

Ordaining Young People as Ruling Elders

Ruling elders and deacons are men and women elected by the congregation from among its members. The nomination and election of ruling elders and deacons shall express the rich diversity of the congregation's membership and shall guarantee participation and inclusiveness.¹

Years have relatively little to do with being "good enough" to be a ruling elder. Right qualifications are not paced by the calendar. The church has found that it is greatly to its advantage to avail itself of the gifts and services of its younger members.²

Can a Young Person Be Ordained as an Elder?

Yes, and we've been doing it for a long time. I recently conducted an informal survey to see just how far back the practice of ordaining young people to serve as elders in the Presbyterian Church went. The earliest I discovered was in the late 1960s. Thus we have for quite a while, even if not every church has adopted the practice. I also discovered that the term *youth elder* is a touchy subject. Not so much for the practice of ordaining young people but for the title or name of "youth elder." As it was quickly and, dare I say, vociferously pointed out, there is no designation or title in the *Book of Order* for "youth elders." An elder is an elder no matter the age. However, I'm using the term *youth elder* to denote an elder who is/was ordained as a young person, which I'm defining as between the ages of 12–18.

As stated above, the *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) does not stipulate any age requirement for someone to be elected as an elder. In fact, the only qualifications for a member of the church to be elected as an elder are found in G-2.014 of the *Book of Order*, which says that they "should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ." It also states, "Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world." And finally, "They must have the approval of God's people and the concurring judgment of the council of the church." G-2.0301 directs, "Congregations should elect persons of wisdom and maturity of faith, having demonstrated skills in leadership and being compassionate in spirit." That's what the constitution of our denomination defines as qualifications to be elected and serve as an elder in the

1. *The Constitution of the Presbyterians Church (U.S.A.)*, Part II, *Book of Order* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2017), G-2.0401.
2. Paul S. Wright, *The Presbyterian Ruling Elder: An Essential Guide*, rev. Stephen G. Lytch [Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2014], 16.

PC(USA). Thus, a young person who is a member of the church can absolutely be an ordained elder or deacon. This Quicksheet focuses on the office of ruling elder in the PC(USA), although the same suggestions and steps are to be applied to the office of deacon.

How Do You Get Started with Youth Elders?

Whether you are the pastor, clerk of session, educator, youth director, or someone who is passionate about helping young people in their faith journey, here are practical steps to consider in order to begin the process of calling a young person:

1. *Speak to your pastor, clerk of session, or staff person in charge of youth ministries and make your case.* Explain why the church should be open to ordaining young people. Talk about the benefits of it for the congregation (all voices being heard, the viewpoint of a younger generation—a generation that will be affected by decisions much more than the older generations—etc.) and the benefits for the young person (development of leadership skills, a true sense of inclusion in the life of the church, honoring gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit, etc.)
2. *Educate the congregation and the nominating committee.* They may not be aware that they could have been nominating young people all along. Someone might have a question or a doubt. Generally, once one is reminded of the polity and the theological precedent of God calling young people to service, doubts are often transformed.
3. *Decide on length of service term.* The *Book of Order* (G-2.0404) states that elders “shall be elected to serve terms of no more than three years.” This means the three-year term is the maximum, but terms may be shorter. Many churches that have adopted this practice elect to go with one-year terms for youth elders. This is due to the fact that, in order to complete a term of service before going off to college, a young person would need to be elected around the age of fifteen or younger. A shorter, one-year term allows for older youth to be nominated. However, many younger ruling elders serve multiyear terms.
4. *Decide when a young person’s term will start.* If you want all elders to go through the same training at the same time, a younger ruling elder should follow the same orientation and class schedule as the elders in the same class. Another possible consideration for younger leaders is to think about a young person’s life. They function more on a school calendar of September through August. In many churches, a year of service as an elder begins in January. Following a traditional calendar of January to December, if a young person is serving a one-year term and is a senior in high school, they may not be able to complete the full year if they attend college out of town. Thus a September-August term may better suit them.

5. *Nominate a young person (or two).* Nothing says that you can nominate only one young person. You could have an entire class of nothing but young people, but then again you wouldn't be representative of the whole church. Consider how many young people you'd like per class. If you are using one-year terms, consider nominating two young people. If you are using three-year terms, then perhaps one youth per class will suffice, as there would be three youth serving on session in any given year. Remember, serving on session can be an intimidating experience, so having another young person to serve alongside can help ease that. As every church is different, you may have a small number of young people in your church or you may have years where there are more young people who are not yet ready to serve. These are things to think about.

Now That We Have Youth Elders, What's Next?

Getting to the point where your congregation will elect young people to serve as an elder is only half the battle. Once there, like any elder, if you don't support them and train them, then you are setting them up to fail, and that doesn't benefit the church or the young person. So here are ideas to help young people succeed in their service:

1. *Provide training.* This isn't just a recommendation, it's a requirement in the *Book of Order* (G.2-0402). All elders are required to participate in a time of study and preparation, after which they are to be examined in regard to their personal faith and their knowledge of church doctrine, government, and discipline contained in the Constitution of the church. Much elder training focuses on these elements, but remember that youth elders may need some additional training beyond the constitutional questions. For example, young people may be confused as they read a monthly fiscal report for the first time. Remember that young people may not know how a meeting is run or understand agendas and reports, Robert's Rules of Order, etc.
2. *Assign responsibilities/ministries.* Many churches rely on their elders to perform certain duties and accept certain responsibilities other than attending session meetings. Youth elders should be given the same duties and responsibilities as adult elders. To do otherwise implicitly states that youth elders are a separate class of elders. As the old adage goes, expect a lot and you'll get a lot; expect a little and you'll get little. Young people can do amazing and impactful things, so don't treat them as second-class elders. Give them responsibilities, expect much from them, and let them flourish. If having them serve on committees is part of their responsibilities, don't automatically assign them to the Christian education or youth committee. They might have a passion for another area of ministry like mission or they might be a budding financial wizard.

3. *Pair mentors.* I surveyed elders who were ordained as youth from fourteen different churches. They overwhelmingly said that they would have appreciated a mentor while serving. Consider pairing a youth elder with an adult elder, preferably one who is currently serving. The benefit, especially if there is only one youth elder on session at a time, is that they have a specific person they trust to ask questions, ask for help in understanding a particular discussion item, meet with ahead of time to ensure they understand what's coming before the session at the next meeting, etc.
4. *Provide leadership opportunities.* One of the best benefits of youth elders is the inherent leadership skills that come along with serving. Give them opportunities to lead, whether it be prayer or Bible study at a session meeting, appointments with congregation members in pastoral care situations, or even a committee meeting. Young people can be excellent leaders, but, like anyone else, they need tools and training to succeed. The session experience doesn't have to be a place of only business decisions, it can be so much more: an intergenerational group of leaders empowered to grow in faith and equipped to serve the greater church for years to come.

Additional Resources

- *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II, Book of Order* (2017–2019).
- *The Presbyterian Ruling Elder: An Essential Guide*, by Paul S. Wright
- *Making Disciples, Making Leaders: A Manual for Developing Church Leaders*, by Steven P. Eason