

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Regarding ruling elders: ministry without installed pastoral leadership

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A few years ago, the session and members of the church I attend in Louisville, Kentucky, found itself without installed pastoral leadership. And the dissolution of the terms of call occurred under difficult circumstances.

The church continues to provide an important witness to the community, but not just because we were blessed by the presence of several teaching elders who worshiped and worked within the congregation on a regular basis. Were it not for the vital commitment of ruling elders—in the roles of Sunday school teachers, treasurer and financial assistant, committee chairs and members, clerk of session, worship leaders, and the myriad of other roles ruling elders can play—the ministry of the church would have been extremely curtailed if not lost indefinitely.

Our experience may or may not be unique, but my guess is that there are more churches that go through pastoral transitions without the pastoral resources available to them like we had. But even though we were greatly blessed, there may be some similar issues to think through:

What is it like to have the session moderated by someone who is not the installed pastor of the church?

While there is very little technical difference between having an installed pastor moderate or having the presbytery appoint a moderator, there is a greater “cultural” difference:

The session is made up of installed ruling elders and installed teaching elders of that

Under healthy circumstances, the session may take on additional responsibilities in the various ways in which the life of a congregation is expressed. But in particular, new or enhanced responsibilities may include:

Intentional communication with the congregation.

Regular communication with the presbytery, its staff, and its committees.

Discernment of the future of the congregation, in terms of mission and ministry, including the appropriate level of pastoral and professional and/or volunteer staff. This should include consultation with the congregation and presbytery.

Reexamination of the budget and projections of future expenses (including an honest assessment of the facilities

congregation and all members have voice and vote. When a moderator is appointed who is not installed at that congregation, they are not a voting member of the session (*Book of Order*, G-3.0201).

Each moderator has their own style working with a session. No style is wrong—every style takes some time to which to adjust.

The clerk and moderator have to negotiate roles regarding agenda, reports, etc.

More time must be spent exploring history and context surrounding each item of business.

What are some of the implications of having a “vacant pulpit”?

Many churches have a vacant pulpit for at least a short time during a pastoral transition. However, if the vacant pulpit is declared and there is no definite plan for filling the pulpit in the near future, it can lead to a time of uncertainty—questions about the ministry, the viability of the congregation, the mission and witness in the community, and many more. The psychological effects of being a vulnerable congregation—or even an at-risk congregation—can weigh heavy.

This may also be an opportunity for great gifts to emerge:

Support from presbytery leadership and the committee on ministry (or your presbytery’s similar ministry);

Opportunity to reexamine the congregational mission and witness;

Coming to understand congregational identity in a new way.

How might the role of session change?

The role of the session will change during a pastoral transition. Exactly how much and in what ways depends on the way in which the session engaged the previous staff and how much of a partnership for congregational leadership existed with the previous pastor. Like many churches, we relied on the pastor for much of the work of the congregation and often allowed the pastor to fill the void of leadership when we neglected to fulfill our own responsibilities. So the work that we had to take on during the transition was much greater than it should have been.

The session has great responsibility for the ministry and witness of the congregation, including pastoral care, worship, outreach, stewardship, and personnel. Though a pastoral transition can be difficult, causing grief and questions, it does not have to bring the ministry of the congregation to a standstill.

So my message to congregations in times of transition is this: God will provide! And I don’t mean that in the passive sense—that you just stand still, ignore movements of the Spirit, and God will provide you with a new pastor. I mean that God will provide, and has already provided, your congregation with all that it needs to do ministry. You just need to be God’s partner in the process and push yourself beyond your comfort zone and discover leadership skills that were unknown or untested. The church is stronger than any particular person or role—teaching elder or ruling elder!

helpful resources include:

On Calling A Pastor

Models of Ministry

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and other liabilities) and checking those assumptions out with the congregation.

Providing additional pastoral care to one another, and/or making sure the pastoral care needs of other employees, volunteers, and members are being met.

For more about the information provided here:

Please contact Martha Miller at martha.miller@pcusa.org and browse the Ruling Elders Web site.

Read this post in Español and 한국의.

Tags: leadership, monthly, ordered ministry, pastor, regarding ruling elders, ruling elders

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