

Rebuilding the Presbyterian Establishment

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To offer comments and responses to *Rebuilding the Presbyterian Establishment*, contact:

Office of Theology and Worship
100 Witherspoon Street
Louisville, KY 40202-1396
tel: 1-888-728-7228, ext. 5033
e-mail: abrown@ctr.pcusa.org

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*This essay was written in response to a challenge from Joe Small and the Theology and Worship staff of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). I have advanced some of these points before, especially in *Leading from the Center: Strengthening the Pillars of the Church* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2003). My understanding of an establishment comes from my teacher E. Digby Baltzell, especially his *The Protestant Establishment* (New York: Random House, 1964); my view of exit, voice, and loyalty was shaped by Albert Hirschman's book of the same name (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1970); and my conception of authority (and everything, really), was shaped by the work of Max Weber. This essay benefited from conversations with Joe Small, Charles Wiley, Barry Ensign-George, Mark Tammen, Dick Coffelt, Ken McIntyre, Ron Afzal, and Susan Weston.*

—Beau Weston
New Year's Day 2008

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Foreword

Have we structured our life together in a way that serves our best aspirations? Do the current institutional arrangements of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) help us flourish? Of the many things we carry with us from previous generations of Presbyterians, do they all continue to work well—or is it time for some of them to be reworked, reshaped . . . or even replaced?

In *Rebuilding the Presbyterian Establishment*, Elder Beau Weston raises just such questions. And he answers those questions (sometimes yes, sometimes no, sometimes a little of both) with insight gained from his love for the PC(USA), his long participation in its life, his years of studying this denomination, and his training as a sociologist.

Weston is National Endowment for the Humanities Professor of Sociology at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky—a PC(USA)-related school. He has written extensively about the PC(USA). In *Presbyterian Pluralism: Competition in a Protestant House* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), Weston probed our denomination's past, analyzing the dynamic interaction of groups within the denomination as they navigated through times of sharp division. In *Leading from the Center: Strengthening the Pillars of the Church* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2003), Weston retold and extended that story, tracing the dynamics down to this new century.

Rebuilding the Presbyterian Establishment builds on those earlier analyses. It considers where we are now, and asks what we might do to move forward and flourish.

Weston focuses on structures that we've established to shape our life together. He considers where leadership is being nurtured among us. He asks that we make better use of some of those among us whose experience, gifts, and natural abilities fit them to provide us the kind of leadership best suited to our Presbyterian way of being church. Weston asks that we think

about authority and power—how they can be put to work to make the PC(USA) healthier.

Weston uses the sociological notion of an “establishment” as a tool for evaluating who we are. “Establishment,” “authority structure”—for some of us the words alone raise our hackles, evoking an almost Pavlovian resistance. But every institution has an authority structure, an establishment. Every single one. Without an authority structure (some pattern for organizing authority, and thus organizing its own life) an institution cannot exist.

The question is not will our denomination have an authority structure or an establishment. The question is what establishment/authority structure will our denomination have. Will it be an establishment that serves the flourishing of our denomination? Or will it be an authority structure that leaves the PC(USA) unable to flourish, unable to achieve health?

It is my hope that Weston’s essay will be a contribution to the discussion we are now having about the structures that shape our life together in the PC(USA) (a discussion that already includes new proposals about our *Book of Order*). I hope it will provoke us to discern whether our structures are helping or hindering our desire to flourish. I hope Weston’s willingness to state what he has discerned will inspire us to say what we discern as we seek to shape structures for flourishing.

Weston is a member of the Church Officials Initiative Cluster of the Re-Forming Ministry program. Re-Forming Ministry is an initiative of the Office of Theology and Worship, funded in its initial stages by a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment. Re-Forming Ministry brings together pastors, governing body leaders, and professors to do theological work together as equals in a shared task, engaging in discussion of pressing theological issues in an effort to help our denomination think its faith more deeply, that we might be better able to articulate and live our faith as we bear witness to Jesus Christ in the world. Re-Forming

Ministry seeks to be one means by which we respond to Jesus' command to “. . . love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30).

Further information about the Re-Forming Ministry program can be found at the Re-Forming Ministry Web site: www.pcusa.org/re-formingministry. I invite you to visit, to read other papers presented there, and to learn about the program.

Barry A. Ensign-George

Associate for Theology, Office of Theology and Worship
Program Director, Re-Forming Ministry

REBUILDING THE PRESBYTERIAN ESTABLISHMENT

William J. Weston

Professor of Sociology, Centre College

I. Presbyterian Establishments, Built and Unbuilt

The Presbyterian Establishment and the Decline of the PC(USA)

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been fighting internally, declining steadily, losing its place in society, and equivocating as an evangelist for Jesus Christ for the past forty years. Forty years ago, the church made a systematic effort to dismantle its power structure—the establishment—and dissipate its authority. Most of the challenges to the church's authority—and, indeed, to all authority—came from larger social forces in the Sixties. Many people at that time confused legitimate, authoritative institutions with tyrannical, authoritarian ones. The Presbyterian Church made the effects of those challenges much worse by capitulating to them. Instead of working with the authoritative structures of the church to face the problems of church and society, we dismantled the authoritative structures.

An establishment helps any organization run smoothly and work for a clear purpose in normal times. An establishment really shows its value to the organization, though, in settling a crisis. When the Presbyterian Church dismantled its old “Establishment,” it lost its best chance to incorporate the prudent reforms of the Sixties movements, while resisting the worst excesses of the cultural revolutions that came with it.

If the Presbyterian Church is to end its endemic crisis and turn around its long decline, it will need to rebuild the Presbyterian Establishment. I believe that this will be a long, hard struggle and will require the political capital of a generation of church

leaders. But the struggle will be worth it. The Presbyterian Church is too precious an inheritance for its members, and too valuable a steward of society at large, to allow it to just fade away.

What Is an Establishment?

An establishment is an integrated body of authoritative leaders. A mere elite, by contrast, is an aggregation of individuals who have risen to the top of various power pyramids, but who are not integrated with one another. In society at large, an establishment is linked together by family ties. In the church, the connections among leaders are more likely to be built out of common colleges, seminaries, camps and retreats, and long years of committee service. Many family connections also were found among the old Presbyterian Establishment.

The Establishment are made of equal parts cultural commitments and structural position. They believe the confession and respect the authority of the polity. The old Presbyterian Establishment were made of people who were committed to the Christian faith and the Presbyterian Church. This means that they tended to be loyal to the denomination as it actually is, not just to their own theological or ideological position. To take an example from generations ago, the Establishment leaders believed the virgin birth of Christ, but also chose to live with the few Presbyterian officers who did not as long as the dissidents respected the polity. To take an example from today, the shadow establishment accept the ministerial gifts of women, but also choose to live with the few Presbyterian officers who do not as long as the dissidents respect the church's order.

Committed loyalist Presbyterians who were good leaders used to be drawn naturally to central positions in the denomination. They ended up at the heads of denominational agencies or national committees, as presbytery moderators or stated clerks, and, most of all, as "tall-steeple" pastors. The elders of the Presbyterian Establishment tended to be successful in the secular work world, but their authority in the church was based on years of service as commissioners and committee members.

The old Presbyterian Establishment really showed its mettle in the fundamentalist/modernist controversy of the 1920s and '30s. After decades of conflict, the church appointed the Special Commission of 1925 to settle things. Made of leading pastors who were not centrally involved in the controversy and leading laymen who were devoted to the church, the commission efficiently heard testimony, considered the issues, delivered a wise, practical, centrist report, and concluded its business. The church was so grateful to the commission for resolving the controversy that in 1927, the year it made its final report, the General Assembly elected Robert Speer, the commission's best known and most Establishment member, moderator of the church *by acclamation*. In those days, as in ours, moderatorial elections were hotly contested between ideologically opposed candidates. It was remarkable, therefore, that all other candidates would agree to withdraw in favor of the unifying leader of the Establishment.

In fact, many other members of the commission were elected as moderators for years to come after they made their report. The stewardship of the Presbyterian Establishment was increasingly shaped by Barthianism and Niebuhrian Christian Realism in the 1940s and 1950s, which helped it stay unified and focused.

Why and How We Unbuilt the Old Establishment

Then the Sixties happened. The cultural revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s was a very good thing for American society in removing the barriers that kept African-Americans and women from full inclusion. More than removing the legal barriers, the Sixties changed the consciousness of most Americans. Thereafter, excluding individuals on the basis of their demographic group came to seem wrong to most people.

As with most cultural revolutions, though, the Sixties' spirit went far beyond removing barriers. Every sort of authority was questioned, and many power structures were diluted or

dismantled. The very concept of an establishment fell into disrepute, and was instead denigrated as an “old boys’ network.”

Some of the more liberal movements went so far in reaction to the exclusions of the 1950s that they *mandated* inclusions in the 1970s. New rules were passed to require that decision-making bodies include women, racial-ethnic minorities, and youth, often in specified quotas.

The Presbyterian Church enthusiastically adopted the new spirit of inclusion. By the end of the 1970s the church had changed its rules, even its constitution, to mandate representation on the basis of sex, race, and age. The General Assembly added Youth Advisory Delegates (YADs), with real powers to speak and even to vote. Representation committees were set up in each governing body to enforce compliance with the new demographic counting rules. Most forcefully, the church’s constitution was changed to mandate women’s representation at all levels of the church, down to the local session.

The church took strong steps to disperse the power and authority of those leaders who remained in place. Sessions were required to rotate members. Nominating committees went beyond including the excluded, to exclude the old authorities. Where tall-steeple pastors were once the natural leaders on presbytery committees, they now were likely to be excluded; as a result, they became less involved in presbyteries altogether. The demands of a large, program-heavy congregation could easily take all the time of leaders who were viewed with suspicion at the presbytery level.

The General Assembly took the most extreme steps to prevent any sort of establishment from having power. In the old days, the elected moderator chose those who would chair the committees in the upcoming General Assembly. The most informed commissioners then filled the rest of a committee’s membership. Now, presbyteries usually choose commissioners by seniority. General Assembly committee moderators and vice-moderators are then chosen from whatever pool of commissioners

that seniority system happens to create. YADs, who make up a third of the commissioners, have voice and vote in committees, and voice and advisory vote in the General Assembly plenaries. Worst of all, the committee membership is not made on the basis of any previous knowledge or experience that the commissioners might have, but by random computerized assignment. Permanent advocacy committees for women's concerns and racial-ethnic concerns institutionalize mistrust of the denomination's authority structures.

Adding all these representation rules has made the various committees and agencies of the church much larger. Depriving the GA committees of natural denominational leaders or, in many cases, any relevant knowledge, made it very difficult for them to make decisions. The swift rotation of members meant that most of the church's institutional memory and learned mastery evaporated quickly.

Two negative consequences followed from dismantling the church's Establishment. One was that more and more decision-making power devolved to the staff. Pastors complain of "staff-dependent churches" at the same time that they help prevent a corps of competent Ruling Elders from actually ruling the congregation. In the higher judicatories, the committees that are supposed to direct the denomination are so huge and ephemeral that they are not effective decision-makers; in fact, they barely function as advisory boards for the staff.

The second problem, though, is worse than having the staff make decisions: the church makes no decisions at all. The decisions of one General Assembly are undone by the next, or are ignored. The denomination drifts. Entropy sets in. Decline multiplies, with no serious effort to stem it, much less to reverse it.

So what has been the net effect of disestablishing the Presbyterian Establishment? Women, racial-ethnic minorities, and youth are indeed included at higher rates in the church structure. But the church structure itself has less and less authority.

II. Shaping Workable Presbyterian Categories

Teaching with Authority for a New Generation

It may have been necessary to break the old boys' network to generate a consciousness of gender and ethnic inclusion. The old generation of the 1960s were, even with all good will, deeply set in the sexual and racial expectations of their youth. The Baby-Boom generation that succeeded them have made a social revolution on that score, in America as a whole and in the Presbyterian Church. Generation X, now coming to power, take it for granted that sex and race are no reason to exclude an individual from anything. They do not need the quotas and the elaborate structure of group representation that the older generation may have needed to make that change in consciousness.

The church's representation rules today are a straitjacket for the church. Most of the other institutions that went through a spasm of mandated democratizations in the '60s and '70s have gotten over their worst excesses, especially the impulse to tell everyone else what to do. Other institutions have moved to more pragmatic rules that let the actual leaders of today lead, without the constraints that earlier generations needed.

The Presbyterian Church's longtime confession of faith, the Westminster Confession of Faith, used to say that the Pope was anti-Christ. Eventually the denomination no longer needed that claim to remind us of our deeply Protestant understanding of God's representatives on earth, so we amended our confession and took that provision out of the church's constitution. Presbyterians came to see that such strong condemnations of the Pope were excessive, though perhaps understandable for the generation in which they were written.

It is time to remove another passing generation's excesses from the church constitution. It is time to rebuild the church's Establishment. Decency and order require it.

The Pros and Cons of Demographic Representation

Gender Representation Mandates

It seems almost perverse to talk about including women in the church. Women are more than half of the church's membership, and probably always will be. Still, the era in which women were excluded from the offices and councils of the church is a living memory. There may have been a case for a season of affirmative action to be sure that women really were included everywhere. Better than a rule requiring women's inclusion, though, is a consciousness of the positive benefit of including women's gifts at all levels of the church. I believe that such a consciousness is now deep and wide in our church. When we look at moderatorial elections, top staff appointments, and the strong and varied group of women at all levels of Presbyterian leadership down to the local, we may take some satisfaction in a good change well accomplished.

Mandatory change always comes at a cost. A rule requiring any kind of representation always produces a resistance to the fact that it is a mandate, regardless of how well-intentioned the mandated practice is. Moreover, requiring that women be included just because they are women is tantamount to the same kind of sex-based error and injustice as its opposite. Mandating any role on the basis of sex, when the role is not essentially tied to sex, is sexist. Even if we think the mandate is necessary for a time to overcome historical exclusion, our ideal should be to establish the new inclusive consciousness and let the mandate sink into the sunset.

Racial-Ethnic Representation Mandates

Racial-ethnic representation is a different circumstance. The different racial-ethnic groups and caucuses in the Presbyterian Church today each have a distinct story. Lumping them together is misleading, at best. The oppression of African-Americans and Native Americans is the great original sin of America. The missions to black and Native American communities, and now

the missions by those congregations, have, for the most part, been a positive response to that foul history. By contrast, the Hispanic group in the church is so enormously varied that the category is unworkable. The circumstances of Mexican-American congregations in the Southwest, Cuban churches in Florida, and entire Spanish-speaking presbyteries in Puerto Rico are so different as to make it silly to treat them all in the same way. The Asian category suffers from the opposite problem—it is so dominated by the vibrant and growing Korean churches and presbyteries that Korean has become the third language of the church. Other smaller groups and caucuses of immigrants from all over the world will change the face of the church.

The policy of racial-ethnic representation was developed largely in response to the long, varied, and scandalous exclusions of African-Americans. I think it is fair to say that the spirit of racial exclusion and segregation has been largely conquered in the Presbyterian Church. There is no constituency in the denomination anymore for the old doctrine of the “spirituality of the church”—that the church as a spiritual body should not be involved in political movements. This doctrine long hamstrung Presbyterian efforts to fight slavery, segregation, and racism, especially in the South. It would be too much to say that the church is already as well integrated by race as it clearly is by sex. But the backbone of racism has been broken, and the idea that African-Americans’ special gifts are valuable throughout the church is fairly widespread.

The idea that structures established to ensure inclusion of African-Americans should simply be expanded to all racial-ethnic minorities was well intended, but has been a procrustean bed. Moreover, as with the mandated inclusion of women, a mandate produces a backlash. And treating people as primarily identified by their race and ethnicity perpetuates racism, whether that identity is meant to exclude or include the group.

The most successful racial-ethnic policies in the church have been those that provide customized support for congregations, ministries, and schools that predominantly serve one racial-ethnic

group. It is a good idea to continue such support as long as those who get it want it *and* as long as it helps create an integrated church where all serve Christ. When the right moment comes to drop special racial-ethnic programs will differ from program to program. I believe that mandating reserved spaces in church councils for people solely because of their race is now counterproductive.

Youth Representation Mandates

The Presbyterian Church is guided by the presbyters, the Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders who have been trained, ordained, and installed by the church in accordance with God's call. *Youth elder is an oxymoron*. We should do everything necessary to draw upon the services of youth and develop the leaders among them. The Youth Advisory Delegate system could be remade as a leadership-training program during the General Assembly. Occasionally an "old soul" will appear among the young whose extraordinary gifts the church can call upon, even ordain as an elder. Youth should certainly be consulted in any actions of the church that directly affect them. But mandating youth representation in the councils of the church seems to me to be misguided from start to finish.

Representation Mandates and Christian Identity

The church cherishes the sexes, races, ethnic groups, and ages of all the people who make it up. But none of those things constitute a Presbyterian's primary identity. Presbyterians are, first and foremost, Christians. Building demographic identities into the structure of the church—establishing mandates and quotas by sex, race, and age—is a dangerous principle for the church. It not only tends to overemphasize those identities in society, but worse, leads Christians to treat those divisions as standing against their fundamental unity as Christians. It may be sociologically unrealistic to completely ignore age, race, and, especially, sex. But ultimately those aspects of identity are overcome in Christ.

The Pros and Cons of Theological Representation

If demographic representation is ultimately a bad idea for the church, what of building in representation of the range of theological positions that we always seem to find in the church? Much of my work, especially *Leading from the Center*, has been devoted to showing the bell curve of theological positions in the church. I believe the Presbyterian Church is best thought of as having a small left wing and a somewhat larger right wing who compete for the hearts and minds of a center who are neither right nor left, but who are loyal to the church as they actually experience it. I believe this picture is accurate for the church now, and in all the past that we can count and all the future we can foresee. In fact, there is good reason to think that every large denomination is structured that way, and always will be.

If there is always a right, left, and center, would it make sense to make sure that all such views are represented—perhaps proportionately—in the councils of the church? No.

Theological diversity is a good cultural practice, but a bad structural principle. This requires that church leaders exercise good judgment about theological diversity, without a formal rule about theological representation. I think it would be a good idea for nominating committees, for example, to be sure to have some liberals and some conservatives on the committees of the church. This practice would keep the centrists from being content with doing things the way they have always done them. Moreover, if the church leadership has a strong leaning one way, it is especially important to be sure to have strong voices from the other side, to keep everyone honest. These days, liberals dominate the bureaucracy and governing body staffs of the church. It would be especially prudent, therefore, for all church bodies to include some strong and well-regarded conservatives. The same principle would hold if conservatives dominated the denominational structure.

Still, it would not be good to reserve seats on church bodies for liberals or conservatives. For one thing, there is no good way to identify who would qualify. For another, part of the point of having theological diversity in the councils of the church is to get us to talk to one another across our divisions. When we talk together, we sometimes change our minds. If you were holding a seat reserved for a particular theological position, you would either lose it if you changed your mind, or be tempted to never yield out of loyalty to those you represent.

Theological diversity is a good culture, but a bad structure for the church.

Vocational Representation: The Best Way

One kind of representation has long been built into the structure of the Presbyterian Church: the parity of ministers and elders. All governing bodies of the church above the local congregation are traditionally built on this bedrock principle. A Ruling Elder matches every Teaching Elder. This wise structure has stood the test of time. This principle is still largely honored in the church—*except* when it comes to Committees on Representation, YADs, and, most egregiously, the Council of the General Assembly itself. Ministers and elders come in both sexes and all races, ethnicities, and theological positions. Moreover, their roles in the church ensure that they will, among them, have every sort of experience, expertise, and, God willing, wisdom to deal with anything that comes before the church.

I believe that vocational representation—having an equal number of ministers and elders in all official bodies of the church above the congregation—should be the church’s *only* mandatory representation rule. Vocational representation will not by itself reconstruct a Presbyterian Establishment, but it will remove some obstacles that stand in the way—obstacles which were, in part, deliberately constructed to prevent a Presbyterian Establishment.

III. Leadership in the PC(USA): Persons and Councils

The Natural Leaders of the Church: Tall-Steeple Pastors

The church is favored with a body of natural leaders, trained in theology and administration, used to dealing with varied constituencies, whose more eccentric members have been winnowed out by working their way up the status market in the denomination. Moreover, they are generally reasonable, practical, loyal to their congregations and to the other denominational institutions, and usually the best-informed group in the church about what is going on in the church. I am speaking, of course, of our “tall-steeple” pastors.

The senior pastors of our larger, richer congregations are the best-prepared church executives that our system has to draw on. They have typically spent decades working in Presbyterian institutions, from our colleges and seminaries to our many parachurch ministries. Most important, they are likely to have worked their way up in the system, starting in a small church or as an associate in a larger congregation, serving on presbytery committees, reading Presbyterian publications, having some running sense of what the General Assembly and the Presbyterian Center are up to, and generally soaking up the ethos and particulars of the Presbyterian way of life. The ones who are selected to head the larger churches have typically demonstrated competence as pastors, as administrators, and as the face and voice of the church in their local community. When the system is working well, they also have quite a bit of experience at the presbytery level and higher in the church.

In the Sixties’ backlash against all authority, though, the leadership of tall-steeple pastors was often specifically rejected and repudiated. The old boys’ network, it was thought, excluded women and ethnic minorities, and was in any case too tied to the Establishment to change the church. There was even some resentment of letting tall-steeple pastors lead the church precisely *because* they were the church’s natural leaders. Given that climate

of opposition, many tall-steeple pastors stopped participating in their presbyteries and found themselves excluded at the higher levels of the church. So they concentrated on building up their congregations, developed networks among themselves, and, in many cases, grew angry. They could see that the denomination was being led to decline and irrelevance. The Presbyterian Church has within it proven leaders who could grow the church and serve the community, yet they seemed to be the only ones *not* included in the “inclusive” leadership of the Presbyterian Church.

If we are ever to rebuild an effective Presbyterian Establishment it will have to have the tall-steeple pastors at its core. The church needs to rely on them for congregational leadership, of course, since that is where they excel. More than at the congregational level, though, the senior pastors of large churches should be preeminent in the councils of the presbyteries. They should head national committees and commissions. They should, at some point in their careers, be the main staff members of the middle governing bodies and, especially, the General-Assembly-level agencies. One measure of a healthy establishment in the PC(USA) will be if most moderators are tall-steeple pastors, honored for their congregational success as well as their service to the denomination.

The Church’s Best Advisors: Presbytery Stated Clerks and Executive Presbyters

The genius of the Presbyterian form of church government is in the idea of the presbytery. Our polity is not top-down, run by the curia or the house of bishops, but neither are we bottom-up, with all authority residing in the congregations. We are a connectional church centered on the middle governing body, the presbytery.

Who runs the presbytery? In theory, the presbytery is the equivalent of a bishop’s diocese. Instead of a bishop, though, our presbytery is run by an ingenious republican system of

representation. The presbytery combines all the Ministers of Word and Sacrament (Teaching Elders) with an equal number of Elders (Ruling Elders) who are commissioned and sent by each congregation, roughly proportionate to the congregation's size. The presbytery is like a one-house legislature, in which the senators/lords and an equal number of representatives/commoners sit together, with equal status.

The presbytery has two low-key constitutional officers, the Moderator and the Stated Clerk. The Moderator is partly a ceremonial office, elected annually, but chairs some committees, represents the presbytery, and, especially, runs presbytery meetings. The body of former Moderators is the closest thing that most presbyteries have to a local establishment.

The Stated Clerk officially just makes sure that the paperwork is in order, that the committees do their work, and that the meetings run properly. In practice, though, the presbytery Stated Clerk is the person who best knows what is going on in the presbytery, knows who will get the job done, and understands how things were done in the past. The Stated Clerk is the main servant of the presbytery, not a bishop presiding over it.

Yet the church keeps reinventing the office of bishop because we need it. We need an executive to connect regional groups of congregations. And we need a pastor to the pastors. The Presbyterian Church's fear of bishops sometimes runs to the point of paranoia. We have good reason to fear a permanent corps of Church Lords ruling over local congregations. Still, our fear of bishops has sometimes hamstrung our ability to coordinate the work of the presbyteries. And we still need a bishop, even if we can't stand the thought of a Bishop.

Thus we invented the Executive Presbyter. The Executive Presbyter (EP), sometimes called the General Presbyter (GP), is the most important undertheorized office in the church. The structural theory of Presbyterianism has no real place for EPs, yet our actual practice of making real presbyteries has come to require them. In smaller and less formal presbyteries, the EP and

Stated Clerk tasks are combined, and may even be combined with other jobs, pastoral or otherwise. The EP is the crucial staff member when a pastor and congregation are at odds. EPs are the natural connectors of people within the presbytery, pastors and lay people, who are in different congregations but should be working together.

Yet the existence of Executive Presbyters is also part of the problem. When the northern and southern Presbyterian Churches, the UPCUSA and the PCUS, respectively, reunited in 1983, new presbyteries had to be drawn up in much of the country. With them came the full implementation of a new theory of presbyteries first developed in the “organizational revolution” of the early 1970s. According to the new theory, presbyteries were not just governing bodies but program agencies. To carry out programs, presbyteries needed a permanent staff person for programs (the EP); to fund the staff person, presbyteries became much larger.

On Presbyteries and Congregations

The large size of most presbyteries is an abiding problem in the PC(USA). I support the movement back to much smaller presbyteries. If we had small presbyteries of 12 to 20 congregations, just about all of the regional Presbyterian leaders, both ministers and elders, could have an ongoing, organic church life together. The pastors could readily know one another and meet more often than at presbytery meetings. The elders active beyond the congregation could get to know one another, too, and take the lead in regional projects that should be led by lay members.

I think presbytery size these days is driven more by the economics of funding full-time presbytery staff than it is by the organic right-sizing of church units. I can see a real value in EPs and GPs, but not at the cost of making the presbytery unworkable. Smaller presbyteries could rarely afford a full-time executive or Stated Clerk. These duties would have to be attached to a particular congregation or two. So be it.

An organic presbytery would be a viable unit of church governance. We would not sink to congregationalism, as we are now threatening to do. But we could move past the sense of crisis and doom, of disconnection and distrust, which stalks middle governing bodies now.

The Presbyterian Church has worked out a practical system for getting the value out of bishops, without letting them get too big for their miters. The Executive Presbyters and the presbytery Stated Clerks are now the backbone of the national denomination. Their connections with one another are the foundation of the organic ties connecting presbytery with presbytery. The presbytery officers can make the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) a real, living institution in a way that the staff of the national headquarters never can.

For most Presbyterians, the only level of the church organization that really matters is their own congregation. If the pastor, session, and clerk do their jobs well, the average member need never deal with the higher levels of the church personally. For most “grass-tops” leaders of the church—the ministers and elder commissioners representing congregations—the only level of church organization that really matters is the presbytery. If the Moderator, committees, and Stated Clerk, together with the EP, do their jobs well, the average presbytery leader need never deal with the higher levels of the church personally.

The presbytery officers and staff have the single most important role in making the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) a functioning national denomination. Therefore, they should, in my estimation, have a central role in advising the General Assembly of the denomination. The GA today seats as advisory delegates a curious hodgepodge of missionaries, ecumenical visitors from other churches, theological students, and, most egregiously, youth. At the same time, the best-informed and most experienced on-the-ground functionaries of the church, the presbytery Stated Clerks and EPs, are sitting on the floor of the Assembly, just watching. I would abolish all the current advisory

delegate categories. The *only* advisory votes that I think the General Assembly should seek are from the presbytery Stated Clerks and EPs.

On General Assemblies and Synods

The local congregation is the fundamental institution of church life. The regional association of congregations (such as a presbytery), especially those gathered in and around a metropolitan city, are the organic unit through which pastors and other congregational leaders can know and support one another. These two levels of church organization are in the Bible. They will be necessary, I think, until the world passes away.

The General Assembly, on the other hand, is where the church meets the world. Protestant churches are normally organized on a nation-state basis, more for political reasons than for religious ones. When the highest unit of effective political power has changed, the general assembly has changed with it, as happened during the American Civil War. A Presbyterian General Assembly is organized as a covenanted body of presbyteries. This is how we coordinate the church's necessary structures with the world's necessary structures. I think the Presbyterian churches, as a global system of denominations in the Reformed Protestant stream, will need to be organized within the effective boundaries of political power to the end of the age, as well. Likewise, the Presbyterian Establishment must necessarily be organized on a nation-state basis under the prevailing systems of power in the world. To be sure, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and scores of smaller bodies are valuable for making connections across national boundaries. Likewise, the members of the Establishment of the PC(USA) will have thousands of personal ties outside the denomination and outside the nation-state, which are valuable to the church. Still, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is tied to the U.S.A., and any establishment within it will, of necessity, be organized in and oriented to the social world created by the national political structure.

So what is a synod? A synod is made of presbyteries. The PC(USA)'s 16 synods stretch across the national church. Yet they are neither fish nor fowl. They are not organic units of church life, like presbyteries, nor are they necessary counterparts of worldly institutions, like the General Assembly. Synods used to have the job of supporting the church's many colleges and universities, but in the great majority of cases they have given up on that task. Most synods are ghost structures. They have no impact on church life. In the church courts, decisions of a presbytery permanent judicial commission can be appealed to the synod PJC, but these days a synod PJC decision is almost automatically appealed to the General Assembly's PJC. The synod merely delays decisions; it almost never makes them.

I think the synod is more like the General Assembly than it is like a presbytery. That is, the synod is needed, if it is needed at all, to match the world's structures, rather than the church's needs. With the growth of cheap transportation, and even cheaper communication, synods are no longer needed to answer the world's practical problems of getting Presbyterians together. *If synods were abolished tomorrow, the church would barely miss them.*

The only use I can see for synods is when church action needs to be coordinated on a state level. Indeed, the most functional synods today are, in effect, state synods—notably in Pennsylvania (Synod of the Trinity), Texas (Synod of the Sun), and Puerto Rico (Synod of Boriquen). In rebuilding the Presbyterian Establishment, I would shrink synods back to state-level associations of presbyteries. In most states, this would mean shrinking the formal structure down to a shell, to be resurrected only on those rare occasions when statewide action was called for.

IV. Rebuilding the Presbyterian Establishment

The Purpose of the Establishment

The aim of an establishment is to bring the best leaders into positions of power in the most efficient way.

The best leaders are likely to come up through local church institutions where they can learn the ropes and demonstrate competence. Local institutions that effectively nurture leaders develop the leaders' skills. Just as important for the church as a whole, the leaders develop loyalty.

The positions of power in the church will always be a mix of the official structure of the denomination and the unofficial structure of personal connections. The church works most efficiently when the actual informal structure of personal connections roughly coincides with the formal structure of power.

The same mechanisms by which the Establishment draws new talent into the formal and informal power structure both *develops leaders* and *co-opts dissent*. This is a good thing. Incorporating new leaders lets the church change. Building up the dissenters' loyalty helps properly manage that change.

At any given moment, some potential leaders will be complaining about something. The church should hear their complaints and act upon them as appropriate. At the same time, the mechanisms through which dissenting leaders can be heard will help bind them loyally to the church, even if they don't get what they want in any particular conflict. The *short-term* dynamic of the church will work best if the Establishment structure can get the best leaders into the official structure without undermining their loyalty. The *long-term* dynamic of the church will work best if rising leaders have an effective mechanism for giving voice to their concerns while they are rising.

The Presbyterian Establishment is paid in status more than it is paid in money or in the power to command others. The church is a low-budget operation. Its leaders are not paid enough to put up with the aggravation if money were their only compensation. The Presbyterian denomination is a voluntary organization. Its leaders cannot get the satisfaction and power of giving orders and having them followed. Being a church leader is a sacrifice in all worldly terms. The only reason to do it is if it is a calling from God and is honored by people. *The honor that well-ordered churches shower on their leaders is the lifeblood of a religious establishment.* The mistrust that Presbyterians now bestow on our leaders, especially at the national level, is among the chief reasons for the decline and dysfunction of our denominational structures.

Most members of the Establishment should be a seeming paradox: cosmopolitan locals. They should primarily be rooted in local institutions, but be informed about the national church. In the Presbyterian Establishment, these would be the pastors, the presbytery clerks and executives, and the elders (of whatever occupation) who are recognized leaders in congregational and presbytery-level affairs.

The national level of the church exists to serve the local and regional level, not vice versa. The work of the church is best done at the lowest level that can handle it. It would be good for the church if the national staff drew members from the Establishment, but it would be best if most of their careers, and most of their eminence, came from their local work. The national staff would be best if it were filled with mid-career ministers on their way to be tall-steeple pastors. And the top offices should be the last stop for locally based church leaders.

The Marks of a Presbyterian Establishment

The church has to make decisions, allocate scarce resources, coordinate action—in a phrase, *do things*. For an organization to do anything it has to have recognized legitimate authority.

The main point of an establishment is exercising authority. The church, as a voluntary organization, cannot rely on the authority of commands to get things done, because no one has to follow commands. And it can't rely on sheer money to pay people to do things, because love of money is an enemy authority (mammon) that the church is designed to fight against. Besides, the church would never have enough money to buy its way, even if it wanted to.

The authority in the church ultimately rests on trust that the leaders of the church are doing the task that God called them to do. The church has built in a few structures to help guide and discipline its leaders. When leaders stay within those structures and follow that guidance, we members of the church can have some confidence that they will lead us rightly. We follow their lead, honor their sacrificial work for the church, and pay them in status, as well as more ordinary coin.

I propose three principal marks of the Presbyterian Establishment:

Confessors confess:

Reformed churches are confessing churches. Most congregations recite the classic confessions regularly. Until recently, we expected our leaders to be guided by several confessions, but to be constitutionally bound by one of them, the Westminster Standards as amended by the church. In the middle of the twentieth century, many church officers found the Westminster Standards old, fusty, and easy to ignore. Instead of reviving the church's old constitutional confession, though, the Presbyterian Church adopted the academic theory that confessions are merely expressions of their moment in time, not meant to be binding in the future.

Central to the assault on authority in the Sixties was the overthrow of *the* confession of the church. When two northern Presbyterian bodies merged to produce the UPCUSA, a new confession was called for. The new confession, *The Confession*

of 1967, was indeed produced. Instead of adopting the new confession as the constitutional standard of the church, though, the denomination took the revolutionary step of adopting a whole library of confessional documents. *The Book of Confessions* included the Westminster Standards, The Confession of '67, and a slew of others. It was as if the country amended the U.S. Constitution, but, instead of incorporating new text into the venerable old document, adopted the entire constitutions of a dozen other countries, too.

In theory, the one constitutional confession was supplemented by many others. In practice, officers of the church are no longer expected to be bound by any confessional statement at all. Dropping the confession out of the binding part of the church's constitution undermined authority in two ways. First, leaders no longer had any authoritative faith to develop or lead *from*; second, the body of the church no longer had a clear public standard to hold its putative leaders *to*. Instead of an establishment that kept one another humble by trying to live within the confession, the church was afflicted with a host of self-appointed prophets who expected the church to follow them, pay for their pet projects, and like it.

Rulers rule:

The Presbyterian Church pioneered checks and balances and shared authority because we know, better than anyone, how prone to sin and pride we are. This insight about our own sin helps Calvinists hold firmly to the idea that everyone needs standards. We do things decently and in order not simply because our personalities are configured that way, but because we know that disorder is the greatest temptation to pride, sin, and self-will. Discipline is a distinctive mark of Calvin's church on good theological grounds. Yet today it is common for church officials to ignore the standards, bend the rules, and delay decisions for fear of creating conflict or giving offense. Worse, on a number of contested standards, church officials are likely to be out of step with the rest of the church and obstruct disciplines they don't like. This practice undermines their authority faster than anything else they could do.

Leaders lead:

Leaders lead. That is what makes them leaders. Whenever officials of the church conduct “visioning exercises” to discover what the church thinks it should do, they have failed as leaders. Worse, they are taking up the space and authority that leaders could use. Leadership by referendum is an oxymoron. The great value of the Establishment to church leaders is that it provides the great body of wisdom, experience, and prudence that any given individual might lack—without descending into mere opinion coallating. Fear of tyranny is appropriate, but it can be and has been taken to excess. Leaders in the Presbyterian Church have limited authority, usually limited terms, and a dozen restraints to keep them from tyranny. Our danger today is the opposite: we have constrained, undermined, and diffused authority in the church so much that in order to lead at all, you pretty much have to get out of the official church structure. This is why there has been the huge growth of special-interest organizations in and around the church. They have to try to lead from the outside, because the inside structure has been cleansed of almost all of its proper authority and power.

The Establishment is not a special-interest group. The Establishment is a social structure that makes special-interest groups unnecessary.

Let the Chips Fall Where They May

The old Presbyterian Establishment was composed almost exclusively of traditional, bourgeois, pious, old, straight, white men in positions of power in the church and their counterparts among traditional, bourgeois, pious, old, straight, white men in positions of power in the world. A restored Presbyterian Establishment would not be exclusively white, and definitely would not be exclusively male. Nonetheless, it is likely that it would be overwhelmingly white, predominantly male, and very largely traditional, bourgeois, pious, old, and straight. It would be based, of necessity, in the positions of power in the church and the world.

The Establishment will always be much less diverse than the church as a whole. The process of rising in leadership winnows out most of those who are committed to breaking traditions, outraging convention, and promoting heterodoxy. It takes a long time to rise to leadership, which works against the young. The teachings of the church, as well as the orientation of the overwhelming majority of humanity to begin with, ensure that the Establishment will be almost exclusively heterosexual. What would be different from the past would be the racial and sexual composition of the Presbyterian Establishment.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is overwhelmingly white and likely to stay that way. At the same time, there is strong support for a more racially diverse church, and slowly that is beginning to happen. Leaders have been rising in the church from all the racial-ethnic groups that we have, some already in prominent positions. I am confident that the normal mechanisms of church leadership that I have outlined for developing the new Establishment—tall-steeple pastors, presbytery EPs and Stated Clerks, lay people devoted to the local and regional ministry of Presbyterians—will bring forward nonwhite leaders at least in proportion to their fraction of the church. In fact, I think that in the near future we will see more natural leaders emerging from the Korean-American stream of the church than their proportion of the total membership would suggest.

I do not think that we need explicit policies of representation, quotas, and affirmative action to develop racial-ethnic leadership in the church any longer. I think we need to continuously promote the *consciousness* of racial and ethnic inclusion, but I think the moment for affirmative-action *policies* has passed. They would now make the situation worse, more stuck in racist categories.

The case of women in the Presbyterian Establishment is both easy and hard to resolve. It is easy, because so many women in the church have significant leadership experience and potential, many serving now in significant leadership positions among us. Other factors make strict proportional representation hard to achieve.

As a sociologist who has taught and studied family life, sex, and gender, I have become convinced over the years that the differences between men and women in their approach to power is deep. Women have been excluded from the opportunity to achieve power and to be part of the establishment in the past. Changing sexist structures that excluded women is a great gain and something we should always be vigilant about. But I believe that ensuring women equal *opportunity* to be part of the Presbyterian Establishment will not result in an equal *outcome* of women being half of that Establishment. We need to promote the *consciousness* of gender inclusion, but the moment for representational *policies* has passed.

Those whose main goal is equal representation of men and women in all positions of power and authority in the church will likely find that the Presbyterian Establishment project is not for them. The more effective the Establishment is, the less likely it is to simply reflect the raw demographic diversity of the church. *So be it*. The church needs an establishment that works with real effect and authority. We need leadership chosen for its ability to help us work together effectively.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is declining. It has been losing absolute numbers at a significant clip for decades; it has been losing its share of all believers in this country for centuries. I believe that the church of Jesus Christ will endure to the end of the age. I do not believe that God gives any such assurances about the PC(USA). It is possible that our denomination will continue to wither into insignificance even if we did reconstruct a Presbyterian Establishment. I don't know. I am certain, though, that *the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) cannot turn itself around if it does not reconstruct an authoritative establishment.*
