of the world, taking on the risk that he did. This goes

⁶¹ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/study-finds-gender-discrimination-still-pervasive-within-the-pcusg/>.

⁶² <https://news.stanford.edu/2018/03/16/gender-equality-stalls-u-s-stanford-report-finds/>) (<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2018/05/18/450972/unequal-division-labor/>).

beyond pulpit swaps, renting space to an immigrant congregation, calling a woman to be a pastor, or taking occasional mission trips to a reservation. This is about how we work against inequality throughout our lives: at church, at work, in our communities. This has implications for how and where we live, the policies supported by our elected officials, and how we deploy our own resources of time and money.

To be faithful in these instances could be very costly. This goes to show that ordination is not simply a matter of authority in a congregational or judicatory setting, but a call to live into the vows of ordination throughout one's life. The solemn and public nature of the ordination service underscores the seriousness with which the office is to be taken.

These confessions provide an example of what it means to live faithfully, not simply inside the church, but as the church in the world. An argument central to the Confession of Belhar is that racism is antithetical to the unity of the church. Rather than bend to what society wills, such as legal apartheid, or systems and structures that maintain inequality between genders, we are called to address the violations of reconciliation and unity in the name of our faith. After all, we are not so distant from legal, cultural, overt segregation in both church and state, and we understand that people continue to experience segregation and inequality.

It is not enough to confess what we believe, but to understand what it means to be the church, more specifically, at particular times, for the "visible life of the church"⁶³. Accommodating social divisions is a betrayal of ordination vows, and ultimately a betrayal of Christ. Our ordinations call us to be faithfully different.

In what ways will you seek to love your neighbors as a part of your call to ordered ministry?

"Ordination is not simply a matter of authority in a congregational or judicatory setting, but a call to live into the vows of ordination throughout one's life." How does this ring true in your life?

Additional Resource:

Race and Reconciliation: The Confessions of 1967 and Belhar from the *Being Reformed* series published by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

<https://www.pcusastore.com/Products/680854/race--reconciliation-the-confessions-of-1967-and-belhar-workbook.aspx>

About the writer

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⁶³ *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding: The Confession of Belhar, Leader's Guide* by Mark D. Hinds, Louisville, Ky.: CMP, 26.

Coming Alive in Christ: Training for PC(USA) Ruling Elders and Deacons Based on the Constitutional Questions

g.—Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?

Biblical Background

The New Testament letters attributed to Paul reveal the struggles of the early church to maintain peace, unity, and purity. Paul asks the Philippian church to help repair the relationship between two of its members.

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. (Philippians 4:2-3, NRSV)

Paul makes the work of reconciling Euodia and Syntyche the responsibility of the whole church. The broken relationship is not just a personal loss but a loss to the Philippian congregation. In the troubled Corinthian church, the divisions are broader and deeper.

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided? (1 Corinthians 1:10-13a, NRSV)

Paul is making his appeal to a congregation that is much divided. Through the rest of First Corinthians and Second Corinthians we see Paul's efforts to bring unity to their divisions on a number of theological and moral issues. The beautiful Chapter 13 in First Corinthians that is often read at weddings is really a rose among the thorns of a conflicted church. You can almost feel Paul's weariness as he closes out this search for peace that spans two letters of the New Testament.

Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. (2 Corinthians 13:11-12, NRSV)

These serve as examples that the quest for peace, unity, and purity of the church is as old as the church itself.

Read Ephesians 4:6. What is Paul's concern for the Ephesians? How does he want the Ephesians to work toward unity?

The Local Congregation

When a person says "I do" to this ordination question, they are committing themselves to a threefold task:

1. To work for peace-filled relationships that reflect the love of Christ.
2. To work for a congregation united in its ministry and mission.

3. To work for a church that lives out its understanding of the faith as described in the PC(USA) Constitution.

All of this would be very easy except that the church is full of human beings. We are all, on our best days, trying to live our lives the way we understand God has called us to live. Yet as we grow in our faith we are always faced with change. A congregation is not a static group of people. It is a collection of siblings growing at different rates in the same space.

The church is similar to a vegetable garden. Some plants grow straight and tall. Some are vines that can take over all the space if you let them. Some plants grow unseen until harvest. We see the same things with individuals within the church. The challenge is to nourish this growth while dealing with the conflict that can be caused by different people changing at the same time in the same space. That conflict can be between just two people over a personal issue, as in the case of Euodia and Syntyche, or it can be about several divisions in the congregation as in Corinthians.

The presence of conflict does not mean that your congregation is a problem church. All congregations have problems at one time or another. When you accept that, you will be better able to face the challenge and find solutions. Ruling elders and deacons who do not admit there are problems cannot lead their congregations well.

There is a very human tendency to want placidness, quiet, and agreement. Sessions will use the appeal for unity to promote peace. Sessions can also use an appeal for unity to enforce purity. Neither approach is healthy. What is healthy is creating an atmosphere where people can challenge the status quo and ask questions about the faith.

This may rattle the unity by making some people feel uncomfortable. Congregations are generally uncomfortable about being uncomfortable. The session's role is to lead in that tension without panic or a simplistic panacea. Sometimes that will mean making difficult choices. It would be rare for a ruling elder to live out his or her three-year term and never face a hard decision. Ruling elders are elected to make decisions. We all want to say yes to anyone's good idea but there is a finite amount of time and money that can be utilized. However, there is an infinite amount of hope and love that can be used to make those decisions.

One member of the congregation is a professional painter. Another member is a professional decorator. They are both willing to re-paint the fellowship hall but have very different ideas about the colors. **How would you work toward a decision and maintain the peace, unity, and purity in such a situation?**

Conflict Resolution

"For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20, NRSV). This verse from the gospel of Matthew is often quoted to defend a small crowd at worship. In the context of its use in Matthew, it has nothing to do with a crowd size at all. It is really about conflict in the church. Here is the rest of the passage:

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not

listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.
(Matthew 18:15–20, NRSV)

These verses include some very basic advice about dealing with a personal conflict in a community of faith. The first step is to deal with the conflict one on one in private. If that doesn't work, invite others in to help you. And if that doesn't work, go to the leaders of the church.

The primary point, though, is that whether you are talking one on one or with a group, Jesus is there with you. That alone should affect your attitude in the conversation and hopefully the words themselves. Striving to maintain the peace, unity, and purity of a congregation is not just a human task, it is a spiritual task also. There are four actions that can help achieve conflict resolution. They are:

- To listen
- To learn
- To love
- To lead

To Listen

Whether a conflict in a congregation is between two persons or two groups, the most important first step is listening. If a person does not feel heard, they are not apt to listen as the conversation continues. Be patient and take note of different perspectives. Avoid looking for the holes in the story. We are all sinners, and, in a conflict, there will rarely be saints without some defects. When people are passionate, they can emphasize minor hurts and miss their own place in the conflict. Listen for the real pain or argument. Listen for the remedy sought. Most of all, listen to what the Holy Spirit may be saying in the conversation. Practice discernment by actively seeking insight from the Holy Spirit. These are God's children talking and God's children seeking reconciliation and healing. Jesus has promised to be there with all involved.

To Learn

Enter into a conversation about a conflict as a learner. Some key facts will be missed if, from the very beginning, there are assumptions of fault based on previous encounters. In fact, what God is trying to teach in this conflict may be missed. It is a cliché to say we learn from our mistakes. We can learn from others' mistakes too. Reflect on Paul's letters to the various churches. What can be learned from those letters that could help with this conflict? Pay attention to your own responses as you listen to the conversation. What words are "pushing your buttons" and why? How is the congregation responding to this conflict? What could the congregation learn about its tolerance of conflict? As a church leader what are you learning that will be part of your discernment about where God is calling the congregation?

To Love

While people may love their point of view or love the sound of their own voice, the word love is not usually associated with a church conflict. As a ruling elder or deacon seeking

a way forward, remind those involved how much God loves all of us. Congregations have a tendency to punish people who upset the balance or create tension. In these situations, the word "unity" can become a weapon to stifle all hard discussions. It will be important to look inwardly and be honest about our feelings toward the people in the conflict. Remember that God so loved the world that God sent Jesus to find all of us prodigal sons and daughters and bring us home. Prayerfully consider how the people in the conversation can be helped to find their way home too.

To Lead

It would be ideal if every church conflict could end with satisfaction on all sides but that will not always be the case. Our quest for peace dictates that people who cause harm to others must be stopped. Our quest for purity finds some boundaries in the understanding of faith. There was a session that spent a whole Saturday wrestling with a decision. The decision was announced on Sunday and created a great uproar. The next Sunday after worship the session sat facing the congregation and let everyone in the congregation have their say. The session remained resolute and united in their decision but they had given the congregation an opportunity to vent. That was leadership.

Leadership is not about being a bully. It is recognizing that decisions have to be made. Decisions can only be made on the information the session has at the time. People are too quick to fault sessions for making decisions that are seen differently at a later date. No session has a crystal ball. If you have listened carefully, learned all you can, and acted out of your love for God and your congregation, then you have done all you can to provide leadership. That will help nurture the peace, unity, and purity of your church.

Use the four points of conflict resolution to develop a strategy to resolve this challenge:

The new Friendship Adult Study Class has outgrown the room where they meet each week. The long-standing Fellowship Adult Class has a few remaining members but meets in a room that is much too large for their needs.

Beyond the Church Walls

When affirming this ordination question, the promise is not only to promote peace, unity, and purity in the local congregation but also in the whole Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and through its mission in the world. The Confession of 1967 says this:

The church disperses to serve God wherever its members are, at work or play, in private or in the life of society. Their prayer and Bible study are part of the church's worship and theological reflection. Their witness is the church's evangelism. Their daily action in the world is the church in mission to the world. The quality of their relation with other persons is the measure of the church's fidelity. (BOC, 9.37)

That last sentence says plainly that our relationships with people in and out of the church is the testimony to how faithful we are to the gospel. The reality is this: when a person has an encounter with a Presbyterian congregation or an individual Presbyterian, this interaction is going to affect how they see all Presbyterians. So, we must work as a whole church to raise the standard for our relationships so that we further the peace, unity, and purity in the lives of all people.

Raising that standard for the whole church will mean you must be willing to serve the PC(USA) beyond your own congregation. You can bring your wisdom and experience to

the table and learn from others. Working with people from other congregations and from other areas of the country will help you see the wideness of our PC(USA) mission. In 1910, the Presbyterian church adopted the classic statement we know as *The Great Ends of the Church* (BOO, F-1.0304). These audacious goals call the church to its mission in this world. This mission cannot happen if church leaders don't work together to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church. The call to ordained ministry as a ruling elder or deacon is a call to service and leadership from the people who have identified the qualities and gifts necessary to lead them toward these goals.

Read the Great Ends of the Church in the *Book of Order* (BOO, F-10304).

How does this ordination question relate to achieving those goals?

What partners would you need to further the peace, unity and purity of the larger church?

Additional Resources

The 214th General Assembly (2002) appointed a Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. The final report contains resources for dealing with church conflicts. It can be found at <https://www.pcusa.org/resource/theological-task-force-peace-unity-and-purity-chur/>.

Seeking to Be Faithful Together: Guidelines for Presbyterians During Times of Disagreement, by the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program. Available at <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/seeking-to-be-faithful-together-guidelines-for-presbyterians-in-times-of-disagreement/>

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Coming Alive in Christ: Training for PC(USA) Ruling Elders and Deacons Based on the Constitutional Questions

h.—Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?

Sustaining Our Vocational Calling

One of the most inviting and empowering tenets of our tradition is the understanding that we are each—all of us—called to ministry. In responding to the call to ordained leadership, ruling elders and deacons have already done some important discernment. But the art of vocational discernment doesn't end with ordination. This is just the beginning!

Theologian Frederick Buechner describes our vocation in this way: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."⁶⁴ The question of how we will meet the world's hunger and the needs of our people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love is a way of asking, "what is our deep gladness?" What sustains us? What brings us joy in this good and hard work?

Questions of energy, intelligence, imagination, love, and even gladness are counterintuitive to many of us. Many leaders work and live in spaces that don't leave a great deal of room for this type of reflection and discernment. These kinds of questions emphasize health, sustainability, curiosity, and joy rather than productivity, efficiency, and certainty. Most of us need practice asking and answering such questions.

The PC(USA) *Book of Order* reminds us, "As there were in Old Testament times elders for the government of the people, so the New Testament church provided persons with particular gifts to share in discernment of God's Spirit and governance of God's people" (*BOO*, G-2.0301). **Discerning the Spirit of God and leading God's people accordingly requires energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.** However, when faced with the everyday challenges of keeping an organization alive and well ...

- our **energy** can be easily depleted when there are more tasks to do than hours with which to complete them;
- we can begin to question our **intelligence** when our areas of expertise may not prepare us for leading an organization made up of diverse and, at times, competing needs;
- our **imagninations** can be dampened by the realities of diminishing resources, human and financial;
- and our **love** can be tested when our lives together are marked by anxiety and fear of an unknown future.

"Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?" Without intentional engagement and facilitation, this particular question can feel unattainable and unrealistic. But the truth is, if our work is to be faithful and if we are

⁶⁴ Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*. 1993 by HarperOne, 119.

to follow what Jesus describes as the greatest commandment—“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37)—our work will not be sustainable unless we commit to practices that replenish our energy, expand our intelligence (understanding), evoke our imagination, and deepen our love for one another. These practices might include forms of prayer, spiritual disciplines, communal discernment, storytelling, and leadership development.

In order to promote the practice of a more sustainable sense of vocation, let's consider what we really mean when we say “energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.”

Energy

We live in an unprecedented time of technological advancement and expanding opportunities to fill our time. In a given year in the United States, 25 percent of Americans regularly volunteer their time, and 32 percent of these volunteer hours are contributed to religious organizations. This means those who have responded to God's call to ordained leadership as deacons and ruling elders in our congregations are part of this 25 percent. Volunteers average about thirty hours per year.⁶⁵ According to these statistics, we can assume that those who have chosen to share their energy and human resources with the church contribute, on average, about 2.5 hours per month to these ministries.

There is an immense wage gap between those who have a great deal of resources and time to spend them and those who have very little and are scrambling with multiple jobs and responsibilities in order to make ends meet. It is likely that the leaders of our churches represent the full spectrum of this reality. Much of our leaders' energy is consumed daily by their demanding work and/or home lives. Some of our leaders are caring for aging parents as well as growing children. Others are balancing physical and mental health issues with their commitments to caregiving for others and service in the church. And still others are in the midst of financial or relational crisis.

But what if the church was a place that did not acquiesce to our cultural norms of productivity and efficiency over wholeness and wellbeing? What if facilitating good leadership in our churches might become an opportunity to slow down, to teach and learn more sustainable practices? To relinquish the hold that capitalism and scarcity have on us?

In his book, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*, Walter Brueggemann offers us the opportunity to reclaim sabbath as a faithful practice of work stoppage—unhooking ourselves from the relentless nature of busyness and productivity, rejecting the notion of scarcity, and embracing the reality of God's abundance.⁶⁶ God's gift of sabbath offers a model for more sustainable practices of ministry, inviting our leaders to not only pour themselves out in the service of our community but to be replenished as well. The question of serving with energy might mean that rather than imagining ourselves as being in competition with the other parts of our leaders' lives we begin by sharing stories *about our lives*. We begin by creating a culture in which we tell the truth about how and where our energy is being poured out and where (or whether) that energy is being replenished. We might need to have honest conversations about where our capacities are and whether we have the energy to meet *all* the needs of our organization right now. We might need to name and remind our leaders that their

⁶⁵ Huffpost. January 31, 2017. Joseph, Marc, [America Does Not Have Enough Volunteers](#).

⁶⁶ Brueggemann, Walter. *Sabbath as Resistance*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press; 2014.

worthiness is not determined by how much they give or how hard they work. Collectively, we might need to adjust our expectations of ourselves and one another.

When we invite our leaders to be self-reflective about their own relationship to time and energy as well as reflect on what the congregation as a whole truly has energy and passion for, then we can begin to faithfully discern what our priorities will be for this particular season of our congregational life.

What gives you energy? What depletes you? When you consider the ecosystem of your congregation, what requires the most energy? How might you replenish it? What might you need to let go of in order to be restored?

Tell a story about a time you experienced restoration. Where were you? Who were you with? What did you see, hear, smell, taste, touch, or feel in this place?

Engage together in “A Sabbath as Resistance Meditation” (see appendix).

Additional Activity: Energy Inventory

Invite the leaders to make a list of all the areas in their lives in which they give energy. This might include jobs, family, hobbies, friendships, volunteer work, caregiving responsibilities, etc. Ask them to circle the things that require the most *energy*—which may be different from the things that take the most *time*. Encourage them to consider not only physical effort, but emotional, spiritual, and intellectual energy as well. For the visual thinkers in the group, invite them to make pie graphs to illustrate their lists. Invite them to reflect on what in their graphs surprises them or resonates with them.

Now invite them to do the same activity collectively, reflecting on the time and energy of the congregation. Take into account not only where the bulk of time and energy is spent but also the financial resources. Take time to reflect as a group on how the matrix of time, energy, and resources spent might match what Frederick Buechner describes as the intersection of the congregation’s deep gladness and the world’s hunger.

Intelligence

Our commitment to intelligence, expanding understanding, and intellectual rigor, is imbedded in the life of Presbyterians. That said, we cannot tackle our commitment to serving with intelligence without naming the ways in which narrow definitions of intelligence have also been a source of exclusion and even oppression in our congregations and in the wider denomination. If we are to be faithful to the gospel and to the expansive theology of our polity, then we must examine what we mean when we declare a commitment to serve with intelligence. This commitment also requires us to be intentional in our nominating processes, considering the diversity of wisdom and intelligence present and able to serve in our congregations.

Just as there are many styles of learning or leadership, there are also many ways in which intelligence manifests itself in our human experiences. Some of our leaders will demonstrate an academic intelligence, honed either by practice or profession, and they will bring gifts of intellect and historical and institutional knowledge to the work of leadership and governing. Others will demonstrate strategic and critical thinking

intelligence that will provide our work with good questions and processes. Still others will demonstrate a creative or generative intelligence that will ground us with deep questions and engage us in outside-the-box problem solving. And still others will bring embodied intelligence, experience from the frontlines of service, activism, mission, and caregiving that will inform our work in real time and keep us honest as we attempt to meet the needs of our community. And, of course, many of our leaders will embody more than one of these along with wisdom and other intelligences.

How do we empower our leaders to bring their whole selves, including their wisdom and intelligence, to bear in their service to the church? How do we create spaces that become teaching and learning communities for our leaders so that they can not only grow but appreciate the intelligence and wisdom that their colleagues are bringing to the table as well?

The artist, Molly Costello, has created a beautiful and empowering image of this kind of intelligence in action. Four hands are reaching through a flower garden toward the center of the image, and stars seem to be pouring down from the heavens into the outstretched hands. These words appear on the hands: "We have been given all the tools." When we empower our leaders to name and claim their gifts of intelligence and wisdom, we will discover that collectively, as the body of Christ, we have indeed been given all the tools we need.

In what ways have you deepened your understanding? What are you still learning? When you consider the ecosystem of your congregation, what information, learning, or training would enable you to deepen your understanding of the community you are called to serve, or expand your impact as followers of Jesus?

Tell a story about a time you experienced growth in your own understanding. Who was your teacher/mentor? How did this growth change or shape you? Is it connected to your call to service in the church?

Engage together in the "Head, Heart, Gut and Feet Prayer" (see Appendix).

Additional Activity

Use Luther Snow's "Quick and Simple Asset Mapping Experience" from his book, *The Power of Asset Mapping: How Your Congregation Can Act on Its Gifts* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers; 2004).

Imagination

The role of the imagination in the life of leadership, particularly in faith communities, is embodied most vividly in the biblical story in the life of the prophets. When the prophets speak and act, they draw on all the people's senses, triggering their memories, awakening their hearts and minds, and inspiring them to turn and return to God again and again.

This role, the prophetic, vision-casting role, can be one of the most intimidating parts of a leaders' work. Therefore, in many congregations, the role of prophetic word and vision-casting is left up to the pastor. As many in pastoral leadership have learned the hard way, however, casting, holding, and enacting such a vision alone is neither sustainable

or faithful. We must commit to the work of sparking and stretching the imaginations of our people collectively if there's any hope of our ministry taking root or making real impact.

Imagination is essential to Christian leadership. Without imagination it is almost impossible to remember and return to the cosmic Creator, the living and breathing God of creation. Imagination is essential because the gospel offers an alternative narrative to the reality many in our congregations live every day. In the face of greed, the gospel calls us to generosity. In the face of our human penchant for violence, the gospel calls us to be peacemakers. In the face of the inequality and abuse of power rife in our systems, the gospel calls us to demand justice. In the face of environmental destruction, the gospel reminds us that we are co-creators with a loving God. In the face of death, the gospel promises new life and a new reality. This is the good news of Jesus Christ, and church officers must learn how to embrace and proclaim it alongside our pastoral leadership.

**How can leaders embrace creativity and imagination as real tools for faithful leadership?
How do we empower leaders to claim their role in sparking the imagination of the congregation?**

In Genesis, God is an artist, singing creation into reality. God's breath moves like a brushstroke across the deep and all the beauty and complexity of life emerges. Then God takes a deep breath and creates human beings in God's own image. We are created in the image of a creative, sustaining, and imaginative God. And God has been inviting us into the work of co-creators ever since.

What would happen if, instead of asking ruling elders and deacons to fill predetermined roles, people were asked, "What shall we create together this year?" There are, of course, certain items of business, fiduciary responsibilities, and important and consistent tasks that need completed for our organizations to run responsibly. But all too often, in an effort to make them manageable, we reduce the work of leaders to tiny technical tasks that make it impossible to see how they are contributing to something transformational.

Take worship, for example. Many of our congregations have worship teams. How often do those meetings get consumed by the technical questions of how often and who will prepare communion? How many readers/liturgists need to be recruited for worship? Has anyone seen the Advent paraments? Worship committees, teams, or collaborators need to be invited into generative questions: "What is happening in our community and in the world?" "Do our people need to hear a word of comfort? Challenge? Hope?" "What do we want our folks to see, hear, feel, smell, and experience in worship this season?" "What can we create together to move, inspire, or stretch our congregation in worship?"

What sparks your imagination? Is it a good story? Vibrant words? Art? Music? When you consider the ecosystem of your congregation, is there a biblical story that stretches your imagination or that might inspire the work God is calling you to do together?

Tell a story about a time your own imagination was sparked. Did it help you take a leap of faith or make a decision about the future?

Engage as a group in "Weaving Our Communal Prayers Together" (see Appendix).

Additional Activity

Invite leaders into a process of making something together. If you are a smaller group, invite a session member with a big kitchen to host a meeting and cook and eat together. This will be uncomfortable for some and a source of deep joy for others. Do it more than once! As we exercise our collaboration and creative muscles together, we will begin to see a deep cultural shift as our leaders begin to access their own imaginations.

Note: In some of our communities and cultures, it's increasingly rare that we make things with our own hands. In other communities where we do continue to make things, this work is often tied to our employment, productivity, and self-worth. These prayers and activities are not about perfection or production, they are intended to engage a process that will unlock our creativity and joy.

Love

"Love one another." This is our mandate from Jesus, drawn from the laws of Moses and passed down generation to generation. While this seems simple enough, why do our relationships in the church often get so messy, complicated, even harmful? How do we instill a culture of loving well in communities made up of diverse, complex, and hurting people?

Sometimes I reflect on the messy struggle that it is to love one another in the church and I think to myself, "Wow ... the church is so beautiful, we have such expansive aspirational theology in our polity, we are rife with gorgeous imagery and complex stories that are imprinted on our hearts through our hymnody, liturgy, and confessions. We make bold claims about working for humility, justice, and peace. There is so much potential for goodness in the life of a local church. *Why do all these broken and messy humans have to show up and ruin everything?*"

The truth is loving relationship take time, practice, and intention. As most of us know from our personal lives and relationship, the ones that thrive are the ones in which we can be ourselves and tell the truth, and where we can both give and receive care and compassion. Loving relationship are equal parts tender and honest. They are grounded in the desire to give as well as receive and often times they grow steadily over time.

Church life exists at a strange intersection. The church is a community, but it's also an organization. The church is relational, but it's also institutional. Some of our churches reflect a familial structure, either due to size or to the longevity of the membership. Others are structured more programmatically; they might be bigger, or they are designed around the activities and mission life of the congregation. Some of our churches have a corporate vibe. This is often due to size and the need for efficiency, but it is also a reflection of the values and expertise found in our communities.

Our approach to laying the groundwork of loving relationships will vary depending on our context and the culture of our congregation, but the first step is identifying love as a desired outcome. It seems silly, but in the midst of keeping our congregations alive we can become so consumed with maintenance of the system that we forget the "why" of what we're doing.

Regardless of the congregation's design or structure, is love at the heart of the church's identity?

The first step in developing loving relationships is the good *and* scary work of becoming known. As members are brought into leadership positions, the pressure is to plug them in and get things rolling. We might take time to orient folks to the official roles and responsibilities of their leadership positions, we might even explain a bit about how our polity works and teach them about Robert's Rules so our meeting can run decently and in order. But do we take time to know one another?

Authentic and loving relationships will only emerge if we are as intentional about forming them as we are in setting the business agenda or crafting the budget. This could be as simple as beginning meetings with opportunity for life updates and check ins. These communal conversations can be facilitated by story prompts or prayer requests. If it's a brand-new concept, start small, invite folks to share about their week with a neighbor: one highlight, one low point, and then pray for each other. If you're leadership has already established such practices, go deeper—invite conversations around topics such as seasons of change, fears and anxiety, work/life balance, and stories of hunger and joy.

The path to loving relationships in congregational life often begins with identifying what we need. This is hard and vulnerable work. Unfortunately, some of us, and some of our leaders, grew up in churches and families where we were never asked what we needed. We grew up in places where imperfections, weaknesses, mental health issues, addiction issues, family conflict, and trauma were often kept secret rather than shared. It takes time to create a culture in our communities where it's safe and healthy to share our whole selves. It takes time to create systems of care and support where hard issues can be met with non-judgment, compassion, and resources. But we can begin by asking the question: What do you need?

What are the marks of your most loving relationships? What is the greatest challenge you encounter as you work to deepen your relationships? When you consider the ecosystem of your congregation, what are the marks of how you relate to one another? In what ways do you care for one another? Are there barriers that keep you from asking for what you need or sharing your whole selves?

Tell a story about a time you gave or received love in community. Where were you? How did you open yourself up to receiving love and care? Was it easy or difficult?

Engage together in "Remembering Our Baptism" (see Appendix).

Additional Activity: One-on-One Gatherings

If leaders have committed to a three-year term, invite them to plan to meet with at least four other leaders each of those three years. It could be a coffee, a meal, or even a walk. Invite them to start with folks they know the least before setting time with folks they know the best. As for structure, if it is needed, give three guiding questions:

What brings you joy?

Why do you love about our church?

What keeps you up at night?

Open and close with prayer.

About the Writer:

The Reverend Shawna Bowman is an artist and pastor doing ministry with the creative and justice-seeking folks at Friendship Presbyterian Church in Chicago and co-founder of Creation Lab, an art collective and working studio space at the intersection of creativity, spirituality, and prophetic imagination. Shawna is also an affiliate faculty member at McCormick Theological Seminary and National Organizer for Crossroads Antiracism Training and Organizing. You can find Shawna and Creation Lab on IG, Twitter, and Facebook.

Appendix

Prayers and Spiritual Practice Resources

1. Letting Go of The Week: A Sabbath as Resistance Meditation (to be used at the beginning of worship, a gathering, or meeting)

We pause for a few moments ...

To let go of the week that has passed ...

Breathing in ... Breathing out ... (repeat)

Like every other week, it has been a week of doing ...

We each had a to-do list of what we wanted to do ...

We each had great hopes for the week ...

We gave care to one another, we answered to others, we hoped it was enough

...

Although much remains undone, for this Sabbath moment we *resist* ...

Breathing in ... Breathing out ... (repeat)

Like every other week, it's been a week of struggle ...

At times it felt as if things were falling apart ...

At times it seemed we went from one thing to the next without pause or rest.

Although much is still unsettled—broken even, for this Sabbath moment we resist

...

Breathing in... Breathing out ... (repeat)

For this sabbath moment feel your frustration, your worry, your anxiety drift to the back of your mind ...

Let your struggles float away for a moment ...

Breathing in ... take in the fresh air of Sabbath ...

Breathing out ... let go of your need to fix it ...

Breathing in ... take in the fresh air of Sabbath ...

Breathing out ... let go of your worry and fear ...

Breathing in ... take in the fresh air of Sabbath ...

Breathing out ... let go of the voices that hold you back ...

Breathing in ... Breathing out ... resist (repeat)

We let go of the week and we welcome this Sabbath time of resistance ...

Let yourself rest and breathe for just a few moments and consider how this is a form of resistance.

2. Head, Heart, Gut, Feet Prayers

Create and distribute 8.5"x11" pages with an outline of a body, (or outlines of a variety of body shapes). Take twenty minutes for this guided reflection:

- Breathe in, Breathe out. Consider all the swirling thoughts in your head. What is swirling, what is floating to the top, what is distracting you or making you curious in this moment. In and around the head of the body outline on the paper, write down anything and everything taking up space in your brain. (5 mins)
- Breathe in, Breathe out. Consider your heart. Draw a heart in the chest of the body and consider, what are you holding in your heart? Who or what do you have feeling of tenderness, compassion, love, worry, or other feelings about right now, in this moment? Fill the area inside and around the chest of the body outline with names, places, or other things you're holding close to your heart. (5 mins)
- Breathe in, Breathe out. Consider your gut. This is the place where things hit us first. Worries, anxieties, compassion, knowledge of our own shortcomings, failures, and

hard honest truths. Fill in the area in and around the middle of the body outline with words, stories, or images of things that you intuitively know to be true in your gut. (5 mins)

- Breathe in, Breathe out. Consider your feet. This is where you take action. Where are your feet itching to go? Are you eager to run towards something or someone? Are you ready to run away from something? Consider the thoughts, feelings, and intuitions that you've already identified. Where might your feet take you as a result?

Closing Prayer: Breathe in, Breathe out. To close, take a look at the whole body. We often focus our attention to one area of our being. Was there one area that was easier to name than the others. Was there one that was harder? Remember, God doesn't just call a part of us. God calls all of us. And God doesn't only love one part of us. God loves all of us. Amen.

3. Weaving Together Our Communal Prayers

Provide each person with as many slips of 1" x 8.5" paper as there are leaders (including yourself).

Each person writes their own name on all their slips.

Redistribute each slip so each leader has a slip with each person's name.

After a time of sharing celebrations and heartbreak, invite your leaders reflect and to write prayers for each person in the room.

When ready, invite leaders to weave their slips together on a simple frame (old picture frames can be used with a warp made by stapling a ribbon or string one way across to begin the weaving).

Close with prayer.

4. Remembering Our Baptism: Will you _____?

Fill a bowl of water or the font, if it's available, and place it on the center of the gathering table. Read Acts 2: 37–47.

Discussion & Questions for the Leaders:

When we celebrate baptism, part of the presentation for baptism includes questions for the community, oftentimes we ask the community to commit to caring for and fostering the spiritual lives of those being baptized. Today consider how you are best cared for in community, and how we, as leaders, can best care for one another.

What do we do to foster care and compassion in our community? What do we need to work on?

What do I need in a community? And how do I know what others need?

Individual Reflection: What do I need to ask for from this particular community in order to be seen, heard, included, and engaged? Choose one thing and fill the blank line in the question below.

Finish this question to the community:

Will you _____?

Each person is invited to come to the font (bowl of water) and ask their question, those gathered are invited to respond.

One: Will you _____?

All: We will, with God's help!

Close with excerpts from A Brief Statement of Faith:

In life and in death we belong to God.

Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,

and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve. (BOC, 11.1, Lines 1–6)

**Coming Alive in Christ:
Training for PC(USA) Ruling Elders and Deacons
Based on the Constitutional Questions**

i. (1)—Will you be a faithful ruling elder, watching over the people, providing for their worship, nurture, and service? Will you share in government and discipline, serving in councils of the church, and in your ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?

Will you be a ruling elder?

Learning what it means to be a ruling elder is like learning to walk or to bake: one really learns by doing. Full understanding of the role of ruling elders often happens while serving. A person might have an idea of the responsibilities of a ruling elder by having been a member of a congregation, watching other people serve in this capacity, or by reading a description of the role in the *Book of Order*, but it is really along the way, living into the ordination vows and serving on the session and other councils, that a ruling elder is formed.

Since ruling elders are called to particular functions, it is important to understand fully what those functions are. A ruling elder is defined in the following way:

*As there were in Old Testament times elders for the government of the people, so the New Testament church provided **persons with particular gifts to share in discernment of God's Spirit and governance of God's people**. Accordingly, congregations should elect persons of **wisdom and maturity of faith**, having demonstrated **skills in leadership and being compassionate in spirit**. Ruling elders are so named not because they "lord it over" the congregation (Matt. 20:25), but because they are chosen by the congregation to **discern and measure** its fidelity to the Word of God, and to **strengthen and nurture its faith and life**. Ruling elders, **together with ministers of the Word and Sacrament**, exercise leadership, government, spiritual discernment, and discipline and have responsibilities for the life of a congregation as well as the whole church, including ecumenical relationships. When elected by the congregation, they shall **serve faithfully as members of the session**. When elected as commissioners to higher councils, **ruling elders participate and vote with the same authority as ministers of the Word and Sacrament**, and they are eligible for any office. (BOO, G-2.0301)*

It is important to remember three points: **(1)** a ruling elder has been elected because the person has demonstrated wisdom, maturity of faith, leadership, and compassion in spirit. These are the core of the invitation to serve and are present in all kinds of people, regardless of origin, age, race, profession, disabilities, geography, gender, orientation, education, or background. What a powerful message of God's call to all! Whomever God calls, God empowers. **(2)** The call is to serve in a shared ministry. Ruling elders are not meant to live into this calling alone, nor are ministers of Word and Sacrament. Discernment, leadership of the congregation, discipline, and other responsibilities are meant to be done prayerfully, intentionally, and collectively. And **(3)** ruling elders and ministers of Word and Sacrament vote and participate equally in the governance of the councils. This is one of the beauties of our Presbyterian structure: parity (or equality) in governance.

The first eight constitutional questions in W-4.0404 are the same for all those who are ordained, installed, and commissioned. Though these are personal vows, they are expressed and lived in the collective. We all respond affirmatively to these vows, and, in doing so, we all share in the responsibility to fulfill them for the benefit of the world, beginning with our own faith community, and to the glory of God.

In order to serve the people of God, session members need to be able to work and serve effectively together, knowing and trusting each other, and learning to appreciate the particular calling each one has, with their own gifts and skills, to serve in this council.

What are some ways the session can encourage community and trust-building among its members?

How can the session foster healthy relationships and safe, productive working environments?

Faithfulness and Care: Nurturing a Congregation

While all of those who are ordained respond affirmatively to the first eight ordination questions, each ordered ministry has its own question, and question “i” is particular to ruling elders.

The question begins with a vow to be faithful. Faithfulness, a quality that implies loyalty and steadfastness, is connected with worship, nurture, and service. It is important to understand, as per the definition in the *Book of Order*, that to “watch over” is not to “lord over.” The definition refers to the scriptural passage in Matthew 20:25–26: “But Jesus called them to him and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant. ...’” The ministry of the ruling elder is one of service and care. This ministry must go beyond balancing budgets and creating church programs. While serving the people, each person will bring their own gifts, whether they be financial, programmatic, musical, organizational, or otherwise. Ruling elders are invited to serve in these ways because of their demonstrated wisdom, maturity of faith, leadership, and compassion in spirit.

The beginning of the question also refers to areas that can be described as pastoral. It is interesting to note that in a shared governance model like ours, these are also part of the responsibilities of a ruling elder. The question highlights the multifaceted nature of this ordered ministry. Those elected to be ruling elders and the pastor(s) of the congregation are to serve alongside each other to become a pastoral care team. As stated in “The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity” in the *Book of Order*, “This church shall be governed by presbyters, that is, ruling elders and teaching elders (also called Ministers of Word and Sacrament)” (BOO, F-3.0202). All members are called to care for one another, but ruling elders, deacons, and ministers of Word and Sacrament “have particular responsibility for the exercise of pastoral care within the community of faith” (BOO, W-5.0204).

As a part of those pastoral responsibilities, “providing for their worship” is highlighted. In concrete, more practical terms, the “Directory for Worship” in the *Book of Order* delineates the areas pertaining to worship where the session has purview. Section W-2.0303 states, “Ruling elders are called to nurture the common life of the people of God through their gifts of discernment and governance.” With the exception of those

responsibilities that pertain to the minister of Word and Sacrament (see W-2.0304 and W-2.0305), the session has a responsibility for worship services and other gatherings (W-5.0206 and W-5.0302), guiding new members in their journey of faith (W-4.0204), authorization of the sacraments (W-3.0403 and W-3.0410), caring and “providing ongoing opportunities for Christian formation and instruction” to the baptized (W-4.0201), authorizing or denying the use of the church property (W-4.0602), and the development and supervision of church’s educational programs for officers and all members (W-5.0203), among others.

A careful reading of the “Directory for Worship” within the *Book of Order* is highly recommended for a greater understanding of these responsibilities. The task may seem daunting if one forgets that most of our sessions already have practices and policies in place. This fact does not excuse those in ordered ministry from knowing their responsibilities, however. Upon reflection and discernment, practices could be revised and/or changed. This is also a responsibility of the session.

A lesser known responsibility is found within W-2.0303: to “cultivate [the] ability to teach the Word when called upon to do so.” Sadly, this point is not emphasized as much as the other “more obvious” ruling elder responsibilities. To ignore this part of the ministry of the elder is to do a disservice to the church. Given guidance and space, ruling elders may have the opportunity to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, to share the Word, and to witness to God’s love and grace stemming from their own point of view as a ruling elder. There is a special blessing in sharing the Word and witnessing to God’s action in one’s life. The church is encouraged and even challenged by life testimony, longer versions of professions of faith, heard from the lips of their own elected leaders.

Government, Discipline, and Service: A Shared but Personal Ministry

The last part of the ordination question for ruling elders focuses on the shared responsibilities of governance, discipline, and participation in the wider church. Carlos E. Wilton states in his book, *Principles of Presbyterian Polity*, “While the *Book of Order* describes certain personal characteristics ruling elders ought to display as spiritual leaders and exemplars, it also lays out all their ruling responsibilities in collective terms, as belonging to the session ... Collectively—along with the teaching elders who also serve with them in the session—they ‘exercise leadership, government, spiritual discernment, and discipline and have the responsibilities for the life of a congregation as well as the whole church, including ecumenical relationships.’”⁶⁷

It is vital to remember that this shared ministry is also deeply personal. The ordination questions are asked in the second person singular (“Will you ...”) meant to be answered in the first person singular (“I do ... I will ... I will, with God’s help”). God’s help and guidance is truly needed. Prayer, personal reflection, and cultivating spiritual disciplines are of the utmost importance, for the work is heavy at times. There will be difficult questions to ask and decisions to make that are equally difficult. Ruling elders may have to become very familiar with the “Rules of Discipline” section of the *Book of Order* or will have to review section G-4.0302 in “The Form of Government,” which includes mandatory reporting in situations of abuse or neglect. Such is the nature of the ministry of discernment and governance.

⁶⁷ Wilton, C.E. (2016). *Principles of Presbyterian Polity*, 68.

For all presbyters, the session is just one of the councils where they may feel called to serve. Being a ruling elder makes it possible to participate and serve in other councils as well. Though ministers of Word and Sacrament are members of the presbytery, sessions elect commissioners to represent their congregation in presbytery meetings and elders may be elected to serve in presbytery committees or commissions. Since there is parity in the votes of ruling elders and ministers of Word and Sacrament in councils, both participate equally and can be elected as officers. The *Book of Order* says it this way, "When elected as commissioners to higher councils, ruling elders participate and vote with the same authority as ministers of the Word and Sacrament, and they are eligible for any office" (BOO, G-2.0301).

Service and calling as a ruling elder does not end when the term on session concludes. As long as a ruling elder is an active member of a PC(USA) congregation, they will "continue to bear the responsibilities of the ministry to which they have been ordained ..." (BOO, G-2.0404). Unless there are particular circumstances that require a person to be released from ministry or renounce the jurisdiction of the PC(USA), ordination is a lifelong vocation. The possibilities of service within the church structure are many. Presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly greatly benefit from the experience, skills, and commitment ruling elders bring to service to the larger, connected church. The Holy Spirit might be calling a ruling elder to serve on the committee that oversees ministry, in an administrative commission to help out a church going through financial difficulty, on the synod permanent judicial commission, on one of many standing committees of the General Assembly, to be a commissioner to the General Assembly, or even to stand as a candidate for Moderator/Co-Moderator of the General Assembly. The Holy Spirit is at work right now. "I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jer. 29:11). The harvest is indeed plentiful.

Faithful leaders lead by example. They are called to model for the people of God a holistic approach to living the faith in which body, mind, and spirit are nurtured and replenished. Living a life of prayer and personal spiritual discipline is therefore of great importance in the ministry of discernment and governance.

How do you model self-care and spiritual care for yourself and others?

About the writer:

Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri is a ruling elder in the PC(USA) and an educator. She has served at many levels of the denomination, including session, presbytery, synod, and as Co-Moderator of the 223rd General Assembly (2018). Vilmarie has dedicated most of her adult life to education and training, primarily teaching English to high schoolers and adults from all over the world. She currently serves as a conference administrator in a CREDO team, a program of the Board of Pensions. Vilmarie lives in Florida with her husband, the Reverend José Manuel Capella-Pratts, and loves arts & crafts, decorating, and Christmas.

For Further Study

Scripture passages

- a) Acts 15:1–29; 16:4
- b) Ephesians 4:1–13
- c) Colossians 3:1–17
- d) 1 John 4:18–21
- e) 2 Timothy 3:14–4:5

The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

- a) “A Brief Statement of Faith,” *Book of Confessions*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Section 11.4.
- b) “The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity,” particularly Section F-3.0202.
- c) “The Form of Government,” particularly sections G-2.0301 (“Ruling Elder Defined”) and G-3.0201 (“Composition and Responsibilities”).
- d) “Directory for Worship,” particularly Sections W-2.0303 (“Ruling Elders”) and W-4.0301 (“Acts of Christian Service”).

Additional Content

A Story about Call and Discernment from the Writer

At 20 years old, I was ordained to serve on the session of the *Iglesia Presbiteriana en Caparra Terrace* in San Juan, Puerto Rico. In decades past, there had been other elders that were young, even younger than I was at that time, yet I was the youngest person to be ordained in a while in our congregation.

It almost didn't happen. No one, other than my fiancée, knew about this part of the story: I struggled with saying “yes” to the invitation of the nominating committee. I struggled not necessarily because of my young age, but because of the weight of ordination.

My grandfather (*abuelo*), Edgar Olivieri, had been a ruling elder since before I was born. His example of leadership, commitment, and mentorship embodied the word “ruling elder” in my mind. My *abuelo* was a person of great conviction and unwavering faith, trusting that the God who called him would see him through even in the most difficult of times.

Would I be able to fulfill the responsibilities as my *abuelo* did? Would I have the time to serve given my school and volunteer commitments? I was born to this congregation. I'd been a member of the church for some years now, active in the youth group and camp. I sang in the choir, participated in the drama group, and had led worship and prayer circles. Was that enough? Was I knowledgeable enough? Did I have what it took to be a more involved church leader? Was I ready to face another side of the church that I was not really familiar with: the governance? The nominating committee seemed to think so. I wrestled with these and other questions while discerning how to respond to the invitation to serve.

As Reformed Christians, we believe in the priesthood of all believers. We are all called in baptism to ministry in Christ's name. Ephesians 4:4–7 reminds us that “there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. ..." In the midst of living into that call, some persons feel called "to fulfill particular functions, so that the ministry of the whole people of God may flourish" (BOO, W-4.0401). I understood my life as part of a big, universal faith family, as a Christian who happened to be Presbyterian, in the context of this church community in San Juan.

After a conscious discernment process, what ultimately moved me to respond affirmatively was that I felt called by God to serve as a ruling elder in my congregation. At 20 years old, though, I couldn't put this into words. The very process of discerning the call to serve on the session would be the first step of a lifetime commitment precisely to discernment and governance. Along the road I discovered that being ordained to this ministry would encompass more than serving the local faith community. Responding to the call is just the first step to a lifetime of ministry.

I served on session for one term. During that time, I finished college, got married, moved from my hometown in San Juan, and became a teacher. My husband, José Manuel, was ordained at that time, too. We moved to the city of Caguas, Puerto Rico, as José Manuel was called to be the re-development pastor of a fourteen-member church that had gone through a schism. I was member number fifteen. Alongside a presbytery administrative commission, José Manuel began his ministry as a parish pastor.

My ministry as a ruling elder flourished there as well, in a faith community that needed nurture and care after going through so much. I hadn't served on a session since I served in my home church in San Juan, yet the call to serve the people of God, in manifold ways, had remained strong throughout the years.

At various points in my life I have served as a Sunday school teacher, a choir member, a presbytery committee member and chair, as synod vice-moderator, as a commissioner to presbytery and General Assembly, in a permanent committee of the General Assembly, as a presbytery moderator, and as Co-Moderator of the 223rd General Assembly (2018). In this ordered ministry, the greatest joy is to serve and to make disciples.

Like my *abuelo* before me, I get to mentor new leaders and walk alongside them as they discern the ways in which God is calling them. It warms my heart to see church leaders I knew as children, youth, new church members, and as first-time churchgoers now serving the people of God as ruling elders, youth group and camp leaders, musicians, ministers of Word and Sacrament, Sunday school teachers, deacons, stated clerks, committee members, community leaders, and so much more.

The ministry continues as the Holy Spirit calls "women and men to all ministries of the Church" ("A Brief Statement of Faith," *Book of Confessions*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 11.4, Line 64). When God calls, God empowers. The plan belongs to God. Responding to it is just the first step to a lifetime of ministry and service to God and neighbor. *Así nos ayude Dios*. So help us, God.

**Coming Alive in Christ:
Training for PC(USA) Ruling Elders and Deacons
Based on the Ordination Questions**

i. (2)—Will you be a faithful deacon, teaching charity, urging concern, and directing the people's help to the friendless and those in need, and in your ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?

Will you be a deacon?

Who or what is a deacon? Presbyterians did not invent this pattern of ministry, nor is it unique to our way of being the church. A genuine claim can be made that its roots lie in the earliest witness of the apostolic church.

In the foundational episode of **Acts 6:1–7**, seven disciples are appointed to distribute food to those in need. Although the title of “deacon” is not explicitly mentioned in English translations of this passage, the Greek words *diakonia* (service) and *diakoneo* (to serve) illuminate the activity of deacons in the early church and inform our understanding of their role today. Time spent exploring the dynamics of this interesting passage will afford space for discovery about the place of service, cooperation, and justice in ministry.

We can also discern more about what it means to be a deacon by examining this passage alongside the principles of ministry and polity enshrined in our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Constitution. Specific *Book of Order* references, and their enclosing chapters as a whole, provide ample space for discussion about ministry in general and the function of deacons in particular:

- The genuine concerns about the welfare of widows in Acts 6:1 informs G-2.0201, in which the role of the deacon is defined first as a ministry of “compassion, witness, and service,” and in W-5.0303, where it is described as a mission of compassion.
- Despite the frictions in Verse 1 and some resentment in Verse 2, the church ultimately demonstrates an openness to change and adaptation, which prompts F-1.0404: the calling of the church to see “both the possibilities and the perils” of its forms of ministry.
- The discernment of prospects in Verse 3 and their subsequent election in Verse 5 gives shape to G-2.0401, on the nomination and election of deacons, and to F-3.0106, regarding election by the people.
- The description of qualifications in Verse 3 informs our polity as expressed in G-2.0201, concerning the qualifications for deacons.
- The emphasis on corresponding functions in ministry in Verses 3–4 undergirds G-2.01, which outlines the particular functions of ordered ministry in supporting, never undercutting, the ministry of the whole people of God.
- The way the early Christian community commissions their new servant leaders in Verse 6 gives shape to our teaching in G-2.0403 and W-4.04 on the practice of ordination and installation.
- The spreading of God's word and the growth of the church in Verse 7 is echoed in W-5.0301 as it relates to the church's mission in the world.

The term “**deacon**” is worth exploring as well. From the Greek διάκονος (*diakonos*), the word appears twenty-nine times in the New Testament and essentially means “one who renders service to another”—servant, attendant, helper, etc. The term had a place in the vocabulary of the Greek-speaking culture prior to its early Christian adoption. Even Scripture sometimes indicates a more general usage: tables needed waiters (John 2:5) and monarchs demanded servants (Matt. 22:13). In these and countless other non-biblical examples, *diakonos* was the preferred noun.

That the early church adapted cultural patterns of service for Christian ministry is instructive: Presbyterian deacons need not try to reinvent the wheel in every act of ministry, but may well choose to make use of patterns, practices, and programs already present in the church or community. The deacons in one congregation in western Pennsylvania, for instance, chose to utilize the *Big Brothers/Big Sisters* organization as a way to invite the congregation into relationships beyond the church walls.

The forms of Christian ministry are always flexible; its heart is always Christ-shaped. When participating in or adopting outside forms, including secular ones, deacons should always ask:

- How might we undertake this effort in the manner of Jesus?
- How might this work become Christian *diakonia*?
- How might the adaptation of this pattern or program bless those in need and also bear witness to the good news about God in Jesus Christ?

“**Servant leadership**” has become a popular phrase in our time, but the ancient office of deacon has been shaped by a paradigm of servanthood for centuries. For deacons, service is not a secondary action to decision-making leadership in meetings, but in fact the primary calling of the office. Service to others is central. That said, there can be a temptation in Presbyterian circles to view the role of deacon as either a lower proving ground for “higher office” as a ruling elder, or as a repository for menial or repetitive congregational tasks no one else wants to do.

On the one hand, setting up tables, making coffee, and counting the offering may well be taking up so much time for the deacons that ministries of compassion and witness to those in distress and need may be curtailed. Indeed, some may even prefer straightforward practical tasks to the sometimes-risky posture of loving real persons. On the other hand, basic communal tasks can be their own witness to the gospel when undertaken with love and generosity—as modeled by Jesus himself in the washing of his disciples’ feet (a menial act of hospitality common to the culture, transformed by him into a sign of God’s grace).

Servant tasks are either blessing or curse, depending on the culture and needs of a congregation and the attitude of those who undertake them. Those preparing for this office, together with those already serving, should be encouraged to examine regularly the role of deacon in the congregation to ensure its alignment with the primary calling expressed in G-2.0201. This principle should be taught: Practical tasks for the congregation should never overshadow living connections with persons in need within and beyond the flock; yet often compassion to those in need is first and best expressed through practical help and support. Deacons can and must practice wisdom to determine which side of that holy balance is needed when on a relationship-by-relationship basis.

In discerning a call to the ministry of deacon, what aspects did you consider?

How does a look into Acts 6:1–7 and some history behind the biblical concept of deacon assist you in moving forward with this call?

Will you be a faithful deacon?

The call to be a “faithful” deacon may prompt discussion about the shape of such faithfulness. One of the more important aspects of ordained ministry is the commitment to continue in everyday discipleship, to be what C. S. Lewis once called a “mere Christian.” There is a sense in which the most important work ordained officers can do is, first and foremost, to practice the word and way of Jesus with their peers. Ordained deacons should be encouraged to examine regularly the shape of their church membership as expressed in G-1.0304 of the *Book of Order*.

The invitation to faithfulness also serves as a reminder that ministries of “compassion, witness, and service” may well meet with complexities, resistance, and fatigue. Honest discussion of these realities can be coupled with an appreciation for why Presbyterians *ordain* officers (BOO, G-2.04). The tradition of vow-taking is, at least in part, a recognition that ministry will not always be easy. Therefore, a commitment to promises and practices larger than ourselves will serve to keep ministries of compassion active and aligned in the congregation.

Will you teach charity?

That this ordination vow invokes the word “charity” might be off-putting to some. In popular usage, “charity” sometimes conveys notions of pity, condescension, or negative stereotypes about the kinds of persons who are in need. Indeed, Christian ministry to real persons can degrade into transactional benevolence when too much emphasis is placed on financial contributions or collected necessities. These “charitable” acts sometimes have the ironic effect of insulating a congregation from real persons and their particular stories of struggle and need. Furthermore, treating others as recipients of benevolence may well prevent deacons from seeing persons in need as peers who also possess skills, gifts, and assets that might well bring improvement to their own situation. Many good resources exist today on the matter of “toxic charity,” and exposure to these principles will be important.

But when “charity” is taken in its more ancient sense—as in “kindness and tolerance in judging others” and “love of humankind”—the term can be significantly rehabilitated for deacon-led ministry. In a congregational context, charity is essentially a synonym for “love of persons.” In this spirit, the training of deacons should focus on the development and maturation of people-skills, i.e. wisdom about loving well those church members, friends, neighbors, and strangers who are in need or distress, all in the manner of Jesus Christ. The practice of this wisdom should take precedence over too much emphasis on policies or procedures for ministry. The latter have their place in congregations, when necessary, but deacons have the opportunity to nurture wisdom about charity and therefore grow in the kind of collective discernment that no policy or procedure can replicate or enshrine. One must learn charity by giving it and receiving it.

As such, a key element in teaching charity is the practice of ministry two-by-two. New Testament passages such as Luke 10:1–11 provide space for reflection on the value of

ministry as deacons in pairs. Advantages of this partnering model include: the emotional safety of having a peer alongside when venturing into unknown experiences; two pairs of eyes and ears for listening well and observing dynamics; the demonstration of Christian fellowship by the immediate formation of a small community for conversation, prayer, and reflection; and the deployment of a plurality of spiritual gifts, recognizing that some are more comfortable with conversation than tasks, and vice versa. Pastors are encouraged to model this two-by-two pattern for deacons by including them often in pastoral visitation.

Additionally, teaching charity in pairs can be extended beyond deacons to include members of the congregation. In one Presbyterian church where this is modeled, a deacon will often invite a pair of youth members to join her when making visits to local nursing homes. The deacon welcomes the help of partners in visitation, those visited welcome the different generations in their midst, and the youth experience an accessible form of Christian mission with the leadership of a wise deacon. In this and numerous other configurations, a two-by-two model allows for learning wise and compassionate charity through a basic action-and-reflection model.

A final aspect of teaching charity is the invitation to new deacons not to overuse meetings. Meetings are well known in Presbyterian circles and will always have a certain place in the organization and planning of deacon ministry. But new deacons can be warned to not mistake the deacon meeting for the deacon ministry. Unlike a Presbyterian session, whose primary (but certainly not exclusive) sacred task is to gather together for group discernment, the primary work of deacons is not in meetings but “within and beyond the congregation” to persons in need or distress. As such, deacons should only meet as a group as often as is necessary to organize and structure those vital ministries, lest a board of deacons inadvertently use meetings to insulate themselves from the harder but sacred work of engaging the world around them in faith, hope, and love. As with all matters, discernment is needed to keep deacon meetings and deacon ministry in proper perspective and proportion. Again, G-2.0201 should be lifted up as a rule for discernment.

How can the framework of charity being a “love of persons” transform your ministry and the way that you minister to those in need?

Will you urge concern?

In a meeting about recent ministry efforts, a Presbyterian deacon once sheepishly asked the group if it was okay that she brought a meal to a widower on her street, despite the fact that he was not a member of the congregation. This common example—crossing boundaries, encouraging and not disparaging unofficial ministry—draws attention to the deacon’s important role in “urging concern” among the congregation.

The *Book of Order’s* foremost function for deacons makes it clear that such a ministry is never limited to the members of the congregation. Previous editions of the “Form of Government” even included the phrase “within and beyond the congregation” in the description of the ministry of deacons. Indeed, most deacons will soon find that the practice of charitable ministry for “anyone in distress” will take them on an adventure of new directions, new relationships, and new opportunities. “Those in need” and “the friendless” are rarely confined to congregations, and so deacon training should include

exploration about the shape of ministry beyond the familiar boundaries of church membership.

Additionally, Christian ministry frequently happens without the prompting of ordained leadership. Given their calling to urge concern among the flock, deacons can celebrate ministry taking place in informal or unofficial ways, rather than making the institutional mistake of insisting that every effort of concern must be sanctioned, led, or supervised by an official body. When care is taking place without them, let the deacons rejoice! But let them be trained to then ask: Who is falling through the cracks of the congregation's or community's concern? Who is not being served in our current models of ministry or social support networks? The *Book of Order* makes this clear: "The existence of ... ordered ministries in no way diminishes the importance of the commitment of all members to the total ministry of the church" (BOO, G-2.0102).

Will you direct the people's help to the friendless and those in need?

As further evidence of the primary role deacons can play in a congregation, it should be noted that in recent revisions of the *Book of Order* the definition of the deacon moved from third to first place in the chapter on Ordered Ministry. This new placement, preceding the elder and the pastor, suggests that charitable concern and wise help should not be merely a tertiary focus or an afterthought once the needs of the church itself have been satisfied. Rather, the ministry of the deacons is in fact the leading edge of a congregation that is paying attention to persons, its neighborhood, and its community.

In one Presbyterian congregation in a declining industrial community with lots of challenges, the deacons of the church assigned one of their members to attend every meeting of the city council and the school board. The purpose of the visits was to listen deeply, to pray generously, and to report back to the deacons the hopes, needs, and hurts of the larger community. This is one excellent example of the many ways deacons can be trained to function as matchmakers for the congregation. On the one hand, deacons learn to pay attention to the actual needs of the community, articulating them carefully and wisely to the congregation, and then "matching" those needs with the treasure, time, and talents of church members. On the other hand, the flow of this work can also move in the other direction. Deacons in ministry will come to see in what ways the gifts and blessings of the larger community, including those who are in need, are being sent by God into the life of the congregation learning about the giving and receiving of true charity. As with all aspects of ministry, deacons should be coached at the start to practice patience, openness, and wisdom as these dynamics are discerned and developed.

Will you in your ministry try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?

No doubt aware of the servant pattern of Jesus in his ministry, early Christians chose the general Greek term *diakonos* to describe specifically a pattern of ministry in Jesus' name marked by acts of service, humility, and mercy. As such, deacon training and subsequent ministry will always benefit from scriptural studies of instructive episodes in Jesus' ministry. Passages such as Mark 2:1–12 and 8:1–9 provide insight for deacons wishing to examine the shape of Jesus' love and justice, and how that same charitable love and wise justice might be practiced among "the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lost,

the friendless, the oppressed, those burdened by unjust policies or structures, or anyone in distress" (BOO, G-2.0201).

Consider the ways in which the Gospel's depict Christ's ministry of compassion, witness, and service with individuals and communities.

Beyond your initial training to serve as a deacon, how might you keep these examples in the forefront of your ministries, reminding you of the "why" of service as a deacon?

About the writer

Ralph Hawkins serves as pastor of Northminster Presbyterian Church in Macon, Georgia. Prior to this call, he served as the executive presbyter and stated clerk for the Presbytery of Shenango, which consists of forty-five congregations in western Pennsylvania. He served congregations in Georgia, Virginia, and Pennsylvania before arriving in Macon. His focus in pastoral ministry is "equipping the saints for the work of ministry," including developing ruling elders and deacons for their leadership, nurturing cross-cultural mission partnerships, and mobilizing Presbyterians for local ministry in the neighborhoods around congregations. Ralph is a father to his teenage daughter, Ella, and in his spare time is an avid railroad enthusiast (hawkinsrails.net), an amateur photographer, a tent camper and canoer, and a computer geek squad for family and friends.