

Business as [un]Usual

Notes from the Stated Clerk about the business of the presbytery during this most unusual of times.

There have been a lot of unique constitutional and polity issues popping up as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, situations that are not addressed in the *Book of Order*. In my ‘day job’ as a lawyer, we call this sort of situation “a case of first impression,” because there are no statutes or case law decisions that address or decide the particular issue being presented. And in the past three months, I can tell you, there have been a lot of cases of first impression as we have tried to faithfully address unusual circumstances of church life.

At the advice of a trusted and wise Ruling Elder, I have been reviewing and studying the first section of the *Book of Order*, “The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity,” especially Chapter Three, “Principles of Order and Government.” It seems to me that the Foundations section really articulates who we are, whose we are, and who we are called to be. The Foundations section includes such beautiful principles: The Church is a community of faith... hope... love... witness. The Church seeks a new openness... to see both the possibilities and perils of its institutional forms... God alone is the Lord of the Conscience. We think it the duty... to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other. In our decisions, we seek to find and reflect the will of Christ, not simply the will of the people.

And so, when considering questions of first impression, I have found the Foundations of our polity to be enlightening, comforting, and helpful. If we are seeking the will of Christ, if our focus is creating communities of faith, hope, love and witness, and if we are not elevating institutional forms over the possibility to seek a new openness, and if we are extending the grace of forbearance to those holding a different view, questions of first impression can be resolved with integrity.

Here are some of the Questions I’ve received this month, along with some of my thoughts and responses. I do not pretend to have “all the answers,” and I am certain other, wiser presbyters may have additional or different

thoughts to share. In fact, I invite you to let me know your thoughts, so that I can learn from you. Let's Talk!

Q: How can I watch General Assembly?

A: The 224th General Assembly opens TODAY, Friday, June 19, at 6:00 pm Central Daylight Saving Time. The Assembly is totally on-line, and will occur on three days: June 19, June 26 and June 27. You can follow the business of the Assembly count on PC-BIZ: <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/>

The proceedings will be live-streamed on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/spiritofga>;

and on the GA-PCUSA web page: <https://ga-pcusa.org/>

My best advice: wear your comfy clothes, pop some corn, and release your inner presby-geek self. You know you want to!

Q: How can I find out what this General Assembly will be considering?

A: The Docket for the General Assembly can be found here: <https://ga-pcusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GA224-Online-Docket.pdf>

Please note that the times listed are EASTERN Daylight Saving Time not CENTRAL Daylight Saving Time. Don't be late!

Our PTCA Ruling Elder Commissioner Elona Street-Stewart is standing for election as Co-Moderator (with the Rev. Gregory Bentley). The Co-Moderator election is **TONIGHT**, that's right, TONIGHT at 8:00 pm Central Daylight Time!

PTCA Commissioners to General Assembly:

Ruling Elder Commissioner--Marian Michael, Valley Community Presbyterian Church, Golden Valley, MN

Ruling Elder Commissioner--Elona Street-Stewart, Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, Saint Paul, MN

Teaching Elder Commissioner--Brian Entz, Buffalo Presbyterian Church, Buffalo, MN

Teaching Elder Commissioner--Lisa Johnson, Presbyterian Church of Oronoco, MN

1st Ruling Elder Alternate--John Zwier, The House of Hope Presbyterian Church, Saint Paul, MN

2nd Ruling Elder Alternate--Jean Emmons, First Presbyterian Church, Stillwater. MN

1st Teaching Elder Alternate--Brenda Alexander.

2nd Teaching Elder Alternate--Doug Mitchell.

Q: Can our church elect, ordain and install officers if we are worshiping remotely?

A: Yes! Several PTCA congregations elected officers at electronic/digital meetings, and then ordained and installed them during a recorded/streamed worship service. I am aware of several very creative and lovely ways that congregations have symbolically included the laying on of hands of the newly ordained officers. Please remember that if your congregation's Bylaws do not permit digital/remote congregational meetings, you will need to "ratify" the actions when you are able to have an in-person meeting; and you should strongly consider amending your Bylaws to permit electronic meetings of the congregation and session. Sample language for these provisions can be found here:

https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/32420_final_edited_advisory_opinion_church_in_an_emergency_or_pandemic.pdf

Q: Can we have a Baptism if we are worshipping remotely?

A: This is one of the "first impression" questions, and I would love to hear your thoughts—both about my musings as well as your own approach to the question.

The Session has responsibility to provide that the Sacraments are rightly administered and received (G-3.0201b). Baptism is authorized by the Session and administered by a minister of the Word and Sacrament (W-3.0403). In exceptional circumstances, the Session may authorize a Baptism beyond the traditional congregational worship setting (W-3.0403). Just as we have adjusted and adapted the administration of the Lord's Supper during this time of remote worship, some congregations are now asking how we may celebrate the Sacrament of Baptism during a remote worship service.

At the present time, there are no Advisory Opinions from our Stated Clerk J. Herbert Nelson addressing this issue. We do, however, have guidance from Stated Clerk Nelson in an Advisory Opinion regarding the administration of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, permitting adaptations so the Sacrament may be celebrated during remote/electronic worship services, which may provide some assistance to us.

https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/advisory_opinion_communion_in_an_emergency_or_pandemic.pdf

Is it possible to apply this creative approach to a remotely celebrated Baptism?

If the worship service is being pre-recorded or live-streamed, *and* the person to be baptized can be present, *and* it is possible to maintain safety precautions (social distance, masks and gloves), the Baptism could be recorded or celebrated during the live-streamed service. The parents and those present answer the constitutional questions.

If the person to be baptized (and family) cannot be present for the recording of the service, *some* congregations have planned and held "remote" Baptisms, similar to the administration of the Lord's Supper in a remote worship service. The pastor administers the Sacrament: The pastor asks the constitutionally required questions of the parents, who answer the questions in their home as they view the service. The questions for the congregation are answered by those present when the service is recorded, and by congregation members viewing the service later. As the pastor pronounces the classic sacramental words of baptism, the parents apply

water to the child's head. When the service is pre-recorded, some pastors have been present at the family's home/yard/deck to perform the Baptism during the replay or viewing of the recorded service.

In the event of "remote" baptism, a "reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant" (W.0205) may be held when in-person worship resumes.

Q: Should we count the number of persons who are "attending" our virtual worship services and Christian education classes?

A: Each year, our clerks of session complete statistical reports for the General Assembly; these reports include "attendance" data. When we are gathered for worship in our sanctuaries, it is easy to "count heads" and determine how many persons are present. When we are worshipping remotely, determining "attendance" is a bit trickier. And, frankly, determining "attendance" is probably not high on any of our lists of priorities right now. So: Don't Sweat It.

Having said that, I am aware that some of our congregations are noticing that on-line viewership of their services regularly exceeds the average number in attendance before COVID-19. If this is true for your congregation, I would love to have a conversation with you about how you're responding to this blessing!

Q: Our church rents space to another organization, and they want to begin meeting in the church building again. What are our options?

A: It depends. If your congregation has questions about your rights and obligations and risks as a landlord, please contact the stated clerk (statedclerk@ptcaweb.org) and Barbara Anne Keely, Chair of the Board of Trustees. We will assist you as best we can.

Q: Will the presbytery be moving forward with the 'restructuring plans'?

A: YES. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Institutional Audit begun in February, and the tragic killing of George Floyd a few weeks ago, The Presbytery Leadership Team's task force is reassessing the plans, and may be recommending some adjustments, tweaks, updates and changes,

proving once again that we are Reformed and ALWAYS Reforming. Stay tuned.

Q: In response to the additional stress related to the COVID-19 situation, our church wants to offer our pastor some special or additional financial support and/or additional paid time off as a “one-time” gift. Is this a change in the terms of call?

A: WOW! In order to be fully informed about any unexpected tax consequences for the pastor, I recommend that the Session consult with a tax expert knowledgeable about clergy compensation. A call to the Board of Pensions would also be wise, as a financial gift may need to be included in the pastor’s compensation as reported to the Board of Pensions. Providing a “gift” to the pastor is within the authority of the Session, which determines the distribution of the congregation’s benevolences and then provides full information to the congregation regarding these decisions. G-3.0205.

Q: When is the Presbytery going to open?

A: The Presbytery is open now. Although we are working remotely most days, your presbytery staff continues to respond to questions, provide support to our congregations and ministry leaders, and to fulfill the tasks and responsibilities described in our position descriptions. The Presbytery Committees, Boards, Commissions, Task Forces and Working Groups continue to meet, serve and focus on the ministry and mission of the presbytery.

Q: How did the surgery go, and when will the stated clerk be back at work?

A: I am home, recovering, following my doctors’ recommendations about therapy and cardiac rehab, and feeling stronger every day. The focus this week has been on a curious concept called “energy conservation,” which, to my surprise, has nothing to do with turning off the lights when you leave a room. Apparently, I have much to learn about this concept, as my occupational therapist gave me an “F” this week when I admitted I had not taken a nap, and my assignment for next week is to take a nap every day. I am buoyed by the cards, telephone calls and prayer support. Thank you!