

## **What do Presbyterians believe about elders?**

### **Elders as spiritual leaders**

**By Stephany Jackson and Tammy Wiens**

*Reprinted from the March 2008 issue of Presbyterians Today*

Patti Kauffman said “yes” to the call to serve as an elder because she thought her skills in administration would be an asset to her church — Beth Salem Presbyterian in Columbus, Ga.

“I thought that all I had to do was take notes, type up the minutes and send them to the presbytery office,” she says. “I knew that we had some challenges before us, but I had no idea that the presbytery was considering closing the church.”

The truth of the matter was, the church had no lights, the men’s bathroom was inoperative and the roof was in need of repair. Members of Beth Salem had said goodbye to their pastor because they could no longer afford his salary, and they were six months behind on mortgage payments. The situation looked hopeless, but the members of Beth Salem refused to give up. They looked to the session for direction.

Kauffman soon realized that administrative skills alone were not going to be enough. As clerk of session, she began calling the other elders together for regular prayer and Bible study.

“We all knew that we would have to do more than we felt capable of doing,” she says, “and the only way we were going to survive was to rely totally on God.

“We asked God to give us a mission and God answered our prayers,” she continues. “The presbytery has reinvested in our ministry. We have formed mission partnerships throughout the community. A new sense of energy has been generated in the congregation. The lights are back on, the roof is fixed and the bathroom has been repaired.”

With God’s help, Kauffman says, she has even preached twice — “something I never thought I would do.”

### **More than budgets, buildings**

Like Kauffman, many Presbyterians say “yes” to becoming an elder, thinking it means hammering out a budget once a year, attending a few meetings, counting the offering and making sure the church gets locked up after everyone leaves. The call to serve as elder, however, is a call to serve the spiritual as well as administrative needs of God’s people.

It's a call to build up the body of Christ, which means much more than planning for building repairs or making budget adjustments. It means ensuring that the members of the body have the opportunity to be engaged in the type of ministry and mission that will help them achieve spiritual maturity.

Elders are called to be spiritual leaders, strengthening and nurturing the faith and life of the congregation committed to their charge. In the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) elders are instructed to engage members in the mission of the church and to provide opportunities for evangelism, pastoral care, worship, education and stewardship (*Book of Order*, G-10.0100). Consider the spiritual vitality that might blossom within congregations if elders would give as much time and attention to providing models for discipleship and evangelism as they give to governance and discipline.

Today the PC(USA) and other mainline congregations stand at a crossroads. Throughout the church and society there is a desire for radically committed and faithful leadership. People are searching for congregations with leaders who both instruct and inspire, and who are willing to lead by example.

Elders lead by example as they regularly attend Bible study, Sunday school or weekly prayer services. They should be equipped to interpret and support the church's vision. When the need for additional training arises, the elders should be the first to receive it in order to provide new leadership.

### **Elders in the Bible**

The Bible portrays various forms of church government, or polity, among the earliest Christians. There are virtues as well as limitations to every human form of government. While Presbyterian polity is not the only one suggested by biblical patterns, it does have strong biblical roots.

In the first five books of the Bible elders are always mentioned in connection with Moses. In Exodus 3:16–18 God directs Moses to “assemble the elders” and lay out a plan that would free the Israelites after years of bondage. Numbers 11 says elders were chosen after Moses complained to God that he needed help leading the people. The role of the elder takes various forms throughout the Old Testament. Elders are responsible for carrying out legislative and administrative functions. They also are responsible for leading the community by teaching and living out models of obedience to the law (see Exodus 19:7–8; Deuteronomy 27:1, 31:9, 32:7).

In the New Testament, God calls to leadership wise, dedicated and mature persons of faith. All members of Christ's body, the church, are endowed with unique gifts for the purpose of service. "Elder" can refer to one who shares in corporate leadership for a cluster of Christian assemblies or churches (see Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Peter 5:1–2), or to one who has leadership over a particular congregation (see Titus 1:5–7). The term does not so much confer a title as describe a function or role in the community.

Ephesians 4:11–13 lists some of the ministries to which church leaders are called: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (see also 1 Corinthians 12:27–31). All of these ministries exist for the purpose of equipping the saints, members of the congregation, for Christ's mission. When people joyfully engage in the work of ministry, the body of Christ is strengthened and the church matures to take on the character of Christ.

### **A Presbyterian asset**

Elders are called to exercise leadership, government and discipline (*Book of Order*, G-60302). In the Presbyterian Church congregations share a common polity that ensures due process when disputes arise, and promotes equality for all persons. It provides a way of living together in which the concerns and suggestions of all members are taken seriously. It also helps assure members that finances are managed responsibly and mission is carried out faithfully.

This form of government is one of our denomination's assets. It can even serve as an evangelistic strength, attracting people who have become discouraged by poorly managed religious institutions or independent congregations.

One of the questions that elders are asked before they are ordained is, "Will you be a faithful elder, watching over the people, providing for their worship, nurture and service?" The mission that Christ has set before elders requires a constant process of dying to the old self and renewal by the Holy Spirit. Only when elders engage in transformation in their own lives, can they lead others through the process.

This is not something anyone can do on his or her own. All church leaders need the love and support received through regularly engaging in spiritual practices with others. When elders take care of their own spiritual well-being, they are better equipped to model the type of spiritual growth and maturity that will inspire and enable other members of the congregation.

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## **It's Greek to me**

### **A glossary**

#### **In the New Testament**

Both of the following terms are used interchangeably to refer to “elders”:

- *presbuteros* — Greek word for elder, from which we derive the English word presbyter
- *episkopos* — Greek word for overseer, from which we derive the English word episcopal, meaning bishop-led

#### **In the PC(USA)**

The role of elder has its roots in the early church, but various church traditions have come to define the role in different ways. The following terms are used in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and some other churches in the Reformed tradition:

- elders — elected members who are ordained to serve as the governing body (session) of a particular congregation
- presbyters — both elders and ministers together
- presbytery — a group of congregations in one geographic region
- ruling elders — members of a church session
- teaching elders — ministers