

Raising Up Leaders for the Mission of God:

A Report of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Joint Committee on Leadership Needs

Background:

In April 2009¹ the Committee on Theological Education (COTE) convened a Joint Committee on Leadership Needs (JCLN) with the General Assembly Mission Council (GAMC) and the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly (COGA) in response to broad and changing leadership needs in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) (PCUSA). Each Committee designated members that met several times via conference call and once face-to-face. Three key questions for the PCUSA framed the Joint Committee's work and this report:

- What is the current context of ministry and mission?
- What kind of leader do we need in today's context?
- How can the PCUSA resource these leaders?

WHAT IS OUR CURRENT CONTEXT?

We live in a time of major transition. The social, cultural, and religious landscape of North America has experienced dramatic changes in the past half-century. Before 1960, mainline religion, predominantly Christian, had a central place in American culture. This is no longer the case. This massive shift has caused mainline denominations to struggle with their identities and compels them to engage the culture as a field for mission. No longer can we assume that mainline Christianity is somehow "established" as the religious norm. Sweeping changes in our country compel the church to interpret and engage our culture in a much different way, a missional way.

American culture today is market-driven and intensely consumerist. The values of Christian and other major religious traditions appear to have less shaping power in the public square than in the past. There is widespread disillusionment with institutions in general, including the institutional church. These changes make it difficult to preach and to hear the gospel. Where it is proclaimed, its meaning is often bitterly contested.

Some changes present major challenges to mainline denominations that for centuries had fairly homogeneous memberships descended from the European Protestants who founded them. Dominant immigration conduits have shifted from Europe to Latin America and the Pacific Rim, as well as to Africa and all of Asia.

¹ Committee on Theological Education *Minutes, April 2009*, 7 [25]
<http://www.pcusa.org/seminaries/pdf/coteminuteapril2009.pdf>

Most Americans now live in a context in which they either daily encounter, or must determinedly ignore, at least one significantly different culture, often with a different primary language and worldview. In contrast, the PCUSA still has only a very small percentage of members from non-European cultural backgrounds.

Changing work patterns in the globalized economy have encouraged highly transient lifestyles. Populations are concentrated more than ever in larger cities, marginalizing churches and educational institutions that are more distant from urban centers. While new media technologies have introduced new means of connecting diverse populations, these same technologies (coupled with other factors) have led to isolation, social alienation and a cultural balkanization that segregates and separates persons and groups from one another. Too often the result is more distinct and insular economic, social, generational, cultural, and racial-ethnic “communities,” normally with conflicting agendas and values.

In this climate, Christians encounter other major faith traditions as well as the other denominations with which they have long been in ecumenical conversation. Sometimes “traditions” of any kind are hard to locate, as individuals piece together bits from different traditions into their own belief systems. Amid these conditions, the norms and values of traditional forms of Christianity can seem narrow or restrictive.

Demographic changes and economic realities have created a situation in which half of PCUSA congregations can no longer support a full-time minister of the Word and Sacrament. They are instead reliant upon alternative forms of pastoral leadership, including commissioned lay pastors (CLPs), or they have no identified pastoral leadership. According to a 2008 General Assembly Research Services report, the median age of members and elders in the Presbyterian Church is sixty years old.² This reflects the fact that many younger adults who were raised Presbyterian are now either “believers but not belongers,” “spiritual but not religious,” have become involved with non-Presbyterian evangelical congregations or other faith traditions, or have no faith at all. In some specific social and geographic locations, some (often well-resourced) congregations remain alive and well. Some of these are within a more traditional, mainline Presbyterian model of church, some are a combination of traditions and fresh expressions, while others are characterized by new models.

Concepts of PCUSA leadership based in European versions of the Reformed tradition must now interact and compete with other leadership models and styles drawn from business, politics, other professions, and other cultures. Changing patterns of Sunday church attendance and church educational programming, coupled with the decline of traditional “Sunday school” models and adequate new member and officer training, have created a hunger for deeper knowledge and experience of the Christian faith. This hunger is especially apparent among those who did not grow up in Reformed or other church settings. Some have been able to respond to this need through systematic biblical and theological training programs originally developed to prepare commissioned lay pastors.

Moreover, there has been a decline in an understanding of “Presbyterian Identity.” Many of our members did not grow up in the Presbyterian Church, which has changed the culture of our congregations.

² *Presbyterian Panel: Religious and Demographic Profile of Presbyterians*, 2008 (PCUSA Research Services: Louisville, KY) 2008, 12.

These cultural alterations have been magnified by the church's ongoing search for a central pastoral leadership model or metaphor. The Bible describes a variety of forms of ministry leadership. *Evangelists* served a critical role as the early Christian church began to organize. In the Middle Ages, the pastor as *mediator of sacramental grace* became primary. The sixteenth and seventeenth century Protestant Reformation's principles of sola scriptura and the priesthood of all believers, among other things, elicited the pastor as *preacher* and pastor as *ethical guide* models. Around 1900 and with growing literacy new images and metaphors for pastoral ministry began to emerge, especially after the First World War. In no uniform order or pure forms, pastoral ministry models of *professional educator*, *psychologist/counselor*, *agent of social change*, and *manager of the church* surfaced as ideals.³ Recent research shows many congregants expect their pastor to master each of these models; to be an expert in each of these roles.⁴ In too many PCUSA settings, the pastor as master of each of these ministry models challenges the Reformed ideal of the ministry of all God's people.

The transitional, in-between time in which we live creates anxiety and fear, but it also offers exciting new opportunities for the reformation and renewal of the church and its mission.

WHAT KIND OF LEADER DO WE NEED IN TODAY'S CONTEXT?

The identity and function of a leader is shaped by the Reformed understanding of the Christian faith in which the PCUSA is historically grounded, as well as by more recent developments in Reformed ecclesiology. The communal nature of God's call to ministry in a Reformed tradition stands in contrast to an individualistic understanding of call that is based on self-selection. God's call is first to the community—the whole people of God. Within the context of the Body of Christ, individuals are called to specific but interrelated ministries based on their giftedness. A Reformed ecclesiology affirms the historic importance, uniqueness of the identity, and interdependence of the three enduring offices: deacons (and their ministry of care and compassion), ruling elders (and their ministry of governance and

³ *The Pastor as Spiritual Guide*, Howard Rice (Upper Room Books, Nashville) 1998. Former Moderator of the PCUSA General Assembly and Professor of Ministry at San Francisco Theological Seminary summarizes this history in Chapter One: "A Calling Seeking a Definition" pp. 19-38 and especially 21-33.

⁴ *What Do Lay People Want in Pastors?: Answers from Lay Search Committee Chairs and Regional Judicatory Leaders* (Pulpit and Pew: Research on Pastoral Leadership, Durham, NC) Spring 2003 Adair T. Lummis, <http://www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu/PastorSearch.pdf>. This recent ecumenical survey offers a snapshot of the leadership traits most expected and valued by laypeople:

- Demonstrated competence and religious authenticity, good preacher and leader of worship
- Strong spiritual leader
- Commitment to parish ministry and ability to maintain boundaries
- Available, approachable, and warm pastor with good "people skills"
- Continued preference for younger male pastors of the same racial ethnic background as the congregation, despite years of mainline denominational emphasis on inclusiveness and equality
- Conflicting desire for a young married pastor – but with significant prior pastoral experience
- Consensus-builder, lay ministry coach, and responsive leader
- Entrepreneurial evangelists, innovators, and transformational reflexive leaders
-

oversight), and teaching elders/ministers of Word and Sacrament (and their ministry of teaching the Scriptures and leading the congregation in celebration of sacraments).

Christian leadership involves certain qualities of heart and character that can be developed only through the extended practice of Reformed spiritual disciplines. Specifically, we lift up the following character or identity traits as biblical qualities (2 Corinthians 3-4) that are especially relevant to the needs of younger Americans from a broad variety of cultural backgrounds:

- **Transparency:** People are able to see Christ through the leader
- **Authenticity:** The leader assumes appropriate responsibility, proclaiming the Gospel honestly and truthfully, and living a life that demonstrates the Gospel
- **Servanthood:** Ministry is “not about us,” but rather about God
- **Vulnerability:** It is in our fragility, weakness, and humanness, rather than in our presumed adequacy, that God’s transcendent power is most clearly evident.

Valuable characteristics of church leaders for the PCUSA also emerge from other contemporary professions and academic disciplines, some of which resonate with Reformed theological themes. Contemporary leadership studies emphasize the importance of leaders who draw upon the knowledge, experience, and resources within a group, affirming the value of interaction and effective process for the development of collective wisdom. Leaders will function in less hierarchical fashion. Instead, leaders will cultivate an environment where the ministry of the people of God can emerge, calling forth the latent gifts that exist beneath the surface of the community. Leadership includes the ability to discern with the people where God is at work in their community and how God is calling the church to join in God’s work that has already begun.

Leaders in our time must be able to recognize, attend to, and value the cultural realities, differences, and perspectives that underlie human interactions. Appreciation for the pervasiveness of these cultural dynamics can be developed through cross-cultural experiences that help leaders “see” and address cultural differences and factors.

The ability to articulate the gospel of Jesus Christ in the midst of the variety and complexity of contemporary American cultures is a crucial and learnable skill which deserves higher priority on all levels of Presbyterian education and formation for ministry. Church leaders must now function as missionaries, leading and forming the communities they serve in the missional practices of the faith.

In a time when older patterns and structures of the institutional church have lost their appeal for many younger people, it is especially crucial to cultivate the capacity to lead communities in and through creative change that embodies core Christian convictions and values in fresh, culturally responsive ways. The PCUSA needs creative, “entrepreneurial” leaders who can develop skills in revitalizing existing communities. The PCUSA needs leaders who can establish new congregations and new ministries that more naturally engage the emerging cultural values and patterns.

HOW CAN THE PCUSA RESOURCE THESE LEADERS?

The PCUSA needs to continue resourcing leaders in the ways that are already working effectively, as well as developing new models that will push us to stay on the growing edge. The JCLN recommends that the PCUSA consider an intentional broadening in our understanding of the roles, responsibilities, and spiritual/theological/practical formation of deacons, ruling elders, and teaching elders/ministers of the Word and Sacrament.

A deeper exploration of the fact that Christ gave some to be “apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, and to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11–13) is required. This passage reminds us that leaders are to be equipping others for ministry, sharing authority, and sharing leadership. In addition to the traditional emphasis on pastoral and teaching ministries, exploration of apostolic, prophetic, and evangelistic models of ministry is needed.

Leadership education and formation involves partnership and mutual responsibility between PCUSA governing bodies and PCUSA-related seminaries and institutions. The JCLN recommends that the resources of seminaries, presbytery Committees on Ministry and Preparation for Ministry, current CLP training programs, and sessions be freshly combined in mutually reinforcing, accountable, and generative ways; that the PCUSA and its’ seminaries collaborate in new ways to nurture leaders for the mission of God in the world. Given the climate of diminishing resources in seminaries and various levels in the PCUSA including sessions, presbyteries, and seminaries must collaborate with one another. These joint efforts would emphasize working together as church bodies and schools to:

- Cultivate missional leadership formation
- Stimulate character formation
- Form people in discipleship, spiritual disciplines, and missional practices
- Teach awareness of church systems: how they are formed, and how to cultivate change within them
- Imagine new forms of engaging our communities
- Prepare evangelists as new church development pastors and for other community-based ministries
- Develop cultural awareness, sensitivity, and intercultural competence
- Increase biblical knowledge, literacy, and understanding
- Shape creative worship leaders

The JCLN recommends creating experiments with new models of holistic leadership education, formation, and skill development, emphasizing partnerships and mutual responsibility among seminaries, colleges, congregations, ecclesial bodies, consulting groups, foundations, para-church groups, and fellowships. Newer models will likely take on a variety of forms, such as:

- Nurturing communities of theological learning, including giving specific attention to the role of the presbytery

- Bringing together groups of leaders in their immediate context to interact regionally and locally (may be presbytery-initiated and -based)
- Providing online webinars, videoconferencing, chat rooms, and other web-based education that can honor emerging relational networks and help establish new learning communities
- Mentoring current and future leaders in practical and sustained ways through one-on-one appointments (spiritual directors/focus on spiritual disciplines), internships in generationally and culturally diverse and innovative “teaching congregations,” pastoral residencies, missional orders, mentoring communities/groups, transition to ministry groups, and congregationally based seminary programs.

A priority needs to be placed on ongoing, interactive, accountable, lifelong theological education/formation (pastors’ continuing education, elder and deacon training and formation). Opportunities to train church leaders alongside others from business, law, medicine, teaching, and other fields, including Christian leaders from other parts of the world should be sought. Continually changing immigration patterns will also require mature church leaders from various racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

A growing need exists for bi-vocational ministry in a time when many churches cannot afford full-time pastoral leadership. Broadening and clarifying the role of ruling elder shows particular potential for creatively and more adequately addressing the emerging bi-vocational ministry needs of the PCUSA. “Tentmaking pastors” with the Master of Divinity degree will continue to be a valuable resource for these congregations. Alongside them, ruling elders will be equipped in fresh ways to lead God’s people to participate in the mission of God.

This challenge calls for a reconception of the existing role of commissioned lay pastor as a more intrinsic expression of the Reformed office of ruling elder (commissioned elders). In many places, the practice of elder leadership has been too limited and can be expanded to a fuller scriptural role. For this purpose, ruling elders can be equipped to partner with teaching elders as colleagues in ministry. In some settings, a teaching elder can provide leadership, training, and supervision to a group of small churches, each with its own ruling elder who preaches and teaches on a regular basis. Effective, ongoing educational and formational processes for this purpose will center on:

- Competency goals related to specific ministry contexts and needs rather than straight course requirements
- Deliberate and ongoing supervision
- Intentionally varied ministry experiences in different contexts (when possible) to offer evaluation of cultural norms, assumptions, and practices
- Expected ongoing learning and formation processes that provide greater understanding, knowledge, and skill development
- Appropriate and purposeful balancing of online learning and face-to-face discussions and mentoring.

CONCLUSION

One of the major emphases of the twenty-first-century denomination needs to be leadership development for the mobilization of the people of God to participate in the mission of God in our world. How will the church and its institutions respond to the leadership needs in the PCUSA? While some leadership needs and training methods should remain the same and instructive models exist; other methods must change and new models created. Our challenge is to be nimble, flexible, and agile, moving with the Spirit of God, always grounded in the Word of God.

The transitional, in-between time in which we live creates anxiety and fear, but it also offers great hope and exciting new opportunities for the reformation and renewal of the church and its mission.

Ultimately, our hope is in the Lord Jesus Christ expressed in the Spirit of God alive and well in our world. Even though the church sometimes gets discouraged, the God of the Bible continues to surprise. God's work is being done all around the globe as God in the church raises up leaders. The PCUSA can teach and learn from many emerging leaders and ministries arising all around the world and across the American landscape. The PCUSA can cultivate a new leadership environment and a revitalized imagination that more deeply engages local communities in life giving ways. New skills and abilities will be required, but God provides. The Christmas story reminds us that "nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37). The Easter story reminds us that life expired can be resurrected (Mark 16:6-8). The book of Acts reminds us that the Spirit continues to break into new arenas, where the good news of Jesus Christ has not been heard or understood, raising up new leaders to start new ministries that had not previously been dreamed.

The Joint Committee on Leadership Needs invites the PCUSA to dream again, to have hope, to be in conversation about the questions this report raises, and partner to empower leaders for the mission of God in the world.

Respectfully Submitted,
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Joint Committee on Leadership Needs:⁵

The Rev. Dr. Brian K. Blount, COTE, Convener

The Rev. Dr. Phillip W. Butin, COTE

Elder Barbara L. Corwin, COGA

The Rev. Dr. Clark D. Cowden, GAMC

The Rev. Dr. Dennis Hughes, COGA

The Rev. Dr. Bradley J. Longfield, COTE

Elder Dr. Douglas F. Megill, GAMC

Elder Cathryn C. Piekarski, GAMC

Elder Dr. Max R. Sherman, COTE

The Rev. Landon T. Whitsitt, COTE

⁵ The Committee was staffed by the Rev. Dr. Lee Hinson-Hasty (COTE/ GAMC Staff), the Rev. Dr. Marcia Clark Myers (COGA/ GAMC Staff), and the Rev. Dr. Joseph D. Small (GAMC staff). Barbara G. Wheeler, Director of the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education, who conducted research on commissioned lay pastor training programs referenced in this report, attended some meetings as an observer.