

Presbytery of the Peaks
Policy on the Use of Commissioned Pastors
(formerly Commissioned Ruling Elder or Commissioned Lay Pastor)

Background

We are fortunate that in a series of decisions since 1985, the General Assemblies of the PCUSA has opened up the way for ruling elders to preach, administer the sacraments of communion and baptism, moderate sessions, and perform weddings where congregations are unable for financial or geographical reasons to call a Minister of Word and Sacrament. When trained and authorized by the presbytery, ruling elders were first commissioned to serve particular congregations, but then were also permitted to serve in non-congregational validated ministries.

The Presbytery of the Peaks has also evolved in its use of ruling elders as commissioned pastors. Within the last five years Barbara and Al Jacobs were approved to serve communion, not at just one church, but in the Piedmont Neighborhood, where there are so many congregations that depend upon a commissioned pastor for the Lord's Supper. More recently, the Presbytery commissioned two ruling elders as "missional commissioned pastors," giving them authority to preach, administer the sacraments, moderate sessions, and perform weddings anywhere within the bounds of the presbytery.

When our most recent development was presented to Laurie Griffith, the Office of the General Assembly's advisor on constitutional interpretation, she indicated that we had "overreached" in our commissioning of Missional Commissioned Pastors. She explained that the General Assembly approved a narrower scope and authority, emphasizing that ruling elders are commissioned to *limited pastoral service that is required for the missional strategy of the presbytery*. The attached Constitutional Musings: Note 28 is a thorough explanation of what is permitted by the Book of Order.

So that the presbytery can be clear about the focus and limits of commissioned pastor ministries, the following is offered for consideration and adoption as a binding policy for ruling elders commissioned to limited pastoral services within the presbytery.

Fulfilling the The Presbytery's Mission

The Book of Order is abundantly clear that the mission of the four councils of the church, i.e., session, presbytery, synod and general assembly. They exist "to help congregations and the church as a whole to be more faithful participants in the mission of Christ. They do so as they *Provide that the Word of God may be truly preached and heard, Provide that the Sacraments may be rightly administered and received, and Nurture a covenant community of disciples of Christ.* (G-3.0101).

To the end that every congregation within our presbytery has access to faithful preaching, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and appropriate pastoral leadership for the covenant community, we are committed to calling, training, and commissioning ruling elders to serve in congregations whose ministries may depend upon such ruling elders.

To fulfill this end, we find it helpful and necessary to commission two types of ruling elders for such service. The first and primary model of commissioned pastors is when a ruling elder, after appropriate discernment, training, and examination, is commissioned to serve a particular congregation or several congregations who may feel called to a shared ministry. In this model, the commissioned pastor preaches on most Sundays, administers the sacraments according to the practice of the congregation(s), performs weddings authorized by the session(s), and moderates the session(s). In some cases the presbytery's mission is best served when a congregation is served by a commissioned pastor in a shared ministry or partnership with a Minister of Word and Sacrament.

Because there are occasions when the presbytery's mission is served by commissioned pastors who are not tied to one particular congregation but to one of its six neighborhoods, serving multiple congregations in a specific region of the presbytery, we provide for a second type of commissioned pastor, namely, a "missional commissioned pastor," who is commissioned to a presbytery neighborhood, where he or she is authorized to preach, administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and perform weddings under the following guidelines.

- 1) Preaching: any ruling elder is authorized and encouraged by the PCUSA to include preaching as a part of his or her practice of ministry as an ordained ruling elder. There are no restrictions for preaching as a missional commissioned elder other than seeking the Committee on Ministry's approval to be placed on the Supply Preaching list that it maintains.
- 2) Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper: a missional commissioned pastor may administer the sacraments within his or her presbytery neighborhood when commissioned by the presbytery, or the presbytery may authorize the ruling elder to administer the sacraments to specified congregations within a neighborhood (or in multiple neighborhoods if circumstances indicate the need.)
- 3) Perform weddings in any congregation within his or her presbytery neighborhood when invited to do so by a session for a member of that session's congregation. Exemptions to perform weddings in other congregations within the presbytery may be approved by the COM.
- 4) The Committee on Ministry may invite a missional commissioned pastor to serve as the Moderator of a particular session within the bounds of the ruling elder's designated neighborhood.

The Book of Order mandates that all commissioned pastor serve under the guidance and oversight of a Minister of Word and Sacrament.

The Book of Order limits the term of commissioned service to three years, but it may be renewed. It also requires that the service of a commissioned pastor must be reviewed annually.

Both ruling elders commissioned to serve a congregation and missional commissioned pastors shall have voice and vote at all meetings of the Presbytery. Ruling elders who are not commissioned in either capacity and not sent by their session do not have the privilege of voice and vote.