

Ruling Elder and Deacon Training

Formation of Leaders

Presbyterian churches come in many shapes and forms and conduct ministry and witness in a variety of contexts. Yet one commonality is the presence of church leaders who are elected by the congregation for a period of service. Some congregations elect both Deacons and Ruling Elders, others opt for a unicameral system in which Ruling Elders attend to the duties assigned to both groups. Since the expressions of church can be so different, it makes sense that there is no one 'right way' to train ruling elders and deacons. The good news is there are resources that can be used as is or adapted to tailor solid training for these church leaders.

Why train Ruling Elders and Deacons?

The very short answer is we want to set up our leaders for success by providing the tools needed to be effective leaders within the church. The requirements for their training and exam are found in [Book of Order G-2.0402](#), pg. 28.

We provide guidance on how we Presbyterians work together to honor God and God's hope for the world. We provide the necessary background so that newly elected leaders can answer the questions asked at ordination with integrity. Training ensures that our leaders share a common language and understanding of the work before them. Ideally, training offers opportunity for personal spiritual growth as well. Finally, as each new class of leaders gather, they begin to form a learning community which lays the groundwork for teamwork in the years ahead.

What are the duties of Deacons?

Put succinctly, Deacons are charged with being the hands and feet of Christ. Their ministry is one of compassion, witness, and service, sharing the redeeming love of Christ for all. Typically, they provide an extension of pastoral care but in some congregations they also supervise the mission outreach of the church. Their service is defined in [Book of Order G-2.02](#), pg. 27.

What are the duties of Ruling Elders?

Ruling elders seek to discern God's will for the life and ministry of the congregation they serve. Ruling elders duties and responsibilities are fully described in [Book of Order G-3.02](#), pg. 50. They are specifically charged as they serve as the Session to govern the congregation as it guides witness to the sovereign activity of God. Specifically, they are to provide for the provision of worship and sacraments and nurturing the covenant community of Christ. They also are to relate to the presbytery, maintain accurate rolls, and set an annual budget.

What do the Ordination Questions suggest that Church Leaders need to know?

There are eight questions in common to be answered by both all those being ordained to or installed into Ordered Ministry.... The same questions for Deacons, Ruling Elders, and Teaching Elders (also referred to as Ministers of Word and Sacrament). A ninth question refers to accepting the call and responsibilities of particular offices. The questions are found in [Book of Order W-4.0404](#), pg. 108.

In answering these questions, elders and deacons need to have done some introspective reflection on their personal faith. Additionally, church leaders need a working knowledge of Presbyterian theology and the polity or governance rules that grows out of that theology.

What else should be included in training?

Whatever the expectations and responsibilities of the particular congregation are should be covered. In best cases the church has this information in a written format such as a Manual of Operations or Operational Guidelines. One approach to covering this material would be to cross reference these expectations with The Notes of the Reformed Church, [Book of Order F-1.0303](#) and with The Great Ends of the Church, [Book of Order F-1.0304](#), pg. 5. Are all areas covered in your manual? How are you living out these lofty words? Are the ways we honor the guidance from the Book of Order the most effective way for your church to function today?

What will the examination by the current Session include?

Options for the exam are various and are best selected with attention to the context and custom of the particular congregation. Options might range from a written exam (usually open book and notes) to a spoken testimony of how God has been at work in the individual's life. A more structured written faith statement might be requested in which candidates briefly share their beliefs about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, scripture and the calling of the church. It could even be answering a more open ended, yet structured question, such as *What will it look like for you to serve this congregation with energy, intelligence, imagination and love?*

What are some resources available for training and formation of leaders?

Theocademy (theocademy.com) is a treasure trove of excellent educational materials created by the Synod of Middle America. Videos and detailed session guides are found under Elders and Deacons which can be accessed at no charge. Thirteen videos are under 20 minutes each and cover topics including what it means to be a church leader, who and what is the church, our confessional heritage, essentials of Reformed Theology, and polity and the councils of the church. It concludes with four videos on worship in the Reformed tradition which would be particularly helpful to worship committees. This resource would be very well suited to a 'flipped classroom' approach where participants watch videos and begin reflection sheets at home and then gather as a class to discuss and work through exercises (which include case studies together. Resources can be either accessed on the web at no cost or purchased for a nominal fee.

Opening Doors to Discipleship (odtd.net) is a free resource developed in conjunction with The Association of Partners in Christian Education (APCE) and the Office of Christian Formation. While primarily focused on teaching ministry, the door labeled Reformed Theology includes a video and two PowerPoint presentations. Drilling down further there are additional resources digging into our Reformed understanding of God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Bible and the Church. This could be a helpful resource for a segment of both church leadership training and new member orientation.

Session Ref (<https://youtu.be/0w3tOiDjN-g>) is a lighthearted seven-minute take on best practices for meetings developed by the Presbytery of San Fernando. It offers especially helpful guidance to those who will be chairing committees and is short enough that it could be used in an orientation meeting for the committee or task group as that group sets behavioral norms.

Making Disciples, Making Leaders (2nd edition) by Steven Eason and E. Von Clemans is available in the [PCUSA Store](#) as a [Participant Workbook](#) and a separate [Leader's Guide](#). The authors move beyond the tasks of leadership to the issue of spiritual formation of leaders. The comprehensive lesson plans and handouts include questions for personal reflection as well as content analysis. As presented,

it offers lesson outlines for four sessions of 3 hours and 15 minutes each. This extensive training design includes assigned readings and worksheets to be completed before each class. These resources could be adapted and used in other training designs.

CURRENT **Book of Order** either [print edition](#) or [download here](#). Participants should be introduced to the general structure of the book, how to use the index and special attention to the fairly short introductory Foundations of Presbyterian Polity section and G-3 On Councils.

Book of Confessions, either print edition or download [here](#). There are helpful worksheets in several of the above mentioned training resources to guide explorations (The Theocademy video on the topic is especially fine). Also, pair this with Book of Order F-2, the Church and Its Confessions.

Why Presbyterians Are Like That (Congregational Use edition) by John Williams, long time chaplain at Austin College is a free, [downloadable](#) ten session Bible study. The author highlights ten distinctive characteristics of Presbyterian belief and then explores scripture passages related to each. The introduction to the study as a whole and each Bible study in particular could be a helpful summary of Reformed thinking in down to earth, accessible language. The Bible studies might be useful for ongoing study throughout the year.

Coming Alive in Christ is a free, [downloadable](#) resource from the Office of General Assembly which unpacks each of the Ordination Questions. [Companion leader guide](#) is available with guidance for use in a three-session retreat format, or one question mini units designed to begin session meetings.

Seeking to be Faithful Together: Guidelines for Presbyterians in Times of Disagreement

Particularly for those congregations or communities experiencing conflict, these biblically based principles for communication can be extremely helpful. [This PDF Guide](#) is from the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program.

Bread for the journey

There is a lifetime of learning and spiritual growth that should inform the work of church leaders. Small, mini studies can be included in session agendas, as can simple worship and prayer experiences. Groups could benefit from role playing hospital visits or delivering communion to home centered members. The possibilities are endless!

Practice in reading scripture and sharing life and prayer make a huge difference in whether ruling elders and deacons function more like a business board or a board of spiritual leaders. Find ready made Word-Share-Prayer resources on a variety of topics at vitalchurchesinstitute.com

Additional Resources

Additional Resources can be found at the PCUSA [Preparation and Tools for Ruling Elders and Deacons webpage](#).

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