

The Role of Teaching Elders

A Leader Reader by Sharon Youngs

The gifts [Christ] gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11–12).

The new Form of Government, which became effective July 10, 2011, ushered in a number of changes, including new terminology:

- *governing body* is now *council*
- *officer* is now *ordered ministry* (fulfilling a particular function rather than, say, holding a seat on a board of directors)¹
- *elder* is now *ruling elder*
- *minister of the Word and Sacrament* is now *teaching elder*

Why the Change?

It would be more accurate to say the terms are not so much new as recovered from biblical and Presbyterian traditions. *Council* harkens back to the first-century church (Acts 15), and the two ordered ministries—deacons and presbyters—are grounded in Scripture as well (see Eph. 4:11–12; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1; 1 Tim. 5:17).

Presbyters have traditionally been referred to as teaching elders and ruling elders. It was not until the reuniting of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America with the Presbyterian Church in the United States in 1983 that the term *minister of the Word and Sacrament* was even used.

But the switch back to ruling elder and teaching elder is more than a nod to historical tradition. The change lifts up the parity between the two in a time when, consciously or subconsciously, pastors have been considered—by others or even themselves—as higher or more important than elders.

Prayer

Gracious God, we thank you for raising up leaders for various purposes in your church. Especially today we thank you for the gift of teaching elders and all the gifts they bring to us. Endow them with intelligence, wisdom, courage, and most importantly, love. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Unique Functions among Equals

Whether teaching elders, ruling elders, or deacons, the new Form of Government lists common characteristics for those called to ordered ministry: “persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world. They must have the approval of God’s people and the concurring judgment of a council of the church” (G-2.0104a). In addition, they are to “submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life” (F-1.02; G-2.0104b).

However, they also have unique, particular functions, which find their origin in the Principles of Presbyterian Government (1797):

- “Ruling elders are so named not because they ‘lord it over’ the congregation (Matt. 20:25), but because they 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.” (F-3.0202)

- “Teaching elders shall be committed in all their work to equipping the people of God for their ministry and witness.” (F-3.0202)

In essence, ruling elders discern and measure a congregation’s mission and ministry; teaching elders strengthen, equip, and nurture those who are engaged in that work and witness.

As a practical illustration, the similarities and differences between ruling and teaching elders is like going to Home Depot in search of a rake. The first question the orange-vested person assisting you would probably ask is, “Garden rake or leaf rake?” Both are rakes, but each has a particular design because of its particular function. A leaf rake will do little good in preparing a garden for planting, and a garden rake is not much help in gathering leaves. In the same way, a teaching elder may be just as ineffective in taking on the tasks more properly assigned to a ruling elder, and vice versa.

Teaching Elder as Resident Theologian

Of all the changes in terms in the new Form of Government, perhaps the biggest switch is from *minister of the Word and Sacrament* to *teaching elder*.

Am I a Minister?

As Christians, we are all ministers of Jesus Christ. . . . The word “minister” comes from the Greek term *diakonia*, meaning “service.” In the early church, “servants” or “deacons” were those who waited on tables, providing for those in need (Acts 6:1–6). But in the church we are all “deacons” or “servants,” just as our Master said he had come “not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45). We serve, from Jesus’ example, in word and deed (Luke 24:19). He proclaimed God’s Word and “went about doing good” (Acts 10:38). . . . There are no gradations of ministries, no hierarchies. This would go against the direction of the one who washed his disciples’ feet and said his disciples should do the same with each other (John 13:1–20).

—From Donald K. McKim, *More Presbyterian Questions, More Presbyterian Answers* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2011), 70.

The Constitution of the PC(USA)

The Presbyterian Constitution consists of two parts, *The Book of Confessions* (Part I) and the *Book of Order* (Part II). Both parts are important for leaders to read and study.

In commenting on the new title, more than one teaching elder has said that the new term doesn’t change their work, but it does help to clarify it. Perhaps similar to that of a resident theologian, a teaching elder, according to the new Form of Government, is to

“preach and teach the faith of the church, so that the people are shaped by the pattern of the gospel and strengthened for witness and service . . . interpret the mysteries of grace and lift the people’s vision toward the hope of God’s new creation . . . support the people in the disciplines of the faith amid the struggles of daily life . . . seeking always to discern the mind of Christ and to build up Christ’s body through devotion, debate, and decision.” (G-2.0501)

Teaching elders are required to have a theological education. They are expected to have a working, teaching knowledge of Scripture and the Sacraments. They are to help, encourage, and walk alongside others through the mystery, awe, and challenge of being the faithful people of God in today’s world. They are to reflect, within and without, the discipline and joy of the gospel.

None of these requirements or expectations changed with the move from *minister of the Word and Sacrament* to *teaching elder*. Presbyterians have had a deep, historical commitment to education in general and especially when it comes to those called to pastoral ministry.

However, that historical commitment, which has been a distinguishing mark of Presbyterians, creates interesting challenges at this time in the life of the church:

- How do we resolve the financial challenge of a three-year seminary degree for students on one hand, and the financial challenge of increasingly smaller congregations to have a full-time, installed teaching elder on the other? That is, can the church afford such well-educated clergy?

- How do we manage our mutual commitments to maintaining high quality, formal theological education and to becoming more sensitive to receiving ministers from a global church who may not have had much formal education?

These are important questions for the Presbyterian Church regardless of the title of what we call our pastors.

About the Writer

Sharon K. Youngs is Assistant Stated Clerk and Communications Coordinator for the Office of the General

Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She is a minister member of the Presbytery of West Virginia.

Endnote

1. The word *officer* now refers to a person in ordered ministry—deacon, ruling elder, or teaching elder—who is chosen to fulfill a task on a council, such as clerk of session or moderator of session, presbytery, synod, or General Assembly.