

*Spiritual Leadership
for Church Officers*

A Handbook

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*Elders and Deacons
Are Spiritual Leaders*

Elders and deacons are, with pastors, the spiritual leaders of Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations. To begin to understand what their leadership is about, we must first understand what church membership means. According to the *Book of Order*, “One becomes an active member of the church through faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and acceptance of his Lordship in all of life” (G-5.0101a). The word “faith” as it is used here does not mean simply an intellectual belief in God. Rather, “Faith is a personal and immediate relationship to God.”¹ Church membership is rooted in this kind of human-divine bond made possible for us by Jesus Christ and brought about in us by the Holy Spirit. The relationship then bears the fruit of ministry.

Many Christians think of ministry as something the clergy do. Not so, according to the Bible. The Holy Spirit gives each Christian a spiritual gift or gifts to be used “for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7). God raises up among the Christians in a congregation the gifts needed to carry on ministry in that place. Among the many gifts mentioned in Scripture are hospitality, generosity, teaching, preaching, administration, and healing. However, the Spirit is not limited to any particular list of gifts and is constantly at work in the congregation and beyond it, drawing and cultivating the particular gifts needed for mission and ministry there.

For example, a wonderful ministry is to call the children and teens of the congregation by name and make them feel valued. So, too, is

greeting visitors and new members. Dealing with money is an important ministry in every church week in and week out, and being able to do it gracefully is a gift. I have known people who had never taught or worked with children but who volunteered to teach because teachers were needed. They found that as they got into the work, they were given what they needed to do it—and teaching became a joy! This is the Spirit at work empowering the ministry of ordinary church members. “Every member a minister” is not just a slogan. It states a biblical truth that has shaped the Presbyterian Church from its earliest days.

Out of this understanding of ministry as a part of church membership comes the practice of electing and ordaining officers—pastors, elders, and deacons—to carry out particular tasks in the life of the church. Elders are set apart, along with pastors, to lead and govern the church. Deacons are set apart for ministries of compassion and service. Pastors, of course, are also set apart for the ministry of Word and Sacrament. The *Book of Order* is quick to point out, however, “The existence of these offices in no way diminishes the importance of the commitment of all members to the total ministry of the church. These ordained officers differ from other members in function only” (G-6.0102).

Just as church membership grows out of a relationship with Jesus Christ, so ministry in the church, especially ordained ministry (elders, deacons, and ministers of Word and Sacrament) is to be carried out in a way that reflects his character. John’s Gospel tells us that shortly before Jesus went to the cross, he gathered his disciples together for a meal. During the meal, Jesus rose from the table and, taking a basin and towel, began to wash and dry his disciples’ feet. In that day, household slaves usually did this task. When he finished, Jesus said to them, “If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:14–15). The ministry of church officers, along with that of all Christians, is to be carried out in imitation of Christ, who showed his love by serving.

WHAT IS A SPIRITUAL LEADER?

For Christians the word “spiritual” will always be somehow connected with the Holy Spirit. Before Jesus went to the cross, he promised his disciples an “Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name” (John 14:26). The Advocate would function to teach the

disciples the truth about Jesus and also to empower them to follow him in his ministry. The Spirit would help them love one another as Jesus commanded. All this and more came from the gift of the Holy Spirit after Jesus' earthly presence was withdrawn from the first believers.

The Spirit also works to turn believers into people of the Spirit, making their character and actions reflect those of Christ. This new way of being is a gift of God, not anything an individual can earn or create. The apostle Paul says to the Ephesians, "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived" (Eph. 2:1–2). However, through the love of God, the redeeming work of Jesus on the cross, and the power of the Holy Spirit, they were brought out of death into freedom and abundant life. People who live by the Spirit will show the fruit of the Spirit—that is, they will demonstrate in their daily lives "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal. 5:22–23). These virtues are not self-created, but rather are the results of a relationship with the living Christ.

What do I mean by "spiritual leader"? Let's start with the word "spiritual." A spiritual leader is one whose way of life is centered in a relationship to the God revealed in Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Notice that spirituality is about a way of life. As such, it pertains to everything we do, all the time. It is not something we turn on when we go to church and turn off when we go out into the world. Spirituality is not a separate piece of life that we plug in when we have the time or feel like it.

True Christian spirituality is the warp and woof of the believer's daily existence. It includes practices and attitudes that not only encourage faith in the believer but also make a difference in the world. True Spirituality is just as at home in the workplace as it is in the sanctuary. It comes into play not only when we read the Bible, but also when we read the newspaper. Spirituality is not only about religion but has something to say about how we spend our money, raise our children, run our businesses, and cast our vote. People of the Spirit bear the fruit of the Spirit at church certainly, but also in every other area of life as well.

The other important word here is "leader." In the most general sense, a leader exercises authority or influence to motivate other people to follow her or him. Leadership implies movement and change. People who have no desire to go anywhere usually do not need a leader; they will be most happy with someone who functions as a guardian or custodian. Leaders have a vision of something that is not yet accomplished. They are heading for a destination and want to take others

with them. They see things that could be and are drawn to put their energies into galvanizing others in order to make those visions realities.

As I use the term in this book, a spiritual leader leads others to seek and do God's will. Sometimes people take up this leadership eagerly. Others become spiritual leaders only with reluctance. Moses is perhaps the most famous example of a reluctant spiritual leader. He was not looking for a new occupation when he met God at the burning bush. He argued with God about his credentials and his competence for the job. At first glance it might seem that Moses was not qualified to be a spiritual leader. After all, years earlier when he saw an Egyptian beating one of his fellow Hebrews, "He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand" (Exod. 2:12). Yet God insisted that Moses was the one to lead the Hebrew people toward the goal of living in the promised land, and the third chapter of Exodus tells how at the burning bush, he was both called to be a spiritual leader and given the authority necessary for leadership. Like Moses, some officers may feel unworthy and unqualified for their call, but as the old saying goes: God does not call the qualified; God qualifies the called.

ELDERS: LEADERS IN GOVERNANCE

If you are a Presbyterian elder, you belong to a group that is almost without parallel in Christianity. Talk with your friends who are Methodist, Baptist, or Catholic, and you will find that nothing in their churches resembles this distinctive office. In churches with a congregational style of church government, as Baptists have, the power to make decisions governing the life of the congregation is exercised by the congregation itself. In principle this system is pure democracy in action. Each member has a vote, and the majority rules. Persons elected to serve as officers carry out the congregation's decisions and may propose matters to the congregation for action, but the final decision is made in the congregational meeting.

At the other end of the spectrum, in churches with episcopal polity, the power to govern is by and large exercised through varying ranks of clergy. Laity may serve as advisers or act in committees to propose certain courses of action, but bishops or other clergy generally make final decisions on many matters central to the life of the congregation.

In contrast, Presbyterian congregations elect elders who join with pastors in groups that oversee the congregation's life and make policy

decisions: “Together with ministers of the Word and Sacrament, [elders] exercise leadership, government, and discipline and have responsibilities for the life of a particular church as well as the church at large” (G-6.0302). One of the unique aspects of this system is that when elders and clergy sit in governing bodies together, their power is equal: each has one vote, and all votes are equal. The *Book of Order* requires that a certain number of elders, in addition to clergy, must be present in order for any session, presbytery, synod, or General Assembly meeting to transact business legally. Elders are also eligible to hold all the elected offices of the church, including that of Moderator of the General Assembly.

Elders are so central to Presbyterian polity that without them, no method of church government could dare to call itself “Presbyterian.” This unique office has its roots deep in history. The very word “presbyterian” is derived from the Greek word *presbyteros*, meaning “old” or “elder.” The ancient world was very familiar with the rule of elders who were responsible for overseeing the welfare of their communities. Long before the nation of Israel came into existence, we read about elders in Scripture (see Gen. 50:7; Num. 22:4, 7; Josh. 9:11).

The *Book of Order* begins its description of the office of elder by telling us that “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 governing and ministry” (G-6.0301). In organizing itself, the early church was influenced by a familiar institution: the Jewish synagogue, which is not surprising, since all the earliest believers were Jews.

The synagogue came on the scene in the sixth century BC, around the time the Israelites were taken into exile in Babylon. It functioned both as a place of worship and a center for community life. Various members of the synagogue functioning together were often responsible for both the spiritual and temporal business of the faith community in that place. Their duties included seeing that worship services were carried out in a decent and orderly fashion, inviting persons in the congregation to lead the congregation in worship, handling the business matters of the community, encouraging people to keep the law, teaching children, keeping records, and exercising discipline if necessary. Some evidence exists that in later Judaism women may have served as officials of the synagogue.²

While it is difficult to make ironclad deductions about early church leadership from the New Testament writings, it can be argued that along with apostles, prophets, and evangelists, elders held a prominent

role in those first Christian communities. Elders in the earliest days were often the men and women in whose homes the small groups of believers met. Lydia is an example of one such leader (Acts 16:11–40). These first elders were gifted by the Holy Spirit for leadership and administration. Their focus was the overall health and welfare of the local congregation:

It was the elders at Jerusalem who received the gift for famine relief from the church at Antioch (Acts 11:30), and who helped to decide the basis on which Gentiles should be received into the church (Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22–23; 16:4). Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for each of the churches they established on their first missionary trip (Acts 14:32). . . . Paul requests a special gathering with the elders of the church at Ephesus on his way back to Jerusalem (Acts 20:17). . . . James calls for the involvement of the elders in prayers for the sick (James 5:14).³

These elders, like their ancient Jewish counterparts, worked as a group to ensure that the community of faith was healthy. In addition to concern for the public witness of the church, elders interested themselves in the “inner health [of the church], in the climate or environment in which the members lived.”⁴ These earliest Christian elders worked to create a communal environment where the gospel flourished and was shared with others as a powerful source of new life. It takes little imagination to believe that, on a human level, the church owes its continued existence to the ministry of those early elders. They were the ones who preserved the teachings of the faith through hard times and encouraged the people to stand strong in times of persecution.

Over the centuries, as the church went from being a persecuted sect to the established religion of the Roman Empire, the clergy became more prominent and powerful, and the ministry of elders seemed to die out. Much scholarly ink has been spilled discussing why this happened, but the fact remains that priests and bishops increasingly carried out the preaching, teaching, and administration of the congregations. Since in many communities only the clergy could read, even the Scripture itself was only available to people through the priest. Much of the unordained Christians’ evangelical zeal and burning desire to serve Christ in these centuries was channeled into monastic life, for in the parish churches, the clergy generally ruled.

Then came the movement known as the Reformation. John Calvin, the father of the Presbyterian or Reformed movement, created a system

in Geneva, Switzerland, in the sixteenth century where city and church were governed as one. For help in structuring and organizing this governmental system, Calvin looked to the accounts of the second-century church in the pastoral epistles and came up with a structure consisting of four offices: pastor, doctor or teacher, ruling elder, and deacon, each with its own responsibilities. Pastors preached, administered sacraments, and performed funerals, baptisms, and other such rites. Those who held the office of teacher, also called doctor, were largely responsible for the education of children as well as adults. Ruling elders had the task of maintaining order and discipline in the community. Deacons cared for the poor, including administering monies given to charity.

Calvin's ruling elders were nonclergy "representing various parishes of the city and related to both the church and civic government. They took an oath similar to that prescribed for the ministers. They met once each week with the pastors in a body known as the consistory to hear complaints against immoralities, or indecent language, or doctrinal errors, and any other matters that might corrupt the purity of the church and bring reproach to its good name."⁵ John Calvin largely laid the foundation on which is built the system that we have today: clergy and lay leaders having equal power but different duties, meeting together to see to the spiritual welfare and order of the body of Christ.

DEACONS: LEADERS IN SERVICE

The title "deacon" comes from a Greek word meaning servant; benevolent service, rather than governance, has generally been the function of deacons through the centuries. One reason the early church spread so quickly is that its members showed an extraordinary degree of care for those who were orphaned, widowed, poor, sick, or friendless. As we see in Acts 4:34–35, "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need."

Ironically, however, this very generosity occasioned the first recorded conflict in the church. Acts 6 tells how the believers who were of Greek background felt that the Greek widows were being neglected while the Hebrew widows received plenty in the daily distribution of food. This disagreement was the last straw for the apostles, whose energies were so drained by administrative tasks relating to the church's charities that the evangelistic mission was suffering.

From this situation in the early church the officer of deacon was born. The first deacons were “seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (Acts 6:3). Their work was a blessing to the church, and the writer of Acts tells us that after the deacons were appointed, “The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). After reading this story in Scripture, Calvin concluded, “Here, then, is the kind of deacons the apostolic church had, and which we, after their example, should have.”⁶

The crucial importance of the office of deacon grows out of the obligation of the church to care for those in need. This obligation is not an optional activity, but rather one of the ways that disciples live out their relationship to their Lord. As such, caring for the poor must always be a core value for the church and part of its ministry in every place and time. Matthew’s Gospel goes so far as to say that Christians will be judged for all eternity on the basis of how we have treated the hungry, the thirsty, strangers, the sick, those without clothing, and those in prison. Jesus identifies so completely with these people that to do something, or not to do it, for one of them is the same as doing it or not doing it for him (see Matt. 25:31–46).

The work of ministering to those in need is so crucial to the spiritual health and mission of the church that it cannot be left up to individual believers. Writing on the subject of deacons in 1879, Presbyterian minister James B. Ramsey argued that “the care of the poor, relieving their wants and soothing their sorrows, and encouraging their crushed spirits, is, therefore, a duty entwined in the very nature of Christian life—springing naturally and necessarily out of the believer’s union with Christ.”⁷ The church as a whole must take responsibility for this work as an ongoing part of its mission, and as in Bible times, delegating this work to deacons is the most efficient approach.

Given this history, that the original caring, mission-focused calling of deacons often changed into managing the business affairs of the congregation is puzzling. Often when this shift occurred, conflicts and power struggles developed between the board of deacons and the session. Since all decisions made by the deacons had to be approved and could be overturned by the session, the two bodies often seemed to be duplicating each other’s work. In time the *Book of Order* was amended to allow congregations to vote to dispense with the office of deacon altogether, and all the duties that had been carried out by deacons became responsibilities of the elders.

The last twenty years have seen a movement in the church to revive the office of deacon and restore it to its true biblical function. As a result, the *Book of Order* notes that, first and foremost, “the office of deacon as set forth in Scripture is one of sympathy, witness, and service after the example of Jesus Christ. . . . It is the duty of deacons, first of all, to minister to those who are in need, to the sick, to the friendless, and to any who may be in distress both within and beyond the community of faith” (G-6.0401, 0402).

Here we have the heart of the deacons’ calling. They are to lead the church in fulfilling the command of Christ to serve the poor and friendless. Deacons are charged with keeping this work before the church and making sure that the resources are in place to carry it out. They may do this while organized as a board of deacons or they may work as individuals. However they are organized, their leadership in the church’s ministry to those in need is absolutely essential to the church’s spiritual health.

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION

1. Think about someone you have known whom you would call an effective spiritual leader. What were the characteristics, habits, or practices that made that person effective?
2. Faith in God involves having a relationship with God. How would you describe your relationship with God?
3. What do you think your spiritual gifts are? How have you used them to strengthen your church? How have you used them outside the church?
4. When you hear the word “spirituality,” what comes to your mind?
5. What is your reaction to this statement? “The primary work of a Presbyterian session is to lead a congregation to seek and do God’s will.”