Constitutional Musings: Note 28

Ruling Elders Commissioned to Limited Pastoral Service

On the occasion of the amendments to the Book of Order formally recognizing the use of "commissioned ruling elder" and adding the option "commissioned pastor" as terms for referring to "ruling elders … commissioned to limited pastoral service" (G-2.1001),[1] it seems warranted to update two earlier constitutional musings on this form of service.[2] The information here draws upon those earlier constitutional musings and a report received by the 222nd General Assembly (2016) related to presbyteries' use of persons other than ministers of the Word and Sacraments to provide pastoral ministry in congregations and other settings.[3]

History

The origins of the current practice within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) of commissioning ruling elders to limited pastoral service lie in presbyteries expressed need within their strategy for mission to create a role for providing congregational leadership in geographically isolated communities with limited financial resources. Such presbyteries were soon joined by more urban presbyteries seeking to provide leadership for new immigrant fellowships and congregations. Initially an individual who served in this role was referred to as a "Commissioned Lay Preacher," and while open to any "person granted a local commission by the presbytery" (and so not requiring previous ordination as a ruling elder) it permitted that person only "to lead worship and preach the gospel" and to "administer the Lord's Supper if authorized by the presbytery and when invited by the session" (1985-86 Book of Order, G-14.0516).

After roughly a decade of this model, the mid-1990s saw a series of amendments to the Book of Order that first changed the designation for such service to "Commissioned Lay Pastor" (1996-97 BOO, G-14.0516) and subsequently added the requirement that such persons must be "an elder of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)" and expanded the possible functions to include administration of the Sacrament of Baptism, moderating the session, having voice and vote in presbytery meetings (as a ruling elder commissioner for purposes of parity), and performing marriages when invited by the session and permitted under civil law (1997-98 BOO, G-14.0800).

Beginning with the 2011 revision of the Form of Government, the Book of Order replaced the use of the term "Commissioned Lay Pastor" with a descriptive phrase, "ruling elder … commissioned to limited pastoral service," and the functions that could be included were set as "to moderate the session of the congregation to which he or she is commissioned, to administer the Sacraments, and to officiate at marriages where permitted by state law" (2011-13 BOO, G-2.1001). The fact that references to authorization "to lead worship and preach the gospel" and to have voice and vote in presbytery meetings were no longer specifically designated was not a new restriction prohibiting ruling elders serving such commissions from those functions. Rather, it is a recognition that other sections of the constitution already provided for them. All ruling elders

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[1] 222nd General Assembly (2016) business item 06-08, Recommendations 6 and 7 (https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/6328)

[2] Constitutional Musing #6, "Commissioned Lay Pastors," and #16, "CLPs – A Decade of Learnings"

[3] 222nd General Assembly (2016) business item 01-02, section II. Final Responses to Referrals, E. Office of the General Assembly, 3. 2014 Referral: Item 06-12, Recommendation 10 (https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000098)

have a responsibility to "strengthen and nurture [the congregation's] faith and life" (G-2.0301) and to "cultivate an ability to teach the Word … [and] provide for the church's worship and encourage the people's participation" (W-2.0303). Presbyteries have the authority to "enroll … ruling elders during terms of elected service to the presbytery or its congregations" for purposes of parity (G-3.0301), providing them with the privilege of voice and vote.

Amendments related to ordered ministry titles referred by the 222nd General Assembly (2016) and approved by the presbyteries provide two terms for referring to ruling elders commissioned to limited pastoral service under provisions of G-2.10. The designation "commissioned pastor" draws on former constitutional language, and "commissioned ruling elder" represents a standard usage that had emerged during the period since the Form of Government revision in 2011.[4]

Constitutional Basis for this Service

To understand the basis for persons other than ministers of the Word and Sacraments providing these pastoral functions, one should consider each portion of descriptive phrase "ruling elders … commissioned to limited pastoral service as assigned by the presbytery" (G-2.1001).

"Ruling elders": Commissioned pastors are ruling elders authorized by their presbytery to perform specified functions. This service is an extension of their responsibilities found in G-2.0301 and W-2.0303. Neither the term "commissioned pastor" nor "commissioned ruling elder" should be understood as designating an order of ministry distinct from that of ruling elder.

"Commissioned": In Baptism, God calls and gifts each Christian for ministry, and through the act of commissioning the church recognizes forms of ministry and service which may or may not require that the person be ordained to an ordered ministry of the church (W-4.0401). Examples of service that do not require a person be ordained would include certified Christian educators and other forms of certified service (G-2.11). Service as a commissioned pastor / commissioned ruling elder does require that the person be an ordained ruling elder. As such, it is a particular type of commission akin to persons in ordered ministry elected to serve as commissioners to councils above the session (presbytery, synod, or General Assembly) or named to serve on judicial or administrative commissions of a council. In granting those types of commissions, "[t]he designating council shall state specifically the scope of the commission's powers and restrictions on those powers" (G-3.0109).

"Limited pastoral service": G-2.10 sets the scope of a ruling elder's commission to pastoral service within several types of restrictions.

a. Purpose: the purpose of such commissions is to meet the requirements of the presbytery's strategy for mission (G-2.1001). This requires a presbytery to carefully analyze the ministerial needs of a particular congregation or ministry site and assess which, if any, of the functions should be authorized for an individual commissioned pastor. It was never about providing pastoral positions for individual ruling elders.
b. Functions: only three functions may be authorized under commissions specific to G-2.1001, namely, "to moderate the session of the congregation to which he or she is commissioned, to administer the Sacraments, and to officiate at marriages where permitted by state law." While in the more general sense of the term "commission" a ruling elder may be recognized or even authorized by a presbytery or other council to

[4] These amendments are found at G-3.0109b, G-3.0307, G-4.0301, W-2.0303, W-4.0404i(4), and D-3.0101b(1).

other forms of ministry or service, if the commission does not include at least one of these specific functions identified in G-2.1001 the person is not serving as a commissioned pastor or commissioned ruling elder in the sense in which the Book of Order defines those terms. Additionally, a ruling elder's commission from a presbytery to limited pastoral service does not automatically include all of these functions. Only those functions explicitly identified in the presbytery action authorizing the commission are included. Thus, if a presbytery determined its strategy for mission in a particular ministry setting only required administration of the Lord's Supper, it could commission a ruling elder *only* to administer that Sacrament and not to perform Baptisms, moderate the session, or perform marriages.

c. Time: the commission must "specify the term of service, which shall not exceed three years but shall be renewable. The presbytery shall review the commission at least annually" (G-2.1001). A ruling elder who has completed the term of the commission or is otherwise not currently active in a commission is not a commissioned pastor nor authorized to perform any of the pastoral functions specified in G-2.1001 (G-2.1002).
d. Supervision: commissioned pastors / commissioned ruling elders must "work under the supervision of the presbytery," and a "teaching elder shall be assigned as a mentor and supervisor" (G-2.1004). The perspective, experience, and theological education of the mentoring minister brings a wealth of gifts to enrich the ministry of Jesus Christ in the community served.

"As assigned by the presbytery": Such commissions are authorized by the presbytery "in consultation with the session or other responsible committee." The commissions, then, authorize a ruling elder to perform the designated pastoral functions within that ministry context. A ruling elder commissioned to administer the Sacraments and perform weddings for a particular church within a presbytery is not authorized to do so in other congregations of that presbytery or any other ministry setting or presbytery. However, commissions can be authorized for ministry settings other than congregations. "A ruling elder so designated may be commissioned to serve in validated ministry of the presbytery" (G-2.1001). Such commissions exist solely within the relationship between a single presbytery and the ruling elder. Commissioned pastors have no standing beyond their presbytery and the particular ministry to which they are commissioned. They are not permitted to use the Church Leadership Connection to seek opportunities for service outside their presbytery. Should a ruling elder who has served as a commissioned pastor relocate to another presbytery, that presbytery in consultation with the former presbytery will determine whether the individual meets the requirements and needs of the new ministry context and may be considered by that presbytery for a commission to limited pastoral service.

Oversight and Preparation

Who determines whether a commissioned pastor / commissioned ruling elder is needed? Each presbytery is required, under G-2.1001, to determine "that its strategy for mission requires" someone to perform one or more of these specific pastoral functions before it authorizes a commissioned pastor for that ministry setting. A presbytery is required to carefully analyze the ministerial needs of a particular congregation or ministry site and assess which, if any, of the functions should be authorized for an individual commissioned ruling elder. "Strategy for mission" is the determining factor.

In G-3.03, the Book of Order seems to place this responsibility for the initial evaluation of this issue squarely on the "entities within the presbytery" that are charged with facilitating "approval

of calls for pastoral services and invitations for temporary pastoral services, oversight of congregations without pastors, … and its close relationship with … member congregations" (G-3.0307). Presbyteries have adopted a variety of policies and practices for making such determinations. Some have created separate standing committees to oversee all phases of this form of service from the preliminary training of ruling elders through their commissioning and oversight of their service by mentoring teaching elders. If a presbytery anticipates using significant numbers of commissioned pastors, some such arrangement in consultation with entities of the presbytery overseeing pastoral leaders and ministries is advisable.

The use of commissioned ruling elders as reported by presbyteries increased rapidly in the first decade of this century, rising from about 200 in 2000 to almost 900 by 2009. The rate of increase slowed considerably in the second decade, with 934 reported by presbyteries for 2016. Fewer than 5% of commissioned ruling elders were serving in non-congregational ministry settings.

How are commissioned pastors trained? Once a presbytery determines its strategy for mission within a particular ministry setting requires a commissioned ruling elder, it is required to provide "such preparation and instruction as determined by the presbytery to be appropriate to the particular commission" (G-2.1002). Presbyteries differ widely in how they fulfill this requirement. Among presbyteries responding to a 2015 survey, just over half (54%) had designed a specific program for this purpose and almost half (48%) reported they used a program specifically designed by a seminary for persons not seeking ordination as teaching elders / ministers of the Word and Sacraments. The total instructional hours within these training programs as reported by the presbyteries ranged from a low of two hours to a high of 150 hours spread across as many as four years. Within that range, most presbyteries required between 25 and 50 instructional hours.

How are commissioned pastors supported and supervised in their work? While it is surely helpful for presbyteries to provide teaching elder mentors to new ministers of the Word and Sacraments, presbyteries are mandated to do so for commissioned pastors / commissioned ruling elders (G-2.1004). This mentor/supervisor must be provided throughout the whole term of the commission in order to assure that the commissioned pastor has both adequate supervision and constant support, advice, and consultation. Additional forms of support that have been provided by presbyteries include colleague and support groups, continuing education beyond preliminary training, and supervision by a committee within the presbytery.

Additional Learnings

- If a particular mission need does not include pastoral work as designated in G-2.1001, gifted individuals may be commissioned to serve without being trained and authorized as commissioned pastors / commissioned ruling elders (and without the sacramental and other authorizations; W-4.0401).
- Questions sometimes arise as to whether the compensation package for a commissioned pastor / commissioned ruling elder may include a "housing allowance." Presbyteries are referred to the extended discussion of these issues in Constitutional Musing #6, "Commissioned Lay Pastors."