

# An Overview for New Commissioners on Being a Commissioner to Presbytery

By Lois Stair, former General Assembly Moderator

"Will you be governed by our church's polity, and will you abide by its discipline? Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them subject to the ordering of God's Word and Spirit?" All of us who are elders and ministers in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have said "Yes" to this vow. (G-14.02.07)

In addition, elders have agreed to "Share in the government and discipline, serving in the governing bodies of the Church," (G-14.0207.1). Our participation in church government is of such prime importance that it is included in our ordination vows and therefore is our basic understanding of who we are as church officers.

Our Form of Government says of elders: "As there were in Old Testament times elders for the government of the people, so the New Testament Church provided people with particular gifts to share in governing. We have received gifts and are commissioned for this purpose.

Most of us as elders understand our role as it pertains to the local church. The members there chose us, we know our own congregations well, we recognize the duty of the session and we accept its responsibilities.

If we are Presbyterians, we must understand and do more. We are not congregationalists, although we often seem to act as though we were. Our system of government depends on relationships between bodies we call governing bodies, sessions, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly. The practice of the primitive Church is our pattern. Our government is biblically based, recalling such passages as Acts, Chapter 15, which gives the account of the local church, for these are at the heart of what it means to be Presbyterian.

At each meeting of the Presbytery, one-half of the commissioners are to be ministers. When the presbytery meets, each church shall be represented by an elder commissioned by the session with the following additional provisions: "Churches with membership over 500 shall be represented as follows: 501-1000 two elders, 1001-1500 three elders, 1501-2000 four elders, 2000 plus five elders. The presbytery may request additional commissioners from particular churches in order to redress any imbalance between the numbers of elders and ministers (G-11.0100)."

It is good practice to choose the commissioner from your session to serve for a full year and to have an alternate who can accompany your commissioner as an observer. Some sessions require that every elder attend at least one presbytery meeting during their term of office. It is important to have continuity in your voting representation, but there is no limit to the number of observers from any one church. Today presbyteries are larger than in the past, and meetings might well be some distance from your home. Presbyteries plan their own meeting schedule, to make sure your voice is heard in determining times most convenient for full attendance.

Presbytery meetings can be baffling or boring or both, but this need not be. Ask your pastor to meet with you before you attend for the first time so that you know what business is being transacted, what special events planned, what important decisions made. Remember that you are a full member of presbytery and not just a visitor. Many presbyteries provide training for new commissioners prior to each presbytery meeting. Take advantage of this if your presbytery provides such training.

Remember that while you are commissioned by your session to represent them at the presbytery meeting, you have the right of private judgment, "God alone is the Lord of the conscience." The Presbyterian meaning of representation is that persons are chosen and trusted to follow their own determination and not meant to poll and present the majority opinion of any constituency. While you need to be sensitive to the concerns and points of view of the members of your church, you are to be guided by the Holy Spirit and not dictated to by any group.

When you have attended presbytery make sure that time is docketed for a report to your session. Some presbyteries prepare reports on the major actions of the presbytery, which can help you in making your report. It will help if you duplicate copies for each member outlining what you wish to say. It is not so much that you represent them at presbytery, as that you represent presbytery to them, so be clear and concise. If several from your session have attended, plan with your pastor for sharing your report. Make sure that your church bulletin records your attendance and any important news your congregation should hear from the presbytery meeting. Perhaps a "Minute for Mission" during Sunday worship could occasionally be used for reporting about the presbytery meeting or other important events from other governing bodies.

Take the initiative in requesting your session to send nominations to serve on the committees of the presbytery, the synod, and the General Assembly, and when persons from your church have been elected to serve in other governing bodies try to find ways for them to report their experiences back to your session and congregation. You are the means for stretching the minds and hearts of the local congregation beyond limited and local concerns, so they may know more fully the mission of the Church at large and feel a part of it. You are the interpreter and communicator for the Church as it extends beyond the session of the local congregation. Your report is actually a witness for the Church.

If your presbytery chooses you as a commissioner to the synod or the General Assembly, I hope you will take advantage to take part in those governing bodies. When you do, prepare well, ask presbytery to provide an orientation for you with former commissioners, set aside time to study papers in advance, pray for God's guidance and rest so you will be ready for a strenuous time.

In all governing bodies involvements be ready to voice your opinion. You don't have to be a silver tongued orator; often the fresh new voice is the one best heard. Remember it was James, not Peter or Paul, who made the major speech at the Council of Jerusalem.

When I was a commissioner to the General Assembly the first time in 1959, I couldn't have been more green. I was one of the few women and one of the few under forty. The only people I knew were those from the Milwaukee Presbytery, and we had just met. Furthermore, our seats were in the very last row of the huge auditorium. But the worship that began that Assembly let me know this too was a part of the Church, that God was with us and so I had courage. This too can be your experience - to expand your vision of the Church and to deepen your commitment of faith. All joy be yours!