

OVT-005: On amending G-2.0301 to allow congregations to elect members as ruling elders for service to the larger church. Sponsor: Synod of Northeast

Recommendation

The Synod of the Northeast overtures the 224th General Assembly (2020) to direct the Stated Clerk to send the following proposed amendment to the presbyteries for their affirmative or negative vote:

Shall G-2.0301 be amended as follows: [Text to be inserted is shown in italic.]

“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 discernment of God’s Spirit and governance of God’s people. Accordingly, congregations should elect persons of wisdom and maturity of faith, having demonstrated skills in leadership and being compassionate in spirit. 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. Ruling elders, together with ministers of the Word and Sacrament, exercise leadership, government, spiritual discernment, and discipline and have responsibilities for the life of a congregation as well as the whole church, including ecumenical relationships. When elected by the congregation, they shall *ordinarily* serve faithfully as members of the session. *Congregations may also elect members as ruling elders to exercise spiritual leadership in a broader sense, in other specific capacities including service in higher councils, without the requirement that they first serve a term on the session.* When elected as commissioners to higher councils, ruling elders participate and vote with the same authority as ministers of the Word and Sacrament, and they are eligible for any office.”

Rationale

This overture grew out of the Synod of the Northeast’s New Way Forward reorganization. Convinced that full participation—comprising both voice and vote—is essential for true inclusion of more people of color existing within the synod as well as younger Presbyterians in synod governance. Recognizing the core values of the New Way Forward to increase participation of diverse people of color as well as to create space for younger leaders, the synod began to make this happen in many ways. It became clear that the length of time necessary for ruling elders to “come up through the ranks” of session and presbytery service delays younger Presbyterians’ participation in synod work, such that they are no longer young. The synod began to include limited numbers of non-elders in synod governance. In the remedial case of *Mackellar v. Synod of the Northeast*, the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission ruled this voting participation by non-elders to be unconstitutional, noting that the only way this could happen would be through constitutional amendment.

Synod leaders began to imagine ways more diverse people of color and younger people could come to the table with both voice and vote, so the synod’s membership could more truly represent the church as it actually is. This overture is the outcome. While retaining the locus of election in the congregation, and of examination, ordination, oversight, and training

in the session, this amendment allows a nontraditional path to ordination not only for young people and representatives of color, but also for other categories of members who, for reasons unrelated to their abilities, are not able to begin their ordained service with a term on the session.

Here are some examples of how individual members, as well as the church at large, could benefit from such new flexibility:

- *Spouses and children of pastors* often cannot accept a seat on the session because of local conflict-of-interest policies, but may have much to offer to higher councils or their working groups.
- *Employees of congregations*—such as Christian educators, musicians, or administrative personnel—may likewise be prevented by session policy from accepting a seat on the session, but could serve in higher councils or their working groups.
- *Young people* whose attendance at a college or university makes it difficult for them to attend frequent meetings of their church's session may yet be able to participate in less frequent higher-council meetings closer to their college or university.
- *Leaders of new worshiping communities or immigrant fellowships* that do not have sessions could exercise spiritual leadership by being received as a member of a neighboring congregation, then elected and ordained in that congregation to serve the nontraditional community. This would assist higher councils in advancing the foundational principle that “the unity of believers in Christ is reflected in the rich diversity of the Church's membership” (F-1.0403).
- *Mission workers* could be ordained as ruling elders prior to deployment, even if their deployment plans make immediate service on their church's session impossible.
- *Members with superior skills to serve as clerk of session*, whose sessions have no vacancies, could be elected and ordained as elders so their session would then be able to elect them as clerk.

Along the way, the synod discovered that this proposal is not new. In commending to the church, *A Proposal for Considering the Theology and Practice of Ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, the 204th General Assembly (1992) encouraged study of a number of reforms related to ordained service. In the years since the issuance of that report, many of these proposed changes have been drafted and approved. Notably, with the adoption of the new Form of Government in 2011, it became possible for congregations to elect deacons to be individually commissioned and ordained (G-2.0202), without their having to begin service with a term on a board of deacons.

Celebrating the valuable service of ruling elders who are no longer on the session, the *Theology and Practice of Ordination* report points out that “all elders in a congregation, even those not in active service on the session, bear continuing personal responsibility for strengthening and nurturing the faith and witness of members through prayer, conversation, participation and leadership in congregational life. Some elders find themselves called by God specifically to nurture the life and faith of the church at other levels as well” (p. 84).

The 1992 report continues with this recommendation for change:

Persons manifesting the requisite gifts and character for the office might appropriately be elected and ordained to this office at the request of a particular governing body or agency of the church, as an alternative to election to service on the session of a local congregation. Ministers of the Gospel serving in specialized contexts have been so elected and ordained for years. In order to preserve the representative character of office (not merely that of elder but other offices as well) and to reflect the right and

responsibility of some community of God's people to test the gifts and character of those who represent it, persons should not ordinarily be called to exercise the office unless the congregation in which they hold membership is willing to elect them to it.

The emergence of this or some other similar manifestation of the elder's office would permit the wider church to make use of the gifts and graces of persons who, for reasons unrelated to their gifts (certain church professionals, spouses of ministers, and so on) ordinarily are not elected to service on the sessions of the congregations in which they hold membership. ...

Within the current manifestations of the elder's office, those engaged in long-term, full-time ministries of service within the church are prevented from responding to God's call for them to exercise the core functions of the office. This is because the office of elder — unlike that of Minister of the Gospel — depends (at least initially) on a pattern of limited rotary-term service on a board. **There is no reason, in principle at least, why the flexibility possible within the minister's office should not be possible within other offices as well, including that of the elder.** (pp. 87–88).

The Form of Government presently allows for the election and ordination of deacons independently of service on a board of deacons. It also allows ministers of the Word and Sacrament to be elected and ordained to service in specialized ministry, without having to start their ministry as installed pastors of congregations. The synod believes it is time for the church to honor the common foundation of all ordained ministry in *diakonia*, or God service, as well as the parity of presbyterial ministries, by allowing ruling elders to be elected and ordained without their having to immediately serve a term on the session.

This proposal would not in any way bypass the ordinary means by which a congregation elects gifted members for ordained service. Therefore, it is entirely consistent with the sixth Historic Principle that “the election of persons to the exercise of this authority, in any particular society, is in that society” (F-3.0106). Those identified for service would still need to be nominated by the congregation's nominating committee, elected by the congregation, examined and trained by the session, and ordained in a service of worship.

Like all other ruling elders, those who are elected and ordained in this fashion would be ordained for life and would exercise their ministries under the ecclesiastical oversight of the session. In training and examining members who are elected in this way, sessions should bear in mind that persons ordained for service to the larger church may in future years be elected and installed as session members.

As in the case of any other ruling elder serving in higher-council work, sessions should expect these individuals to report periodically to them on their service to the larger church.

The effect of this proposed amendment is permissive rather than restrictive. It does not impose this alternative route to ordained service on any congregation, but rather provides flexibility for uncommon situations so Christian disciples may fully exercise their gifts in service to our Lord.

Concurrence

Newton Presbytery

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