

ON BEING A PRESBYTERY COMMISSIONER

By Elder Bill Tammeus

We Presbyterians call ourselves “connectional.” That means the congregation bone is connected to the Session bone, the Session bone is connected to the presbytery bone and on and on through the Synod, the General Assembly and any other official church bodies. In fact, when you put all these bones together in the right order you find that the church is the body of Christ.

So you as an elder now are serving as a presbytery commissioner because without you the vital skeletal structure of the church would fall apart.

Because Presbyterians also care about decency and order, you will find all of this connectionalism carefully outlined in the Book of Order. By the way, do you know how to tell when Presbyterians are passionate and even angry about things? It’s when they begin to quote the Book of Order to each other.

One example of the way the Book of Order outlines the roles of elders and ministers of Word and Sacrament is found in W-4.4003e. There you find this ordination question: “Will you be governed by our church’s polity, and will you abide by its discipline? Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them subject to the ordering of God’s Word and Spirit?” If you hadn’t said “yes” to this vow you wouldn’t be serving as a presbytery commissioner now.

In a nearby section of the Book of Order, (W.4.4003i.[1]), you find that elders agree to “share in the government and discipline, serving in the governing bodies of the Church.” As you can see, your participation in church government so important that it’s included in your ordination vows. It helps to define who you are as a church officer.

If you look in G-6.0301 of the Book of Order under Form of Government you find this said of elders: “As there were in Old Testament times elders for the government of the people, so the New Testament Church provided people with particular gifts to share in governing and ministry.” So elders are ordained to govern, and they receive gifts and are commissioned for this very purpose.

Most elders grasp their role in their local churches. It’s pretty simple: Other congregation members elect elders to be members of the Session.

But your duties as elders don’t end with your own congregations because Presbyterians are not congregationalists, even if we often act as if we were. Rather, our polity, or system of government, depends on relationships between and among what we call governing bodies — sessions, presbyteries, synods and the General Assembly. This connectional nature of things is patterned on the early church, and our form of government is biblically based. For an example of that, you might read Acts 15, which describes the Council of Jerusalem. So elders are required to take seriously your relationships beyond the local church.

What else do you need to know about presbyteries? Well, at each meeting of a presbytery, half the commissioners are to be elders and half are to be ministers. When a presbytery meets, each church is to be represented by at least one elder commissioned by that church’s session. There are rules in the Book of Order for how many elder commissioners each church gets and presbyteries may adjust that formula annually to keep parity between elders and ministers. It’s based on how many members churches have. You can look up those rules.

Churches choose their commissioners in different ways. Some choose elder commissioners to serve for a full year and to have one or more alternates accompany those commissioners as observers. By the way, there’s no limit to the number of observers from any one church. Some sessions require that every elder attend at least one presbytery meeting in their term of office. But however your church does that, it’s important to have continuity in your voting representation. Presbyteries now are larger than in the past, so meetings might well be some distance from your home.

As you no doubt already know, presbytery meetings can be baffling or boring or both. To reduce some of the mystery, you may want to ask your pastor to meet with you before attending presbytery meetings to go over what's coming on the agenda and what you may need to do in the way of extra preparation. Remember: As an elder commissioner, you are a full member of presbytery, not just a visitor. So it would be a good idea to take advantage of any training your presbytery may provide for new commissioners prior to each meeting.

Remember that while you are commissioned by your Session to represent it at presbytery meetings, you have the right to make your own judgment on any votes taken there. Presbyterians believe that the people they elect to represent them are to exercise their own judgment and are not meant to poll and present the majority opinion of any constituency. Yes, you should be sensitive to the concerns and points of view of members of your church, but you are to be guided by the Holy Spirit and not dictated to by any group.

After attending presbytery meetings, you or another elder commissioner should report back to your Session. Our presbytery posts highlights of the presbytery meeting on our website (www.heartlandpby.org) and you can use those for your report. Reporting to Session is important because not only do you represent your congregation at presbytery but you also represent presbytery to your congregation. Use your church's newsletter, worship bulletin, Web site and other means of communication to tell your congregation what's going on at presbytery meetings. Perhaps a "Minute for Mission" at a worship service could be used for reporting about presbytery meetings.

As an elder commissioner, you should take the initiative in requesting that your Session send nominations of people to serve on committees of the presbytery, Synod and General Assembly. Then make sure those people report their experiences to your Session and congregation. Your job is to stretch the minds and hearts of your congregation beyond just local concerns. You are the interpreter and communicator for the wider church as it extends beyond sessions local congregations.

If your presbytery elects you as a commissioner* to the Synod or the General Assembly, take advantage of the chance to serve those governing bodies. This can be both rewarding and tiring. So if you're elected, set aside time to study papers in advance, pray for God's guidance and make sure you're well rested so you'll be ready for the strenuous time. But you don't have to be an elected commissioner to attend presbytery, synod or General Assembly meetings. Visitors are always welcome.

Wherever you serve, be ready to voice your opinion. You need not be a trained public speaker. Just say clearly what is on your mind at appropriate times. Remember that it was James, not Peter or Paul, who made the major speech at the Council of Jerusalem.

Presbytery is the congregation in which all PC(USA) ministers have their membership. Meetings begin with worship and allow time for prayer at various intervals. Beyond doing the house-keeping work of the church, you will have the joy of helping to discern God's call to some of our brothers and sisters as they move toward ordination to become ministers. You also will welcome new ministers to our presbytery and celebrate the retirement of some pastors. Most of all, you will serve God by serving the church in this important way.

* In Heartland Presbytery for a church to be considered eligible to send a commissioner to Synod or General Assembly, that church must faithfully send its elder commissioner(s) to presbytery meetings. Interested elders may apply to be a General Assembly Commissioner through the presbytery's Committee on Nominations.