

## COMMITTEE ON CHURCH DOCTRINE

(A&P 2016, p. 251–58, 26)

### **A STUDY OF PRESBYTERIAN POLITY: ITS DISTINCTIVES AND DIRECTIONS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY**

For several years, the Committee on Church Doctrine has been working on a study of “Presbyterian Polity: Its Distinctives and Directions for the 21st Century”. Following a number of revisions, we are pleased to present the following document to the 2016 General Assembly. Our intent is to ask that the document be commended to the church for study and response. As the dynamics of Canadian society change with great rapidity and the shape of all organizations and institutions are being examined and challenged, we believe reflecting on our governing processes and core understandings is of great importance, if we intend to engage effectively our neighbours and our world with the grace and truth evident in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The document asks some questions for consideration within the text. We hope it will evoke others and look forward to considering the responses of the various courts of our church.

#### **Introduction**

“[F]or though they keep up a form of religion, they will have nothing to do with it as a force.”

(2 Timothy 3:5, Moffat translation)

For many generations, The Presbyterian Church in Canada sat comfortably near the centre of Canadian society, resting on our perception of ourselves as one of the founding traditions (together with the Roman Catholic and Anglican) that shaped Canadian history. As society has become both more secular and more diverse in recent generations, and as we have come to acknowledge and appreciate other heritages, including those of First Nations peoples, we have become less certain of just who we are as a church and what place we have in that society. This has provoked questions about the relevance and importance of the church. Some question the exclusive nature of the claims of Christ; others have decided that they have no need to be part of any community of faith; and still others are content to engage in spiritual quests apart or aloof from an ordered or organised religious entity. An increasing number of people now affiliate with a variety of non-Christian faith groups or deny any belief in a god of any description.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada experiences these trends measurably in a decline in membership, participation and income; and immeasurably in feelings like uncertainty about what our purpose and presence in Canadian society should be. We can choose how to respond to those tensions. The easiest choice is to focus on the church as a human organization, considering this simply a management challenge to be solved by following the rules and procedures developed over the years.

In this case, the easiest answer is almost certainly wrong, and leaves us open to holding firmly to the forms of godliness while missing the true power of new life in Jesus Christ. We are more likely to find that power by looking past the procedures to the first principles that lie behind them, looking into why the rules and procedures were created and what values those rules were intended to incarnate.

Reformed and Presbyterian polity has provided the framework for much of our life as the Church of Christ. Our Reformed emphases on the supreme authority of scripture (“the only rule of faith and life”), the importance of a defined theological confession (“This we believe...”), the collegiality and plurality of shared oversight and mutual accountability (“elders”, plural in each congregation and equal numbers of ministers and elders in the presbytery and higher courts), and an orderly record (regularly “attested” which has ensured a long and retentive corporate memory) have all served us well. Any substantive changes contemplated to our polity must be rooted in a clear or clearer understanding of scripture, adequately based on and growing out of our theological confessions, and need to safeguard the strengths inherent in the shared oversight and mutual accountability which remain part of what it means to be Presbyterian. There is a present danger amid a climate of widespread change that we may fail to know what we have until it is gone.

A distinguishing characteristic of The Presbyterian Church in Canada is the way we make decisions through a system of representative courts. The rules tell us how those courts are constituted, but in recent years following those rules has not left us with confidence that we have been able to respond faithfully and effectively in our changing society.

The rules say “A court can be convened only by its moderator.” (Book of Forms section 6) This seems to create an office of presiding elder, but the historic Reformed confession is that directive authority rests not in an individual, even one styled as first among equals, but in a court meeting together to discern the voice of the Spirit. In a society that looks to organizational charts to define who is in charge and who is responsible, what does it mean to place authority and responsibility not in an individual, but rather in the collegial deliberations and shared ministry of elders called together as shepherds under the authority of the Good Shepherd?

The rules say “The session shall assign the names of all members and adherents to the elders who shall keep a list of the names and addresses of those assigned to them, and shall cultivate a personal relationship with those persons through visiting, counselling and encouraging them in the Christian life.” (Book of Forms section 109.4) How does this activity grow out of the church’s call to make disciples, to help people grow in the grace of Jesus Christ? What kind of gifts does a person need to fulfil this calling? Does this unfairly limit who can faithfully serve as a presbyter? In a society increasingly sensitive to privacy concerns and governed by privacy laws, how do elders and ministers work together as equals in providing pastoral care and counsel to individuals and families?

Our Reformed confession is that “the organic unity of the church is maintained in a hierarchy of courts (in contradistinction to a hierarchy of persons); the authority of which courts is ministerial and declarative”. (Book of Forms section 3) In this hierarchy of courts, presbyteries oversee the work of sessions. The rules set standards for how presbyteries shall oversee the records of sessions, such as “It is required of minutes that: The number of each page shall be written in full where it is not printed.” (Book of Forms section 27.1) Do these standards adequately ensure the church is working together in faithfulness to Christ’s mission? Or is a different kind of oversight required?

The changing society in which we live calls for a church that does not rest on its heritage. It needs a church focused on its calling as a community sent forth by Jesus Christ to proclaim the word of God, to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ, to lead people to life in a new kingdom or realm of the Spirit. It needs a church dedicated not to maintaining an institution, but to building a new community.

The heritage of polity we have received from previous generations has given us the place where we stand. Over the years it has preserved the community of faith in which we live. The challenge today is how to build on that foundation so that this community can respond to new challenges and become a place where future generations can be nurtured in the faith we received from Jesus Christ.

Do we need different rules and procedures? Or a different way of looking at those rules and procedures? Perhaps the way our Book of Forms describes the activities of church courts leads us to see them primarily as agents of administrative control and institutional maintenance. How could we rewrite them to make our calling as a community with a mission clear? Darrell Guder in his Laidlaw lecture (2015) challenged the church to recognize that the Christendom model of maintenance ministry is no longer adequate for a church in a culture in which a missional model is required.

### **Towards a study of church polity**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “polity” as “a form or process of civil government or constitution”.

Polity, or church organization and government, has largely been taken for granted by many individuals, congregations and courts in The Presbyterian Church in Canada. As much of our Presbyterian polity has been bequeathed to us as part of our Reformed heritage, we have not had to think too long or too deeply about how it was constructed. How we conceive of the nature of the church has a substantial impact on how we approach the forms and processes of our governance.

Historically, the Presbyterian Church has affirmed and espoused a form of government that emphasizes a shared leadership by “presbyters” – teaching and ruling elders, who are spiritually equal in authority and mutually accountable. We are organised on four levels, sometimes called courts, each with defined areas of oversight. The local congregation is led and overseen by the session, composed of a pastor or pastors and a plurality of elders, elected by the congregation, but ordained – set apart – as examples to the believers and to the community at large to which the congregation bears witness. Congregations in close proximity to each other are grouped in presbyteries, composed of equal numbers of pastors and representative ruling elders. Provincial or regional conference among the leadership is facilitated by synods, which now may be either representative or all-inclusive of the membership of the

presbyteries. Nationally, the General Assembly gathers representatives, appointed by the presbyteries, together on an annual basis to oversee the whole and to facilitate and coordinate corporate witness to the country and to the world.

Is the expression “the courts of the church” still helpful? In what other ways might we describe shared leadership and governance that is collegial and mutually accountable?

Apart from one relatively recently revised section on formal ecumenical shared ministries (Book of Forms section 200.13), there is very little said in our polity about local inter-denominational co-operation or work with para-church agencies. Yet in many communities and congregations, current reality is that there is much in the way of such collegial support and co-operation in Christian ministry to the local community.

Beyond national geographic borders, the formal governance process is consultative and fraternal, rather than definitive or legislative. We have relations and partnerships with other Presbyterian and Reformed churches and with other branches of the Christian church espousing other forms of polity (most are Episcopalian, although some are Congregationalist). It could be argued that a lack of a formal structure for Presbyterians beyond national borders is a weakness of our polity and one which may need further reflection and redress in the present age of globalisation.

How might our polity better reflect existing and future ecumenical and international relationships?

### **The Church – Marks and Ministry**

We confess in the Nicene Creed that we believe in “one holy catholic apostolic church”. In his book, *Models of the Church*, the Roman Catholic Avery Dulles reviews and critiques various models of the church, including the church as institution, as mystical communion, as sacrament, as herald, and as servant. In chapter ten, entitled, “Ecclesiology and Ministry”, he describes how differing understandings of the church lead to different approaches to ministry. Dulles understands Protestant ecclesiology to view the church primarily “as a witnessing congregation” and contrasts a “word-centered” witness with a “sacrament-centered” one espoused by the Roman Catholic communion. (p. 161)

Calvin was clear in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that the essential marks of the church are the preaching of the word and the celebration of the sacraments: “Wherever we see the Word of God purely (or sincerely) preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.” (Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV, chap. 1, sec. 9, Battles trans.; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960; alt. reading taken from Eerdmans edition, cited below)

“We have said that the symbols by which the Church is discerned are the preaching of the word and the observance of the sacraments for these cannot anywhere exist without producing fruit and prospering the blessing of God.” (Calvin, *The Institutes*, Book IV, chap. 1, sec. 10, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1957)

To these two marks, Reformed churches have often added a third mark: discipline rightly administered. “Where Christ is, there is the true Church. Since the earliest days of the Reformation, Reformed Christians have marked the presence of the true Church wherever the Word of God is truly preached and heard, the Sacraments are rightly administered, and ecclesiastical discipline is uprightly ministered.” (Scots Confession, 3.18)

The Belgic Confession reiterates this: “The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true Church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself.” (The Belgic Confession, in *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff, Vol. 3, New York: Harper and Row, 1931, p. 419–420.)

Living Faith describes these marks in more contemporary language: “The church is present when the Word is truly preached, the sacraments rightly administered, and as it orders its life according to the word of God.” (Living Faith, 7.1.6) It goes on to emphasize that the church as the community of those who live in Christ are called to a faithful discipleship: “Disciples of Christ are called to obedience. Jesus said: “If you love me, keep my commandments.”

Obedience involves us totally. Yet as we give ourselves to him we discover that his service alone brings true freedom.” (Living Faith 8.1.1)

In our relatively recent rewrite of chapter 9 of the Book of Forms, we have sought as a church to reform and uphold processes for church discipline which emphasize the collegial nature of our leadership and our mutually accountable responsibilities for the oversight of members (by the session) and ministers (by the presbytery).

The marks of the church, whether they be one, two, three, or four, are to point to Christ. James Bannerman, professor in the Free Church of Scotland, in his classic study, *The Church of Christ*, maintained: “The only true and infallible note or mark of a Church of Christ is the profession of the faith of Christ.” He wrote, “Other things, such as sacraments and ordinances, the ministry, and the outward administration of the Church, are not essential to it, but only accidental; they are necessary for its wellbeing, but not for its being. He goes on to quote Jerome, referring to the prevalence of Arianism in the church of the fourth century: “The Church does not consist of walls, but in the truth of its doctrines; the Church is wherever there is true faith.” [James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, orig. 1869, reprinted Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2015, p. 65]

Accepting that the marks of the true preaching of Christ, the right administration of the sacraments and the appropriate administration of discipline are essential for the church’s wellbeing, our polity needs always to be ordered and reviewed with an eye to ensuring that the forms and processes of church administration enable these marks to be clearly seen.

The marks of the church need to be reflected in the way the church is organised. In the Reformed church, such organisation has been built around the distinctive offices or orders of ministry.

T.H.L. Parker wrote, commenting on Calvin’s commission to re-organise the church in Geneva: “For him, the Church in any place must faithfully mirror the principles laid down in the Holy Scripture. In the New Testament, he found four permanent orders of ministry, and around these he constructed his organization. He prepared a draft document, “Ecclesiastical Ordinances”, which was discussed in committee, somewhat modified, and passed for approval by the City Councils. In this fourfold ministry, the whole life of the Church was covered, its worship, education, soundness and purity, and its works of love and mercy.” (Christian History Institute, [christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/life-and-times-of-john-calvin/](http://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/life-and-times-of-john-calvin/) reprinted from *Christian History Magazine* #12 – Calvin, 1986)

Calvin in his Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances states: “There are four orders of office instituted by our Lord for the government of his Church. First, pastors; then doctors; next elders; and fourth deacons. Hence if we will have a Church well ordered and maintained we ought to observe this form of government.” (*Calvin, Theological Treatises*, J.K.S. Reid, ed., Library of Christian Classics, Ichthus edition, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954)

The Second Book of Discipline reiterates this: “There are four ordinary functions or offices in the kirk of God: the office of the pastor, minister or bishop; the doctor; the presbyter or elder; and the deacon.” (Chapter 2, section 6)

The primary role of ministers ordained as “pastors and teachers” is preaching and teaching. Historically, the role of the “doctor” was to teach doctrine. The primary role of ruling elders is to share in the pastoral oversight of the people. Historically, the primary role of the deacon was the care of the poor and the sick.

Dulles’ review of different models of ecclesiology highlights the dangers inherent in viewing the church as “institution”, modeled on the secular state, in which the exercise of power in administration becomes divorced from the fulfilling of “the spiritual mission of the Church” (p. 154).

H. Richard Niebuhr, Daniel Day Williams, and James M. Gustafson in a book entitled, *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry*, ask a challenging and focusing question: “Is not the result of all these debates and the content of the confessions or commandments of all these authorities this: that no substitute can be found for the definition of the goal of the Church as the increase among men of the love of God and neighbor?”

Accepting that the church does not exist for itself (maintenance, as in the now-past age of Christendom), but to bear witness to Jesus Christ in a non-Christian culture and environment (missional, in our new reality), how might our polity better show a priority for the love of neighbours presently outside and beyond the Church? Is there room for a

recovery of the office of deacon to ensure that the evidence of the church's fourth mark of works of mercy and charity is more visible?

Certainly, as the 2014 General Assembly has affirmed, “a clear and critical priority as a denomination is to renew, equip, and inspire local congregations and missions to fulfil the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19–20) and the Great Commandment (Mark 12:29–31).” (A&P 2014, p. 30) To that end, we would affirm that a key focus of our work on polity needs to be directed toward sessions and presbyteries in their leadership in renewing, equipping and inspiring local congregations and missions. In what ways does the polity of The Presbyterian Church reflect our ecclesiology (i.e. our doctrine of the church)? In what ways does our polity fail to reflect our ecclesiology?

The plurality of elders in the local session, and the spiritual and numerical equality of ministers and elders in the higher courts of the church within our Reformed and Presbyterian practice has served well as a barrier and bulwark against clericalism. What it has not done, at least in recent years, is to prevent us from becoming increasingly immersed – some would say submerged – in administrivia. Neal Mathers in a recent online posting said, “Perhaps we need to ask the question: If presbyteries could only do three things to move the mission of the church in their bounds forward what would those three things be? – I can see referrals from GA, examining records, and chasing down statistical reports not being on the list.” The volume and length of regulations governing the church has grown in recent years almost in direct proportion as the size of the church has shrunk.

At the risk of provoking presbyters and presbyteries by giving them one more internally-focused task, it might be helpful along the lines of Neal Mathers' question to ask presbyteries and sessions to reflect on aspects of our polity which help to facilitate effective ministry, and to identify, with a view to elimination or minimalization, those which do not.

### **A review of the role and responsibility of the session**

Recent initiatives to re-imagine the church in terms of being the “missional church” call for substantial reflection on the contours of church polity, especially at the local level. Acknowledging the call from the 2014 General Assembly for all agencies and committees of the Assembly to give priority to strengthening local congregations, we would review sections 109–113 of the Book of Forms in which the responsibilities of the session are set out. The headings and groupings and the order of these serve to point out emphases which may well have served the church in a settled, Christian culture, but which perhaps do not serve as well to aid in energizing and equipping a missional church in a post- and non-Christian environment to take the gospel to a largely non-Christian population.

The following observations and questions are offered to teaching and ruling elders, to sessions, to presbyteries and to synods as a stimulus for discussion:

#### **1. What does it mean to be an elder or presbyter?**

Is it to be gathered in courts where we are accountable to one another under Jesus Christ? Is it to pray and take counsel together? Is it to be out in the world and the workplace bearing witness, living and sharing with neighbours, colleagues, and strangers the love of God found in Jesus Christ? Is it all of these, and more? How can we recover a sense of mutual accountability to the voice of the Spirit? How can the church – the community of Christ – respond nimbly (i.e. appropriately, quickly and effectively) to what Christ calls us to do today? How might the roles of pastors and ruling elders be different in a missional church?

#### **2. What does it mean to be a session?**

How are the description and delineation of duties in sections 109–113 of the Book of Forms helpful? How are they limiting? (“Duties and Powers” are broken down as “Supervision and Oversight”; “Membership and Pastoral Care”; “Worship”; “Christian Education”; “Stewardship and Mission”.) Would “Responsibilities” be a better introductory tag than “Duties and Powers”?

Is the first task of the session “Supervision and Oversight”? Might we conceive of the session first as a community of mutually-accountable elders who are called as disciples of Jesus Christ to bear one another's burdens and to spur one another on to love and good deeds?

Is the linking of “Stewardship and Mission” really appropriate? Asserting as does section 113.2 that “The session is responsible for seeing that the congregation develops and maintains programs of mission and outreach...” reduces mission to a program. In his essay on “Missional Renewal”, Todd Hobart quotes from Darrell L. Guder et al in *Missional Church: A vision for the sending of the church in North America*, “It has taken us decades to realize that mission is not just a program of the church.” Rather, the church is defined as “God’s sent people”. The quotation goes on to say, “Either we are defined by mission, or we reduce the scope of the gospel and the mandate of the church. Thus our challenge today is to move from church with mission to missional church.” (Craig Van Gelder, ed. *The Missional Church and Denominations*, p. 246)

Would a greater emphasis on “discipleship” be helpful amid or ahead of the section on “Christian Education”?

Congregational renewal in worship has engaged many more than the minister or pastor alone in the conduct of worship. In some congregations, multiple staff and in many congregations teams of volunteers work together in crafting and leading worship, especially with respect to praise, employing a variety of voices and instruments. Readers other than the minister share in the reading of scripture. Although we affirm that the minister is responsible for the conduct and content of public worship, most sessions either directly or through delegation to a worship co-ordination team undertake with respect to worship many other responsibilities than simply “regulating the hours and forms of public worship”.

What might be said about the use of church facilities as a witness to the community and as a means to bridge barriers and build bridges to the local neighbourhood? Nothing concerning online audio and video communication or the use of social media has found its way into any part of our stated polity.

### **A review of the roles and responsibilities of presbyteries and synods**

We would put forward to sessions, presbyteries and synods some questions for study and reflection on first principles:

#### 3. What does it mean to be a presbytery?

In acknowledging the declaration of the 2014 General Assembly “that a clear and critical priority as a denomination is to renew, equip and inspire local congregations and missions to fulfill the Great Commission and the Great Commandment” (A&P 2014, p. 31), we would seek to challenge presbyteries to answer this question from the viewpoint of the congregation.

In the chapter of the Book of Forms pertaining to the role and work of the presbytery, only three relatively short sections (sections 198–200) are “in relation to congregations”, while 52 sections, and many long ones (sections 201–252) are “in relation to the ministry”.

Beyond appointing interim moderators, processing calls, and approving building and borrowing plans, how are presbyteries serving in aiding, equipping and supporting congregations?

There is also a need to renew an emphasis on the planting of new congregations, at the initiative of the presbytery. The underlying assumptions in sections 200.1 through 200.4 appear to be that in most cases congregations will be organized on the basis of a petition from a group of individuals eager to be a congregation. The stated alternative is that the presbytery may “of its own motion” form a congregation, but it first “must give notice to the session of any congregation that may be affected....” All of this is fine, but how can we communicate a vision that challenges and encourages presbyteries to be planting churches as a vital part of its work and witness?

The current framework appears focused on the erection of places of worship and their “character”. Section 200.1 says: “Congregations may be organized and places of worship erected only with the sanction of the presbytery, which should be satisfied that such places of worship are of a suitable character.” A preoccupation with buildings is part of the bane of our existence. The early church met together in homes. The persecuted and missional church in every age has met in fields and camps. The extent of our preoccupation with buildings contributes to time, energy, talents and resources being directed and expended more inwardly than outwardly.

Recognising that large geography is a fact and factor of life in Canada, are some presbyteries too small in terms of numbers to be effective? Should some presbyteries be combined? Should there be provision for some roaming

presbyters to support the work of presbyteries, as the former superintendents of mission did in the synods, in times when The Presbyterian Church in Canada was planting or strengthening more missions and congregations?

#### 4. What does it mean to be a synod?

Part of the impetus for current discussion and decisions around “optional elimination of synods” arises from observations that synods do not have as much “work” or “money” to manage as formerly. Yet our first principles remind us that synods are “for weighty matters, to be intreated by mutual consent and assistance”. (Book of Forms section 274, quoting the Second Book of Discipline, VII, sec. 19)

Presbyteries can go astray, and fail congregations. Small presbyteries, scattered by distance, stretched to the limit through vacancies, or troubled by inter-personal conflicts, may be unable to function in ways that ensure appropriate and necessary oversight of congregations and support for effective missional ministry to the communities in which they are situated, and necessary and appropriate collegial oversight of presbyters. In such cases, it is the role of the synod to intervene to provide what is needed and to ensure mutual accountability.

In addition, synods as corporate entities provide for oversight and organisation for multi-presbytery initiatives and programs, including camps, conferences and retreats which may foster leadership training.

If one or more synods were eliminated, how would the oversight of presbyteries and the coordination of multi-presbytery functions and programmatic initiatives be exercised? How might the polity and ecclesiology of The Presbyterian Church in Canada be more effectively reflected in the processes of committees and boards of the General Assembly?

### **Concluding Reflections**

What is the scriptural context for the way we have done things? How have our procedures expressed the values we confess? And if in our current society those procedures obscure our confession, how can we change those procedures to more accurately reflect the values we learn from Christ’s word? How can we be both reformed and reforming according to God’s word in a rapidly changing context?

In what ways do our existing rules and patterns of doing things set The Presbyterian Church in Canada free to be creatively missional? How do current rules and behavioural patterns get in the way of creativity and mission? He said to me, “‘Mortal, can these bones live?’ I answered, ‘O Lord God, you know.’” (Ezekiel 37:3, NRSV)

#### **Recommendation No. 1** (adopted, p. 26)

That the document “Presbyterian Polity: Its Distinctives and Directions for the 21st Century” be commended to the courts and, in particular, to the clerks of those courts for study and response to the Committee on Church Doctrine through the Assembly Office by August 31, 2017.