Presbyterian Basics- Part 1: What is the Presbytery?

“Presbytery” has many meanings to many of our members. When we say, “The Presbytery should…” or “We have a Presbytery meeting this week,” we use the same word but very differently. When someone says, “the Presbytery,” we need to ask ourselves, “ How are they using the word Presbytery?”

Part of the reason for this complicated word is its definition. The *Book of Order* (*G-3.0301 Composition and Responsibilities*) defines *“the Presbytery”* as *“the council serving as a corporate expression of the church within a certain district and is composed of all the congregations and ministers of the Word and Sacrament within that district.”*

This is what stands out: “The presbytery” is defined as a combination of both individuals (ministers) and organizations (the congregations) within a defined geographical area. Our congregations are part of a Presbytery, part of a Synod, which is part of the General Assembly and the Presbyterian Church USA. Within our polity, those who attend Presbytery meetings or participate in committees and ministry teams do so by their membership within a member congregation of the Presbytery. It is also worth noting that it is at this point where the *core value* of parity between ruling and teaching elders in our decision-making is articulated.

Two aspects of the definition should be highlighted. The *Book of Order’s* definition of Presbytery illustrates what is sometimes called the “we” definition of Presbytery. You will hear this definition when people say things like “We are the Presbytery, ” “We have a Presbytery meeting this week, ” or “I am part of the Presbytery of Mackinac.” The Presbytery is the collective community comprised of every minister member and every congregation member, which comprise the Presbytery of Mackinac.

The second is the phrase “corporate expression of the church.” Presbyteries, by their very nature, are an expression of the church, distinct from local expressions of the church (a congregation) but inseparably comprised by and connected to the church’s ongoing work in response to God's call.

I remember the first “Presbytery” event I ever attended. It was in the fall of 2014, for a Presbytery ‘Budget and Finance Committee’ meeting in Mackinac City. I remember sitting in that room with the committee members, thinking, “I don’t understand half of what they’re talking about.” But the people in that room I connected with through the Presbytery were my people! Then, through the years, I served as the commissioner to the Presbytery and the Synod and then as a delegate to the 225th General Assembly in Louisville, Kentucky, in 2022. Through these trips, I learned that the Presbytery was a place where I fit in, where I belonged, and where I could call home.

My wife, Chris, and I have been active in Spruce Presbyterian Church for fifteen years. We have served as greeters, session members, commissioners, committee chairs, and session clerks. We will never retire! We have sometimes been asked why we keep doing what we do, and the answer is pretty straightforward: it is home. No one would blame us if we took a step back, but we love our church, the fellowship, and the wonderful, uplifting feeling while we are there.

This story illustrates why I keep working to help our Presbytery become what God wants us to be. In addition to each member's home church, we need our people to become part of the Presbytery of Mackinac.

In many ways, the Presbytery feels like home to us. It is our family, complete with the disagreements, history, and rivalries that naturally arise in any family. If you are reading this article, you are one of my people, and I am one of you.

This connection is not simply a matter of choice but a calling to be part of the church's corporate expression. We are united not for our own sake but for the sake of God’s work in the world.

My next newsletter, Part 2, will discuss the Presbytery’s responsibilities.

Don't hesitate to contact me anytime to discuss further how you and your church can become more involved in the Presbytery’s ministry. I hope to hear from you soon!