

Regarding Ruling Elders 2014-2017

Discernment



Regarding Ruling Elders: A Monthly Series for Serving Faithfully

Ruling elders are called to ministry in partnership with teaching elders. Within this calling, ruling elders have responsibilities in several areas of the life of the church including exercise in leadership, governance, spiritual discernment, and discipline. This series seeks to lift up the specific responsibilities while also providing an opportunity to reflect upon how they are lived out.

These articles were originally published online throughout 2014-2017.

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Regarding ruling elders: equipped for ministry



Office of the General Assembly

FRANK S. JAMES

People have various reasons, not always spiritual, for agreeing to serve as ruling elders, and I cannot say definitively that I said yes for the right reason. In fact, it may not have been a considered decision. With my training and experience as an Army officer, I usually make fast decisions. I was married three months after I met my wife, if we don't

count the one-year gap in the relationship caused by a tour of duty in Vietnam.

If becoming a ruling elder was a snap decision for me, it has turned out to be one of the most important decisions of my life. My service as a ruling elder has repeatedly blessed me. For example, I have learned more about our historic

principles and government than I would otherwise have learned. And my decision-making has been informed by Presbyterian interpretation and use of Scripture. This is true of decisions I make in my professional life, in my family life, in my church work and in civic matters. For example, in deciding how to vote in political elections, I rely on Presbyterian interpretation and use of Scripture.

One of the ways I learned about what it means to be Presbyterian was to attend the thenmonthly presbytery meetings, not always as a commissioner, usually as an observer. That may have contributed to my being placed on the reunion task force that was charged with combining six Alabama presbyteries into the present three. Service on that task force led to



a turning point in my life as a ruling elder because soon after that, I was requested to serve as moderator of our presbytery. I initially told the Nominating Committee Moderator why it would be a mistake for me to serve as moderator of presbytery; my lame excuse was that I knew nothing about parliamentary procedure. That was true, but it was simply another way of saying that I was too lazy to spend an evening learning Robert's Rules.

But my requestor persisted and prevailed, and my service as moderator of Presbytery brought home an important spiritual lesson: God does not call men and women to any task without equipping them for that task. Moses was one of many who have learned this lesson. You know he also made excuses about why he was not fit for the mission God assigned to him.

The text in Exodus makes God sound very casual. "So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." Moses, a lowly shepherd, understandably responded, "Who am I that I should go to

For more about the information provided here:

Browse the Ruling Elders Web site at http://www.pcusa.org/rulingelders

Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" Even after God reassured Moses, "I will be with you...." Moses still tried to back out, saying, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken

to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." "Then the Lord said to him, 'Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak." Still Moses demurred, begging the Lord to "please send someone else."

We know that God, acting through his agent Moses, accomplished the mission of bringing the Israelites out of Egypt. Similarly, God chose Gideon to command an army of just 300 to save Israel from its numerous enemies. Jonah tried to run from God, but God used him to save all the inhabitants of a great city from destruction. And with God's help, the Presbytery survived my term as its moderator, and I no longer had an excuse for declining God's call. I have since found it mostly impossible to say no when requested to serve in church leadership positions, even those that seem to require qualifications that I do not seem to possess. I have learned that if we say yes and take a small step towards the task, God equips us to finish the task. It really is true that "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Moreover, we should be comforted and inspired when we see God using us to do God's work. That is evidence of our salvation, fruit of the spirit. It is evidence of our humility and dependence on Christ: I believe that is part of Paul's point in II Corinthians 12:9: "But [God] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."

God chose Moses. God chose Gideon. God chose Jonah. God chose me. God chose you. Let us rejoice and be glad in God's choice.

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Regarding ruling elders: spiritual leaders



Office of the General Assembly

PEGGY HINDS

Mid-Kentucky Presbytery

"Not my will, but your will be done." These words of Jesus, prayed in the garden before his arrest, are the heart of the spiritual leader. Leaders who are Spirit-led, seek God's will for themselves, their congregation, and the world in all circumstances.

Our *Book of Order* defines the ministry of ruling elders as one

of discernment and governance. "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" (G-2.0301). Moses appointed elders from the twelve tribes to hear the needs and grievances of the people. Like Moses, they were people (in this case men) known for their spiritual maturity

Ruling Elders "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."

(G-2.0301).

and wise counsel. Governing, or judging as it was called, was an act of discerning God's will, and directing the people to obey.

As the early Christian church grew, elders were selected from the people to serve the congregation. Again, these were people of good standing, spiritual maturity, and wisdom. Church leaders dedicated themselves to prayer, worship, and serving the people.

The *Book of Order* reminds us that ruling elders are not thus called because they "lord it over" the congregation. Ruling elders are chosen "to discern and measure [the congregation's] fidelity to the Word of God, and to strengthen and nurture its faith and

For more about the information provided here:

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life" (G-2.0301). Discernment is the key to the ministry of ruling elder. Discernment is the act of listening for and to the Spirit, and seeking God's will.

I offer here seven keys to being a spiritual leader. This is not a complete list, but a starting place. As you read this

list, consider how you fulfill the role of spiritual leaders. What are your particular gifts of spiritual leadership? How do your words and actions at session and committee meetings, and in congregational leadership show that you are a spiritual leader? What changes can you make to grow stronger as a spiritual leader?

Spiritual leaders are first followers. Christ is the Head of the Church, and the great shepherd of the flock. We lead best when we first follow.

- 1. Spiritual leaders are called, and understand our role as a vocation given by God. Though people handle the selection and election process, we believe that the Spirit speaks through the congregation and nominating committee. When we say "yes" to serving, we do so because we believe the call comes from God.
- 2. Spiritual leaders pray. Individual and communal prayers are the impetus for knowing God's will. Prayer connects us directly to the source of our being, and enables us to hear and feel the heart of God.
- 3. Spiritual leaders desire an intimate relationship with God, and make time to nurture that relationship. This means a daily discipline of prayer, Bible study, meditation, and other means of focusing on God and where the
- 4. Spirit is leading. It also means fully participating in the life of a worshiping community. Worship is vital to living in intimacy with God.
- 5. Spiritual leaders practice Sabbath. Sabbath allows us to rest in God's grace, and be present with and for God in a way that we cannot be with all of life's responsibilities and distractions. It centers us, renews us, and refocuses us on who we are and whose we are.
- 6. Spiritual leaders love their people. It is not enough to serve the community, Christ calls us to love them, and put them before ourselves.
- 7. Spiritual leaders practice humility. When we become more interested in serving our own will, speaking our own mind, and getting our own way, we lose the ability to hear what the Spirit is saying to us. When we put our egos aside, and sincerely seek God's will for the benefit of those we serve, we are able to lead with wisdom and integrity.

The Reverend Dr. Peggy C. Hinds serves as associate general presbyter for Mid-Kentucky Presbytery. She has written several articles and curricula, including the newly released workbook, "Ruling Elders: Transformation," part of the *Being Reformed* series from Congregational Ministries Publishing.

Regarding ruling elders: ordination



Office of the General Assembly

DEE H. WADE

In the presbytery in which I serve, several new faith groups are emerging. One is led by a teaching elder who was ordained to serve her group while it was still being formed. Another is becoming a commissioned ruling elder (CRE) in order to be his community's pastor. As a former member of the presbytery's committee on ministry, this has gotten

me thinking about the purpose and origin of ordination.

Presbyterians have understood ordination to be like a three-legged stool. First, the call comes from God; second, the individual hears that call; and third, a definable church group sees in the individual ministerial potential. In the case of deacons and ruling elders, that community is represented by church nominating committees, sessions, and the congregations who elect them. In the case of teaching elders, the call-

The church doesn't exist in order to ordain people. The church ordains people that it needs in order to carry out its mission.

discerning body begins with the session of the congregation of membership and, in most cases, eventually carries over to the preparation for ministry process and a pastor nominating committee (PNC), along with a presbytery entity, usually a commission on ministry, who examines both the individual and the PNC before confirming their decisions. "Ordination to the ordered ministry of teaching elder is an act of the whole church carried out by the presbytery, setting apart a person to ordered ministry" (*Book of Order*, G-2.0701).

To read more about what Presbyterians believe about ordination, go to the article originally published in *Presbyterians Today* magazine. [1] Within our denomination's governance, the ministries and ordination of teaching elder, deacon, and ruling elder share the same level of value. According to the *Book of Order* (G-2.0101), the "basic form of ministry is the ministry of the whole people of God, from whose midst some are called to ordered ministries, to fulfill particular functions. Members and those in ordered ministries serve together under the mandate of Christ."

Within the real world, however, ranking tends to occur. Too many people think that clout comes from being "ordained to be a minister." "Anybody can be an elder," they think (and misspeak). "I want to be recognized as a minister of Word and Sacrament, as a teaching elder. Then people will respect me." In the first place, one interested in clout has no business seeking any ordered ministry. Secondly, in a perfect world, the ministry of ruling elder should command as much respect —in some cases more—as that of a teaching elder.

The church doesn't exist in order to ordain people. The church ordains people (to the three ordered ministries) that it needs in order to carry out its mission. There are no magical powers granted through ordination. "In

For more about the information provided here:

ordination the church sets apart with prayer and the laying on of hands those who have been called through election by the church to serve as deacons, ruling elders, and teaching elders (*Book of Order*, W-4.4001a).

Browse the Ruling Elders Website at http://www.pcusa.org/rulingelders

What significance does ordination hold for you?

How did you prepare to respond to the questions asked within the service of ordination (Book of Order, W-4.4003)?

How might you describe ordination to someone outside of the PC(USA) or someone who is not familiar with the term?

For more information on the PC(USA) Ordered Ministries, see the archived issue of Regarding Ruling Elders specifically on this subject. [2]

Dee Wade is a teaching elder and serves as pastor of Anchorage Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky. He has been a member of three presbyteries: Transylvania, Sheppards and Lapsley, and Mid-Kentucky. He lives with wife, Deborah; son, Seth; cat, Bay-bee; and dog, Fingal.

- [1] http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/today/ordination/
- [2] http://www.pcusa.org/news/2014/11/17/regarding-ruling-elders-ordered-ministries/

Regarding ruling elders: sharing your faith



Office of the General Assembly

RICHARD JOHNSON

Becoming a ruling elder in the PC(USA) begins much earlier than the phone call from the nominating committee. Through a myriad of ways, God has been and is working to bring us to that place where we have no choice but to say "yes, here am I, send me."

The first three constitutional questions asked of every person being ordained and installed reflects this. "Ground Zero" is our relationship with Jesus Christ, and our ministry is shaped, not just by our understanding of God's Word in Scripture, but the profound influence of our personal journeys of faith in coming to know the Lordship and Saviorhood of Christ.

Each of us is a product of an amazing God-With-Us journey and we bring that to the table when meeting together as the session. We often underestimate all of the people and experiences that have brought us so uniquely into our expression of faith. Likewise, we overlook how God has been intimately and lovingly shaping our faith long before becoming a ruling elder. One of the

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most significant activities elders can engage in together is writing and sharing their personal statements of faith. Doing so provides the insight, understanding, and appreciation of how God has been at work moving each of us to the moment when we accepted a call to serve our Lord and congregation as a spiritual leader. God has a wonderful sense of humor and timing, bringing together for God's own purposes men and women, who at other times might not necessarily have chosen to work together, onto the session. There, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, all those phenomenal experiences are melded together, providing the capability to nurture, guide, and direct the people of God in fulfilling God's design.

Many of us don't consider ourselves storytellers, or for that matter, having a story worth telling, but nothing could be further from the truth. We carry within our hearts and souls compelling stories, and it is in the telling of these stories and describing where, when, and how we came to know Jesus that we establish the platform from which we engage in the experience of being a ruling elder. Sharing our faith stories allows us to realize that as similar sounding as they all might be, each story is unique and provides the lens for appreciating the perspective each person brings to their service. In sharing our stories, we develop an appreciation for diversity and how God

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is able to work through the likes of us.

Some ruling elders grew up in traditions other than Presbyterian or Reformed. Others didn't come to know Jesus until they were in college, got married, or were in the foxhole. Some grew up in the church, had perfect attendance at Sunday school, went through confirmation, but didn't really understand their faith or develop a deeper commitment to Jesus Christ until much later. When ruling elders gather together, it is a spiritual collage from which the Spirit creates a picture of unity.



By writing our faith statements and telling our stories, we begin to understand others better, appreciate them, and find ways to work together as brothers and sisters. Spiritual journeys do not respect boundaries. Age or gender doesn't matter anymore than where you live, grew up, or went to school. Telling our stories helps us appreciate how the Holy Spirit works to enlarge our understanding and open us up to the deeper, more meaningful expressions of the gospel.

For more about the information provided here:

Browse the Ruling Elders Web site at http://www.pcusa.org/rulingelders

The Reverend Richard Johnson has been a PC(USA) pastor for forty-two years. Fifteen years ago he developed a curriculum for training ruling elders, which has been used for the past six years in training events throughout Great Rivers Presbytery. Recently the curriculum was expanded to include the unique ministry of deacons.

Regarding ruling elders: leading with the spirit



Office of the General Assembly
PEGGY HINDS

Take a survey of ruling elders and you will probably find that many have served on nonprofit boards. This important work takes a certain skill-set and dedication to a mission. Because of this, one might think that serving as a ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is not much different. Many ruling elders view their

leadership in terms of serving on the session, managing the financial business, and running the operations of the church. Elders have a clear sense that their role is functional; they are less clear about the identity they assume as they answer the call to serve in ordained office.

The session is not a board, and elders are not board members. The call to ordered office in the PC(USA) is a call to spiritual leadership. Our *Book of Order* defines ruling elders as persons called to discernment as well as governance. It is a lifelong calling, not a term of office. These two elements of leadership—discernment and calling—differentiate being an elder from any other kind of service.

Some ruling elders embrace spiritual leadership, while others shy away from it. They see it as the pastor's role. The pastor is a professional with seminary training, after all. Perhaps one of the reasons ruling elders do not view themselves as spiritual leaders is that they have an idealized understanding of what spiritual leadership is.

What Is a Spiritual Leader?

Simply put, spiritual leaders are leaders who follow the Spirit. They seek the Spirit's leading in all things, and make their decisions based upon what God wants instead of what they want or what is popular. How do ruling elders know what God wants? They ask, and they take time to listen for the Spirit's guidance. This is what is meant by discernment.

Spiritual discernment is seeking God's will. For ruling elders, this means coming to the session meeting with hearts and minds open to what God is doing. Discernment is God-centered and bathed in listening prayer. We know God's will because we witness it in the life and wisdom of Jesus in Scripture, and the ongoing presence and work of the Spirit. As Joan Gray

For more on discernment and spiritual practices for ruling elders, view this presentation. [2]

writes, discernment is "not a game of hide-and-seek with God hiding and us seeking."[1] It is listening and watching for God's activity and joining in God's mission and ministry in the place and time we are.

For many, the issue is not that we cannot discern God's will in a particular situation. More so it is that we are afraid to join God in what the Spirit is doing, or we simply do not want to because it requires more of a sacrifice than we are willing to give. This is when it is imperative that spiritual leaders be willing to "take up the cross and follow." Spiritual leadership implores us, even requires us, to seek and follow God's will even when it is uncomfortable or scary.

What is the difference between being a ruling elder and being a board member? Ruling elders are called to give their lives and their wills to the living God. There is nothing self-glorifying about ordained office. It is a humbling and awesome responsibility and privilege.

The Reverend Dr. Peggy Hinds, ACC, is a professional coach and consultant who assists churches and congregational leaders to discern God's will for their present and future ministries. She is a teaching elder and certified Christian educator. You can learn more about her ministry at www.linkedin.com/in/pchinds.

Read Peggy Hinds' first article on ruling elders serving as spiritual leaders here. For more about the information provided here, please contact Martha Miller at martha.miller@pcusa.org and browse the Ruling Elders website.

[1] Spiritual Leadership for Church Officers: A Handbook, Gray, Joan S., Geneva Press, Louisville, KY 2009, p. 88.

 $\hbox{$[2]$ http://oga.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/docs/ruling_elders_as_spiritual_leaders.ppt}\\$

Regarding Ruling Elders: Worship Leadership



Office of the General Assembly

DAVID GAMBRELL

Associate for Worship

"...Will you be a faithful ruling elder, watching over the people, providing for their worship, nurture, and service?" (W-4.4003i[1]). When ruling elders in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are ordained or installed, they promise to take special responsibility for the worship of the congregation they serve. This is because we understand ruling elders to be spiritual leaders in the community of faith, "persons of wisdom and maturity of faith, having

demonstrated skills in leadership and being compassionate in spirit" (G-2.0301). Accordingly, it is fitting for ruling elders to have regular roles in worship, making good use of the spiritual gifts God has given them.

Ruling Elders as Worship Leaders

Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal (Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), suggests a number of opportunities for ruling elders (and deacons) as worship leaders. (See the red print, or rubrics, on pages 1–22.) As the hymnal liturgies indicate, in the Service for the Lord's Day (Sunday worship) it is especially appropriate for ruling elders to:

lead the prayers of the people; receive the offering and prepare the Lord's table; lead the prayer of dedication; and give the charge at the conclusion of the service.

These responsibilities, fulfilled by the pastor (or teaching elder) in the practice of many congregations, are in fact quite consistent with the Christian vocation of ruling elders in seeking the welfare of the congregation, exercising good stewardship of the church's material gifts, and leading the community in mission and ministry.

For more about the information provided here:

Browse the Ruling Elders Web site at www.pcusa.org/rulingelders.

Ruling Elders Nurture Covenant Life

Ruling elders also have particular responsibility for the "celebration of the Sacraments" (W-1.4004b).

Beyond speaking and serving in Sunday worship (but intimately connected with these

When the Lord's Supper is celebrated, it is fitting for ruling elders:

to distribute the elements (already the practice in most congregations); but also

to participate in the "extended service of communion," visiting homebound and hospitalized members with the message of the gospel, the prayers of the congregation, and the bread and cup (W-3.3616e).

When Baptism or the Reaffirmation of Baptism (or confirmation) is celebrated, ruling elders:

present candidates for baptism or reaffirmation; and speak the words of welcome that follow the baptism or reaffirmation.

These roles reflect ruling elders' special oversight of the covenant life of the congregation, seeking "to strengthen and nurture its faith and life" (G-2.0301).

Ruling Elders Measure Faithfulness

In addition to the options provided in Glory to God, a few other possibilities in the Service for the Lord's Day include:

leading the call to worship, as the session is responsible for determining times and places for the congregation's worship (see W-1.4004f):

speaking the summary of the Law of God (see page 4 of Glory to God) or call to faithfulness, as ruling elders are charged with "measuring" the community's growth in

reading Scripture, as the session makes provision for the proclamation of the Word (see W-1.4004a).

These are appropriate extensions of the ministry of ruling elders as outlined in the PC(USA)'s *Book of Order*.

Ruling Elders Offer Gifts

discipleship (see G-2.0301); and

As we pray during the laying on of hands in ordination, God has given ruling elders "gifts of [the] Holy Spirit to build up the church, to strengthen the common life of [the] people, and to lead with compassion and vision. In the walk of faith and for the work of ministry," we pray for "gladness and strength, discipline and hope, humility, humor, and courage, and an abiding sense of [God's] presence" (Book of Occasional Services, Geneva Press, 1999, pp. 29-30). May all these gifts be yours as you lead the church in the worship of the triune God and in the service of daily living.

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- responsibilities), here are additional ways in which ruling elders can be leaders in the renewal of the church's faith, life, and liturgy:
- encouraging deeper, more disciplined engagement with Scripture, through Christian education, small group study, and personal devotion;
- helping all members of the church discern how to live out the promises of their baptism, our common ordination to ministry in Jesus' name;
- opening up conversations on more frequent celebrations of the Lord's Supper, as a regular and joyful act of gratitude for God's grace;
- making space for the full participation of children in worship, in conscious and lively ways, according to their age and ability; and
- challenging members to take up the practice of daily prayer, whether through the services provided in Glory to God, or with new resources like the PC(USA)'s Daily Prayer app (see pcusa.org/dailyprayer).

These are but a few examples of how ruling elders can lead in the "discernment of God's Spirit and governance of God's people" (G-2.0301).

Regarding ruling elders: called as partners in Christ's service



Office of the General Assembly

SALLIE SCHEIDE

When I became a ruling elder, I recall the constitutional questions for ordination and installation that really resonated with me were those that speak to being partners in Christ's service:

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

"Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?" (*Book of Order*, W-4.4003f, h)

A few years after my ordination, I was asked to give the message during stewardship season. In addition to a primary theme of my baptism since baptism speaks to who I am as a member of my family and God's family through the church, I also chose the Bible verse that speaks to me regarding how we are to live as God's children:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic. 8)

Both Micah 6:8 and the PC(USA) constitutional questions are a call to be in service with others. As we learn about social injustice, we respond with love and kindness. The response is expressed in multiple ways. We can roll up our sleeves and engage in direct "hands on" service. We can exercise a ministry of presence by taking time to pull up a chair and listen to those who are shunned by others. We can advocate for change with word and action.

When ruling elders strengthen their relationships with each other, they can also build relationships that support Christ's service with others. As ruling elders learn who they are, who their congregation is, and who their neighbors are, Christ's service comes naturally. Acting on these happens individually and corporately.

Ruling elders in my congregation have shared their passion for issues within our community and have mobilized others in the congregation to act alongside each other. Within the multifaceted issue of poverty, we have been active with the mobile food truck that serves our community. As we discern the best response to homelessness in our county, we have become one of the hosts for a rotating homeless shelter. Looking beyond the borders of our county, our ruling elders are always aware of communities across the nation that are receiving support through Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA). We may have only traveled once in recent years to a PDA site, but we continue to *Give, Act, and Pray* in response to the needs of our brothers and sisters affected by disasters.

Back on the Sunday that I gave the message during stewardship season, I asked our choir director to include the singing

of *What Does the Lord Require of You* during worship. Not the arrangement that was in the blue Presbyterian Hymnal in the pews at the time, but the arrangement by Jim Strathdee, sung as a canon or round, which I had come to love from camps and conferences. Just as individuals come together in service, when this is sung as a canon, the blending of the voices and the strength within the simple words exemplify our call as partners in Christ's service.

What does the Lord require of you? What does the Lord require of you?

Justice, kindness, walk humbly with God

To seek justice, and love kindness And walk humbly with your God.

Sallie Scheide serves as ruling elder and clerk of session at First Presbyterian Church, Mt. Pleasant, Michigan. She is also the assistant director at the Center for Student Opportunity: Service and Leadership Initiatives at Alma College in Alma, Michigan.

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