

SELECTED
TO
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Second Edition

A Guide for Church Leaders

EARL S. JOHNSON, JR.

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Preface

I first learned what it means to be a church leader at the dinner table when I was a boy. My mother and father were both ordained elders in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); they both sang in the choir at First Presbyterian Church in Williamson, New York, and taught church school. At different times they each served on church nominating committees and the presbytery nominating committee. They were elected as representatives to presbytery, and it was my mother who made the motion to approve my ordination when it came before Geneva Presbytery. In our house, the position of church leader was always held in honor and was considered worthy of respect.

Not much has changed at the table. My wife, Barbara, and I have served four different congregations together; and since she is an ordained elder and deacon, we still digest news about churches almost every evening. I give my thanks to her for helping me to understand what it means to be a church leader from the inside out, and for encouraging me to propose this book to Westminster John Knox Press in the first place.

Thanks are also due to students at Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School who participated in my classes on Presbyterian Polity and Confessions in the Presbyterian Tradition a few years ago, and to the members and leaders of congregations I have served as pastor in Idaho and New York State. I learned a great deal from all of them,

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not only in classrooms and committee meetings, but in the refectory and at church dinners as well.

The book you are about to read is designed to help church leaders as they learn and share together, especially those who are serving for the first time. It is also written with training sessions for congregations and presbyteries in mind, and I hope that it will benefit Presbyterian seminary students who are preparing for their ordination exams or are getting ready to work with their first churches. Experienced pastors and church leaders may also find it helpful as they struggle with the challenges they face as teaching and ruling elders, deacons, and trustees.

Much of what appears here has been in print before. Since 1992 I have been privileged to write a column for *Presbyterian Outlook* called “For Church Officers” (now called “For Church Leaders”). I am grateful for permission to reprint any and all materials already published.

I also want to express thanks to David Maxwell, Executive Editor at Westminster John Knox Press, for his thoughtful and friendly assistance in preparing this edited version.

My primary purpose in writing has not been to answer the questions about *how* we work as church leaders. The *Book of Order* and a number of other books and manuals tell us that. Instead, my aim is to consider *why* and *what*? *Why* do we do the things we do as Presbyterians? *What* are the biblical and theological principles behind our decisions? *What* difference will it make if we continue to follow New Testament and Reformed traditions in the future?

As Presbyterians we face tremendous challenges to ministry in the twenty-first century. There are continuing questions about biblical authority and about the nature of who should be allowed to become church leaders. In this age of globalization we must address the need to see ourselves as parts of a global economy and ecumenical and interfaith world, and gather the courage to work for justice and peace as violence becomes more and more widespread. The pace of technological growth calls us to spread the good news in a wired and webbed global community, and

scientific discoveries about climate change urge us to practice environmental justice, even when some stubbornly refuse to acknowledge our human impact on the environment. There is also the worrisome concern that it may be becoming increasingly difficult to communicate with younger people in and out of the church. This is a period of church history that is experiencing changes in culture and technology at blinding speed. All these issues will challenge our ability to embrace the traditions that have made us what we are as we attempt to move faithfully and creatively through this era of change. May we find ways to learn what it means to be willing to follow the Jesus Christ known to believers in the past, while still expecting his powerful guidance as we move into the future.

Since the first edition was published in 2000 I have written three books which will be useful:

The Presbyterian Deacon: An Essential Guide
Witness without Parallel: Eight Biblical Texts That
Make Us Presbyterian
The Presbyterian Trustee: An Essential Guide

This revised edition is designed to take into account the changes made in the Form of Government, the new Directory for Worship, and the *Book of Confessions* since 2011, as well as the new *Book of Common Worship* (2018) and *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (2013). During that time, the title “teaching elder” was changed back to “minister of the Word and Sacrament” and the Confession of Belhar was added to the *Book of Confessions*. In addition, references to the meaning and practice of marriage have been expanded and altered (W-4.0601), especially in regard to civil marriage.

Being a Church Leader

The Call to Serve

*T*he call of God is to all believers (Rom. 1:6–7; Gal. 1:6; 1 Thess. 2:12; 1 Pet. 2:9–10; Jude 1). God calls us individually and as members of the church, and Christians know that when it comes to believing and serving we are not so much the choosers as we are the chosen (John 15:16). Even though we will to believe, there is a surprising and almost inexplicable aspect of Christian vocation which causes us to acknowledge an invisible power of the Spirit that works in our lives long before we make our own conscious decisions (Gal. 1:15; Jer. 1:5; Isa. 49:1; 1 Sam. 1:22, 28).

In addition to the general call to all believers, God also gives unique gifts to individual people to enable them to serve the church in special ways. In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) we recognize some of these gifts by ordaining members as ministers of the Word and Sacrament, ruling elders, and deacons. As the *Book of Order* puts it (G-2.0104a), “To those called to exercise special functions in the church—deacons, ruling elders, and ministers of the Word and Sacrament—God gives suitable gifts for their various duties. In addition to possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, those who undertake particular ministries should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.”

The history of God’s revelation in the Bible indicates that women and men of faith have long been given

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a special intuition or feeling that leads and sometimes compels them to want to serve. Thus Abraham and Sarah leave a comfortable lifestyle and location to serve God in new ways and in a new place (Gen. 12:1–3; 17:15–16; Heb. 11:8); Moses is directed to set his people free without knowing exactly who sends him (Exod. 3); Ruth feels the divine pull to the God of her mother-in-law (Ruth 1:16); young Samuel hears God’s voice in the night (1 Sam. 3:2–14); Jeremiah and Isaiah sense that they are compelled to speak God’s word (Jer. 1:9; Isa. 6). Mary readily accepts the Spirit’s call (Luke 1:46–56).

In the New Testament the Greek verb *kaleō* is often used to describe the way believers are called to serve. Paul repeatedly indicates that he is an apostle and qualified to write to churches only because God has summoned him to do so (Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1, 15). In Mark 3:13–15 when Jesus called the twelve disciples, “those whom he desired,” he gave them three special assignments: to preach the gospel, to heal the sick, and to be with him.

The call of Jesus is particularly important for Christians committed to serving God in the twenty-first century. The church is entering into an unprecedented era of unpredictable change. Church leaders will need to be extremely flexible if churches are going to grow and meet the needs of modern men, women, and children. When we look at Jesus’ call, we notice that two of the assignments he gave to his disciples are task oriented. They had to do things: proclaim the good news (evangelize) and serve those who are ill (alleviate suffering, love the poor, and stand up against oppression and prejudice). Yet the third role of those who follow Jesus is one we too often overlook: it calls us simply to be with Jesus and stay close to him. “And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him” (Mark 3:14).

In the coming years all three assignments will be difficult, but the final one may be the most dangerous and exciting. Being with Jesus means that we have to be so close to him that we know where he is going. Being with Jesus means that we must anticipate where he will be next and meet him there. Being with

Jesus means that we must be willing to take great risks when we know that it is Jesus, and no one else, who is calling us to a particular place and time.

In the Presbyterian Church the call of God is a twofold communication. The first part comes from God through Jesus Christ; the second is issued by a nominating committee of the church and validated by a congregation and/or presbytery (G-2.0102; 2.0103; 2.0104b; 2.0401; 2.0701). In our denomination both elements of the call are necessary for it to be considered genuine. The call to Presbyterian ministry is not a mystical experience amenable only to private review. People cannot claim that God spoke to them in a dream, in the wind, or even in prayer and expect to be ordained solely on that basis.

As Presbyterians we believe that if a call to ordination cannot be perceived and endorsed by the whole body of Christ, it does not exist. Those who serve on the session when members are thinking of becoming inquirers (G-2.06), or on a presbytery "Preparation for Ministry Committee" (or whatever committee is assigned the examination process), should not be afraid to give their honest opinions when men and women indicate an interest in becoming church leaders.

When people are truly called to serve God and the body recognizes it, a moment for celebration has been reached. But candidates who are really not qualified to serve because they are spiritually immature, theologically ill fitted, emotionally or psychologically unsuitable, or ill prepared educationally, should be told so plainly by those called by the church to weigh such things, in order to save them pain, the illusion of false expectations, and the expense of pursuing a vocation or position they are not qualified to hold in the first place. The Presbytery committee that examines inquirers has to work prayerfully, sensitively, and confidentially with sessions when those requesting the status of an inquirer are not qualified to take this step.

Ruling elders have a similar responsibility when the congregational nominating committee is ready to invite members to become ruling elders or deacons (or trustees). According to our

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constitution, “When persons have been elected to the ordered ministry of ruling elder or deacon, the session shall provide a period of study and preparation, after which the session shall examine them as to their personal faith; knowledge of the doctrine, government, and discipline contained in the Constitution of the church, and the duties of ministry” (G-2.0402). While a call must always be open to all members (it cannot be denied on the basis of sex, racial, or ethnic background, or economic status), the session does have the right to examine those whom the nominating committee selects. This duty is an important and solemn one. As Joan S. Gray and Joyce C. Tucker indicate, it is the responsibility of the session to determine if each person elected to office has the essential knowledge to serve in a Presbyterian Church, and to inquire about her or his personal faith and understanding of the office. If the session does not approve the nomination of such candidates, it will report its findings to the nominating committee.¹ In such a sensitive situation, those who have not been allowed to proceed to ordination will need the pastoral care and love of the pastor and the members of the church to avoid ongoing hurt feelings and disappointment.

A call to ministry is always one that must be considered carefully and be taken seriously. Those who are thinking about the possibility of becoming pastors often ask how they will know for certain that God really wants them to make such a vocational change. Many times the radical choice to enter full-time pastoral ministry will make a big difference in their lives: they may have to leave a lucrative job, apply for loans to attend theological seminary, disrupt family life by giving up a comfortable income, or force spouses and children to move to a new area. Following God’s call may mean real sacrifice for everyone involved. Yet there is at least one answer to the question “How do I know I am called?” It is this: “When you can no longer do anything else, then you will know that God has definitely called you.”

Sometimes God’s choice is easy to see and skills and gifts obviously fit people to serve the church. On other occasions the voice of God through the church is a surprise. Members and

pastors frequently wonder why a nominating committee has recommended an individual for a position of responsibility, only to learn later that this person has just the talents needed in a difficult or sensitive situation that could never have been anticipated. In one church where I served, I was not entirely pleased when the nominating committee selected four businesspeople to fill all the vacancies on the session. It did not seem to me that the selection was broad enough to represent the whole congregation. Nevertheless, after they were elected and ordained we discovered why God called them to serve. During the next year the nation suffered through a severe economic downturn, and when we had to make drastic adjustments to church spending, the four business leaders were not in the least concerned. "You do not need to worry," they said, almost in one voice. "We know how to take care of it." And they did.

Questions for Study

1. *What are some of the similarities and some of the differences of the biblical call stories? (See Gen. 12:1–3; 17:15–16; Ruth 1:16; 1 Sam. 3:2–14; Jer. 1:1–10; Isa. 6; Mark 3:13–19; Acts 9:1–20; 22:6–16; 26:9–18.)*
2. *Do you think God calls men and women in similar ways today?*
3. *How do people "hear" the call today? How do they know it is more than mere wish fulfillment?*
4. *How important is it to have a call validated by the church in order to enter into ministry?*

Elders

The position of elder is the oldest active office still being used in the Christian church today. Although the apostleship no doubt precedes it in prestige, power, and antiquity, it did not remain a permanent office since it was limited to those who had a direct commission from the risen Jesus himself and had unique gifts

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from the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:1–26; 1 Cor. 12:1–11, 29). Paul indicates that he became an apostle sometime after the original apostles were commissioned and hints that he may have been the last person in the church to hold that title (1 Cor. 15:8–10).

The New Testament tells us that when the apostles planted churches they appointed elders to govern the congregations in their absence (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; see also Acts 20:17; 2 John 1; 3 John 1). The Greek word for elder is *presbyteros*—literally, “an older person,” “a wise person,” “a leader.” It is the basis of the name of our church and its form of government. In the Old Testament an elder was one of a group of wise men who were elected or appointed to rule a city. The term is used in the New Testament as a title for Jewish leaders (see Matt. 15:2; 16:21; Mark 7:3, 5; Acts 4:5, 8, 23; 6:12; Heb. 11:2). Recently archaeologists have discovered benches outside excavated city gates in Israel where elders actually sat and made their rulings.

Although it is not certain what the elders’ responsibilities were in the early church, their position was clearly one of honor. First Timothy (5:17–22 and 6:3–19) indicates that they were worthy of being paid and were expected to exhibit the highest moral character. Elders were to be compassionate, humble, and eager to serve the congregation like a shepherd, following the example of Christ (1 Pet. 5:1–10). They were often engaged in a healing ministry (Jas. 5:13–18).

In the Presbyterian Church there have traditionally been two kinds of presbyters: the ministers or pastors, and the lay elders, who are elected members of sessions. Together, through shared powers and divided responsibilities they govern the church. According to the “Historic Principles of Church Order” adopted by the General Assembly in 1797 (F-3.01, F-3.02), the Presbyterian Church is a democratic one in which the representatives of the whole govern every part of the church, the majority rules, and decisions (based on “the collected wisdom and united voice of the whole Church”) are founded on the example of the apostles and the practice of the early church.

The responsibilities of lay people elected as ruling elders are clearly laid out in the *Book of Order* (G-1.01; G-2.01; G-2.03). They include the encouragement of the congregation in the worship of God, the equipping of the church in mission in the world, the comfort and care of the sick with special attention to the poor and the oppressed, and service in the higher governing bodies of the church. In the local church, the session—with the exception of certain rights and privileges granted to the congregation and pastors—has virtual oversight of all the spiritual, educational, and practical activities of the church.

As Presbyterians we believe that the Holy Spirit works best in our church through the will of the people as represented by its elders, rather than in a top-down fashion through the command of a priest or pastor or through the direction of an executive presbyter, superintendent, or bishop. Even though the ruling elders are given a great deal of power, a heavy responsibility is also laid on them. Elders must not be power hungry, petty, or vindictive but must be spiritually wise, committed primarily to following Jesus Christ as his servants, and of high moral character (G-2.0301; 3.02). The session is not a training ground for new members or new Christians, for gossips or people who want to control others; elders must be those who are spiritually and psychologically mature and are more concerned for the health of the church and the work of God's kingdom than they are for their own positions or reputations. Elders must be men and women who are not only committed to Presbyterian principles of government; they must also be those who are constantly open to change and the fresh breezes of the Holy Spirit which give the church vitality and new opportunities to do God's work.

Questions for Study

1. *What kind of personal and spiritual characteristics do you think members should have before they are chosen to be ruling elders?*
2. *Is the office of ruling elder respected in your congregation?*

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3. *Is the session truly representative in your congregation?*
4. *Do you think that the position of ruling elder is as important as that of a minister of the Word and Sacrament?*

Deacons

Our title of deacon comes from a word with roots in Greek history, *diakoneō*. In its most basic form it can mean “to serve,” “to wait on table,” “to be a slave.”

It is this concept of service that the early church adopted to describe the function of the compassionate, caring arm of Christian mission. At the beginning of the twenty-first century it is hard to imagine that in response to the question “What position in the church is the one with the most prestige?” the answer would be “to be the servant of all,” but that is exactly what the first Christians believed. In the first century, being a slave was usually a demeaning, humiliating station in life, and today few people choose waiting on tables as a lifetime profession. Where did the New Testament believers get such an image to describe the work of God? The answer is that they obviously got it from Jesus himself.

One of the keystones of Jesus’ thinking is that humility and self-giving are two characteristics God requires of the children of the kingdom. Basing his teaching on Old Testament servant passages (Isa. 41:8–20; 42:1–9, 18–22; 53:1–12; 61:1–4; see Luke 4:16–30), he tells his disciples that putting God’s work ahead of their own needs and desires is the highest priority (Mark 10:35–45; Matt. 23:11; John 12:24–26).

The earliest reference in the New Testament to the office of deacon is found in Paul’s letter to the Philippians (1:1). Here Paul greets all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, along with the bishops and deacons. At this time there seems to have been little distinction between the positions of bishop and deacon, and they differed in function rather than rank.

In a letter written later by one of Paul’s disciples, they are linked again, in 1 Timothy 3:1–13, where the spiritual and moral requirements of both offices are listed. A bishop must be above

reproach, sensible, dignified, temperate, and a good manager of his own household. Likewise deacons must be serious, not drunkards or greedy, and understand the mystery of the faith. Verse 11 may well indicate that women were already called to be deacons at this early date, just as Romans 16:1 lists Phoebe as one of the deacons in the church at Cencreae, and Junia is called an apostle (Rom. 16:6).

More specific information about the origin of the office of deacon is found in Acts 6:1–7. Here Luke describes how Greek-speaking Christians complained to the Hebrew-speaking leaders of the Jerusalem church that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food and money. As a result, it was decided that seven people should be selected to carry out the caring and serving work of the church by waiting on table at the church's "love feasts" and taking care of the poor. Meanwhile the apostles would continue a ministry of preaching and prayer. That the office of deacon quickly matured is indicated by the fact that Stephen was not martyred for being a waiter but for proclaiming God's word.

In the *Book of Order* (G-2.0201) the description of the functions of deacons as part of the "ordered ministry" in the Presbyterian Church is clearly based on these New Testament precedents. "The ministry of deacon as set forth in Scripture is one of compassion, witness, and service, sharing in the redeeming love of Jesus Christ for the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lost, the friendless, the oppressed, those burdened by unjust policies or structures, or anyone in distress." It is the duty of deacons to minister to those who are in need, to the sick and friendless and any who are in distress. In many congregations each deacon is assigned families to contact and minister to on a regular basis. In other churches, programs such as the Stephen Ministry are adopted to shoulder some of the caring. It is also possible for deacons to assume other functions such as administering programs for the elderly or working with the handicapped or those economically deprived. In some parts of the country the board of deacons also monitors the finances of the church.

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Deacons perform a very necessary function in the Presbyterian Church and represent the heart of what it means to be a Christian. We can all be like deacons, of course, whether we hold ordained office or not, since whenever we reach out in love to those in need, we reach out in the name and love of Christ himself and are following his example of serving the hungry and thirsty (Matt. 25:35–46). For further study see my book *The Presbyterian Deacon: An Essential Guide* (Westminster John Knox Press).

Questions for Study

1. *Why did the early church first create the ministry of deacons (Acts 6:1–7)?*
2. *What does it mean to call the deacons “the caring arm of the church”?*
3. *How many functions do the deacons perform in your church?*
4. *Do you know of people in your church who do the work of deacons but are not ordained?*

Pastors

After the death and resurrection of Jesus the early church had four major offices (apostles, elders, deacons, and bishops), which differed in function rather than rank. Other positions included those of prophets, evangelists, teachers (Eph. 4:11), administrators, and healers (1 Cor. 12:27–30).²

Although it is not precisely certain what people did when they held these positions, we can see that many of their functions have been assumed in the modern office of pastor or minister. The *Book of Order* specifically states (G-2.0504) that Presbyterian pastors (called “ministers” in the Form of Government) are responsible for the ministry of the Word and Sacrament, for studying, teaching, and preaching the Word, for encouraging the people in worship and prayer, for equipping them for their tasks, for exercising pastoral care for the sick, poor, troubled, and

dying, and for participating actively in the ministry of the church in governing bodies above the session level.

Not all ministers are pastors in local churches. Men and women may be ordained as teachers, professors, chaplains, pastoral counselors, campus ministers, evangelists, administrators, social workers, and professionals in other institutions. Some clergy who have secular vocations may also serve as parish associates or temporary supplies (G-2.0503). Pastors are not members of the local church but are members of the presbytery in the region in which they reside.

In many ways the role of pastor in a church today is terribly demanding, and it is nearly impossible for one person to fulfill all the expectations of church members. In a booklet designed some years ago to help sessions evaluate pastoral performance, a list of twenty-two functions is given, ranging from corporate worship leadership to professional growth.³ Today the list would no doubt be even longer. Pastors need the prayers and support of their congregations as they try to satisfy the widely diverse expectations that they be preachers, human resource directors, administrators, teachers, fund raisers, counselors, crisis managers, planners, community leaders, television personalities, webmasters, and presbyters. More than ever, pastors need to be men and women of great integrity, of spiritual depth, solid education, stable maturity, and careful flexibility as the church meets the changing and challenging environment of the twenty-first century.

The New Testament provides one image of the pastor that helps the church keep pastoral duties in perspective. In John 21:15–19 the risen Jesus urges Peter and the other disciples to remember that their chief function is to feed God’s sheep. One of the Greek words behind our term “pastor” is *poimēn*, “shepherd” (Eph. 4:11), and it comes to the church directly out of Jesus’ own teaching that he was himself “the good shepherd” (John 10:14, 16; see Heb. 13:20), the one who compassionately teaches, feeds, and guards his sheep (Mark 6:34). The author of 1 Peter 5 expands this image and advises certain elders “to tend the flock of God that is in your charge,” to do so eagerly and not

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under compulsion, and to serve with humility as examples to the flock. If pastors and church members can remember that a pastor is not expected to be perfect or to be all things to all people but is only required to work with and love his or her people and be faithful to God's calling in Christ, we all might have a better vision of what pastoral ministry really is and could be.

Questions for Study

1. *What are the most important qualifications of a pastor?*
2. *What can a pastor do in the Presbyterian Church that no one else can do?*
3. *Do you think the job of a pastor is easy or difficult? How can members of the church support their pastors?*

Trustees

An office in the Presbyterian Church which does not trace its roots back to New Testament but is nevertheless equally important in our denomination today is that of trustee.

In colonial days Presbyterians were obligated to appoint trustees because their churches were not maintained by the British or Colonial governments as established churches. Private individuals had to have church property conveyed to them, and they took legal responsibility for it so that the churches could keep what they had.⁴ Later, when the United States was formed and permitted churches to hold and manage property, the position of trustee was changed to meet incorporation requirements of various states.⁵ In our present polity, churches can have trustees function in one of two ways: if the trustees and the session form two separate units the boards are said to be *bicameral*; if all the ruling elders are trustees and the session does the work of the trustees, it is *unicameral*.

According to the *Book of Order*, trustees are to be elected by the congregation at the recommendation of the nominating

committee (G-4.0101) and have the power to receive, hold, encumber, manage, and transfer real or personal property for the church, to accept and execute deeds of title to such property, and to hold and defend property titles—all subject to the provisions of the *Constitution* and the will of the session, congregation, and presbytery.

In many churches, trustees are given responsibility to maintain church buildings and lands, manage the church budget, provide suitable insurance coverage, invest capital, and do long-range financial planning. If the trustees compose a separate board they are always responsible to the session and its oversight and direction. If the church has a unicameral board the session constitutes special committees to undertake trustee functions.

Whichever board functions as trustees, it needs to be understood that all property managed by the local church is not technically owned by that church. As the *Book of Order* points out (G-4.0203), all property held by or for a particular church, presbytery, or synod or the General Assembly is held in trust for the use and benefit of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as a whole and is not the exclusive possession of the governing body that manages it. Although this part of our government is often misunderstood, it makes good sense. Since Presbyterian Churches were founded in accordance with accepted principles of the Reformed tradition, it would not be right to allow a church to be easily turned into a sanctuary housing a congregation with views antithetical to the Presbyterian *Constitution*, or a bowling alley, or the meeting place of a group fomenting violence and murder. Although at the time of reunion in 1983 the possibility of exemption was granted for PCUS churches that might have incorporated under different laws, such an exemption expired June 10, 1991, and is no longer valid (G-4.0208; *Articles of Agreement* 13.1–.4).

Occasionally church members mistakenly assume that trustees are responsible for the practical matters of the church, whereas the session should concern itself only with spiritual issues. Such

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a misunderstanding almost always leads to rivalry and fracture within the congregation. Trustees do deal with everyday issues, but only under the direction of the session, and there is virtually no part of church life that is not the session's responsibility. What is more, it is incorrect to imagine that trustees do not need to have the spiritual concerns of the church in mind. Trustees must be men and women of spiritual wisdom and power, persons who are deeply committed to Jesus Christ and the mission of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and who understand and support the overall program of the church.

In most churches that have two boards the issue of authority never needs to be raised. If the trustees and session keep in constant communication, if each sends representatives to the meetings of the other board, and if the moderator acts as a coordinator of activities, the two can work as true parts of the body of Christ, almost like two hands of the same church, always with Christ as the head.

At a time when the management of church finances is extremely difficult and the maintenance of property is very time-consuming and costly, at a time when investments can be changed instantly over the Internet, the Presbyterian Church is blessed to have so many women and men with practical and professional experience who can be called on to benefit our congregations and higher governing bodies. As good stewards of the church's property and endowments, they serve an important role in preserving the assets of the church of Christ for future generations.

Questions for Study

- 1. In what sense do the trustees perform a spiritual office?*
- 2. What kind of people should serve on a board of trustees? What kind of talents and experience should they have in your particular church?*
- 3. Should trustees be interested in the mission of the church or just the "nuts and bolts"?*

Deciding That a Call Has Changed: Grapefruit Theology

Those of us who are already serving the church need to remember that God can surprise us with a new calling. Even though the call of an ordained elder or deacon is normally for life in the Presbyterian Church (G-2.0404–.0405), we must all be open to the winds of the Spirit and look for new experiences and fresh opportunities, recognizing that the one who gave us our gifts in the first place may know that our experiences and talents have prepared us for entirely new endeavors. If such a thing happens, it is our responsibility to listen once more to God’s voice and be ready to go wherever we are led, prepared to demonstrate again that, along with Paul, we believe that the God who called us into the fellowship of the Son is faithful and will sustain us to the end (1 Cor. 1:9).

These kinds of changes are always difficult. Very few of us are able to make them gracefully, with style and ease. Yet change comes in our calling, in our churches, at home, at work, and in our private lives, whether we like it or are ready or not. Often we cannot avoid these changes; always we cannot completely control them.

One metaphor that may help Christians understand and deal with changes in call could be called “Grapefruit Theology.” Like all metaphors, it has its limitations. If you push it too far, it falls apart; but it can help us perceive how God works when life is not what we expect.

Think of the church or of life as a grapefruit. It is a whole, an integrated sphere. Yet your life and your ability to make decisions is only one segment of that grapefruit. God expects you to be part of the whole by being faithful in your part. Although you know you are part of the grapefruit, you are not responsible for what happens in the next segment or in a segment on another part of the grapefruit. Not only are you not responsible, but God will not allow you to be. What God expects is for you to be faithful where you are.

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If, for example, the minister accepts a call to a new church, he or she has to make the decision based on what God is calling him or her to do. (The discussion here is about a call, not long-range planning.) If other members of the staff are also considering a change and they cannot share that information because of matters of confidentiality, their responsibility also is to listen to God's voice in their lives and act on it. The rub is that it is incumbent on all parties to follow God's will, even though none of them can see the whole. God is in control and coordinates the final outcome. If I am faithful in my part, and the others are faithful in theirs, God's plan is fulfilled. If we are not faithful, then it is possible that my segment is wrong, and that the whole grapefruit will become rotten, because God's plan for the part—and consequently for the whole—is disrupted. From a human perspective, the changes may seem confusing and uncoordinated. But from God's point of view the mission of the church may be proceeding exactly as planned.

The difficulty of proceeding with changes in ministry despite a grasp of the total picture is what Oswald Chambers calls “the bewildering call of God.”⁶ His language is not inclusive and is quoted exactly.

The call of God can never be understood absolutely or explained externally; it is a call that can only be perceived and understood internally by our inner-nature. The call of God is like the call of the sea—no one hears it except the person who has the nature of the sea in him. What God calls us to do cannot be definitely stated, because His call is simply to be His friend and to accomplish His own purposes. Our real test is in truly believing that God knows what He desires.

If we can understand how God's call works in segments and in the whole, and trust in the knowledge and wisdom of God, we can move to a simplicity and calm that is, as Chambers puts it, “characteristic of the children of God.” As God said to Joshua, “Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord is with you wherever you go” (Josh. 1:9).

Questions for Study

1. Study Paul's change in calling from a Pharisee to a Christian leader in Acts 9. Do you think that Presbyterians are called by God in such a dramatic fashion today?
2. How would a minister know when it is time to change churches? How does God let a church officer know that he or she has something different to do in the church or in a secular vocation?

When Should a Church Leader Resign?

Most members of a church have experienced the departure of a minister. It happens in the life of all congregations periodically: whenever the pastor believes that God is issuing a call to a new church or another job; whenever there is a mismatch between expectations and talents; when retirement finally comes.

Fortunately there is a good bit of help available when this decision needs to be made. Excellent materials can assist ministers and congregations when they decide that a change is necessary.⁷ The *Book of Order* provides the proper procedure for the dissolution of a pastoral relationship (G-2.09), and the General Assembly provides detailed steps to the presbytery's Committee on Ministry to help congregations make an orderly transition.

Unfortunately, similar guidelines are not available for the resignation of church leaders. Although it is usually assumed that an elder, deacon, or trustee will normally serve out a three-year term, that is not always in the best interest of the church or the individual. Even when it is obvious that a leader should leave the session or a board, there is no clear mechanism to enable the departure, short of disciplinary action (D-10.0100–14.0502) or the renunciation of jurisdiction by the leader (G-2.0405; 2.0406; 2.0407). In most churches, moreover, other leaders and church members are reluctant to discuss the problem openly, fearing the painful conflict and hurt feelings that may erupt. Sometimes

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church members try to force out a church leader or minister through subterranean means: snubbing the person in question, refusing to increase a pastor's salary, complaining secretly to the Committee on Ministry, etc. Usually, however, resolution by avoidance or subterfuge is not the best way to proceed. Openness and direct action are healthier for the church and the individuals involved.

If you are a church leader, how do you know when it is time to resign?

1. Certainly it is time to leave the session, board of deacons, or board of trustees if health problems or major changes in your job or family make it difficult or impossible for you to participate actively (G-2.0405). If your continuing absence leaves a real gap, your friends and fellow church members must do the work you should be doing.

2. It might also be time to resign if changes in your lifestyle, your ethical code, or your beliefs put you in direct conflict with one or more of the vows you took when you were ordained or installed (see the discussion in chapter 7 below) or with the high standards our constitution demands of church leaders (see chapter 8), or if actions of the church violate your conscience (F-3.0101).

3. A leader might also consider resignation if he or she feels out of sync with the church most of the time. Although it sometimes seems commendable to "hang in there," "tough it out," or "fight the good fight," nothing very positive is accomplished by the church member who holds on simply because "this is my church, always has been, always will be." If you find yourself losing sleep over session decisions; if you are angry at the minister all the time and have taken upon yourself the task of keeping him or her on track; if you feel it is your duty to protect the church against some real or imagined danger; if you find yourself plotting more and worshipping less; or if you constantly have a knot in your stomach whenever you go into the church building, then it is probably best for your own spiritual health and for the future

of the church to step aside and let someone else shoulder your responsibilities.

4. It may also be time to leave if you find—after discussion with church friends, honest analysis of your own feelings, and careful prayer—that your opposition to church actions, to the minister, or to another leader is not based on Christian commitment or God’s will but is based on deep-rooted resentment, a desire to get even, a personality conflict, or raw power politics. Every elder and deacon takes a vow to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church (W-4.0404g). But if we discover that we are more a part of the problem than the solution, then it may be time, with an attitude of honesty, humility, and forgiveness, to move along.

Although churches like to hide painful conditions, officers find themselves in difficult situations often enough to know it is better to face them honestly and openly, before they cause division and discord within the church that might take many years to heal. As ministers and church leaders, we all have desires for power, feelings that get hurt, and egos that can get in the way of our calling. When we find that we are no longer serving Jesus Christ in joy and love, it may be time to remove ourselves from the conflicted situation and, if necessary, even find a new church where we are more comfortable within ourselves and where our gifts are better appreciated and more useful to God.

Questions for Study

1. *Do you know anyone who has resigned an ordained position?*
2. *Do you know anyone who should resign?*
3. *Ruling elders and deacons are permitted to serve two three-year terms. Do you think it is beneficial and wise for a church leader to serve for six years?*
4. *How do ministers and churches know when a pastoral ministry should end?*

Keep the Faith, Baby!

Being a Presbyterian leader can be a very exciting and challenging opportunity. For many people, God has used the experience to change their lives dramatically as they have taken on new responsibilities, met new people, and learned how the church really works. For new ruling elders, deacons, and ministers, the ordination service can be a very moving experience as they sense the power and exhilaration of God's call. Frequently they are nearly overwhelmed with the seriousness of their task when they are asked, "Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?" (W-4.0404h).

Nevertheless, one does not have to be on a church board for many months or serve as minister for a long time before difficult circumstances create discouragement and anxiety. Serving the church is hard, demanding work, and it is not without reason that Jesus promises his followers that one thing they can be sure of as disciples is persecution and suffering (Mark 13:9–13). Ruling elders, deacons, trustees, and ministers must work hard to create a team atmosphere, a synergistic fellowship, where everyone wins and everyone works for the whole. Church leaders with experience know that problems abound in running a church, that there will always be critics and that nothing worth doing comes easily.

One way to avoid the discouragement that routinely plagues the governing of a church is to make sure leaders are carefully trained before they assume responsibility. Nothing is more frustrating than serving on a board or committee without being told what the expectations are, what the tasks involve, and what the protocols include. Many presbyteries offer leader training classes for the whole presbytery or in regional clusters. If presbytery-wide training sessions are not available, a local church can easily set up its own class to prepare its leaders. Elements that might be given in a typical three-hour Saturday morning class include:

Opening Prayer
The Nature of Church Office
 The Call
 The Excitement
 The Reality
 Keeping the Faith
Discussion of the *Book of Order* and the Role of Governing Bodies
Review of the *Book of Confessions*
The Biblical Concept of Ordained Offices
What Each Board Does in Particular
Our Church Budget
Questions
Final Prayer

It is often helpful to invite teaching and ruling elders from other churches to lead discussion or to ask for assistance from the presbytery's moderator, stated clerk, or executive presbyter.

One way to have some fun (and learn at the same time) is to develop a questionnaire to help new leaders become acquainted with the *Book of Order*. To use the following questions, ask leaders to answer them by themselves without any discussion or reference books. Then go over the questions one at a time, with the whole group, looking up answers in the *Book of Order* and discussing further ramifications.

The D.A. (or Devil's Advocate) asks questions or makes challenging statements on these topics.

I. Policy Questions

A. *D.A. to young parents*: "It does not matter that the minister is out of town. Any one of the ruling elders can baptize your baby."

Response: According to our constitution, who can baptize?
(G-3.0201b, W-3.0403, 3.0406–07)

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- B. *D.A. to custodian*: “You are the one who has to clean up this place, so you should decide when the building should be used and by whom.”

Response: Who is accountable for church property?

(G-3.0201c)

- C. *D.A. to the young adult group*: “Since you are the parents of most of the children in the church school, you can decide when church school and the service of worship takes place. You can even cut out these activities if they conflict with vacation or family plans.”

Response: Who has the authority to decide when and where the service of worship will be held?

(G-3.0201a)

- D. *D.A. to young couple*: “You do not need to worry about your wedding. The session will approve it since they know your parents.”

Response: Who decides whether or not a couple should be married?

(W-4.06)

II. Specific Questions from the *Book of Order*

- A. How often does the session have to meet?

1. Once a month
 2. Quarterly
 3. Whenever the pastor feels like it
 4. Only when the pastor or two ruling elders call it
- (G-3.0203)

- B. Who is the pastor to ministers?

1. The Executive Presbyter
 2. The Committee on Ministry
 3. The Visiting Committee
 4. The Presbytery
- (G-3.0307)

- C. Who draws up the budget of the local church?

1. The Board of Trustees

2. A committee made up of the treasurer, the pastor, and the chairperson of the board of trustees.
3. A budget committee made up of representatives from the session, trustees, and the deacons
4. None of the above
(G-3.0205)

III. Questions from *Robert's Rules of Order*

- A. To raise a question of privilege means to
 1. Inquire about one's social status
 2. Wonder why the pastor is a member of the country club
 3. Ask permission to go to the restroom
 4. Make a request that requires immediate attention because of its urgency (§19)
- B. Which motions are not debatable?
 1. Adopt, accept, or agree to a report
 2. Adjournment
 3. Limit the debate on a pending question
 4. Division of the house
 5. Dispense with the reading of the minutes
 6. All of the above
- C. The "order of the day" refers to:
 1. The order of worship for a presbytery meeting
 2. Sending out for lunch
 3. The prayer used that day from the prayer book
 4. A subject, question, or item of business set in advance to be taken up at a particular time (§40)
- D. An ex-officio member is:
 1. A past moderator of the presbytery
 2. An unofficial member who can attend but must remain silent
 3. An officer of the order of the day
 4. A member of the board by virtue of an office who can speak but cannot vote (§48)

Of course, more than training is needed to prevent discouragement. As leaders called by God, we need to keep our faith

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strong through sharing, prayer, routine worship, and Bible study. Prayer is a powerful tool for doing the church's work and constantly reminds us that as members of the body of Christ none of us is expected to do the work of the whole body alone. Each one can do his or her part, but it is only together that we constitute the whole body, with Christ as the Head (1 Cor. 12:4–31). Part of our work is to keep looking ahead to God's future (Heb. 11:1) and to trust that if we have been called, God will empower us through the Spirit to accomplish whatever has been set out for us to do. As Paul says in Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things in [God] who strengthens me."

Questions for Study

- 1. How do you keep up your strength in times of trouble in the church?*
- 2. Are there any promises in the Bible that help responsible leaders keep their faith when times are tough?*