

1 **TASK FORCE ON ENGAGING RULING ELDERS**
2 **FINAL REPORT TO THE STRATEGIC PLANNING COMMITTEE**

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7 If you have any questions about the attached report, please email me at rtaylor@pcanet.org.

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10 Roy Taylor
11 Chairman
12 3/25/05

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31 [NOTE: This cover page is included on the PCA Strategic Planning web page, but will be
32 removed from the final report for inclusion into the *GA Commissioner Handbook*.]
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1 **VII. Task Force on Engaging Ruling Elders**

2 The genius of Presbyterianism is a plurality of elders engaging in ministry together. Various
3 denominations have chosen different ways of identifying themselves. Baptists have chosen a
4 name that puts an emphasis on their unique view of baptism. Lutherans have a name that
5 emphasizes the theology of the founder of their movement. Pentecostals or Charismatics use a
6 name that directs attention to their perspectives on the work of the Holy Spirit. Presbyterians
7 have chosen a name that underscores our belief that the Church is to be led by elders, a
8 plurality or group of elders, not a hierarchy of clergy. Because of the Apostle Paul’s statement
9 in 1 Timothy 5:17,¹ we understand that there are two sub-divisions within the office of elder:
10 ruling elders and teaching elders.

11 **Biblical Basis for Plural Elder Ministry**

12 A. Old Testament

13 The office of elder is an ancient, honorable, and active office. Its roots may be traced to the
14 Old Testament some 3,400 years ago.² When Moses was overwhelmed with the burden of
15 spiritual leadership (Numbers 11:14), the LORD instructed him to choose seventy elders to
16 share the burden of spiritual leadership with Moses (Numbers 11:16-17). Thus, the office of
17 elder began in the Old Testament. The purpose of a plurality of elders was to exercise shared
18 *spiritual* leadership (Deut. 27:1). Joshua, Moses’ successor, continued the practice of shared
19 spiritual leadership (Josh. 8:10). The role of what we now call ruling elders was greatly
20 enhanced by the emergence of the synagogue system as a result of the Babylonian captivity of
21 the Jews in the sixth century B.C. (Jer. 29:1; Ezek. 8:1; 14:1; 20:1, 3). A network of
22 synagogues developed across the Mediterranean basin throughout the Jewish Diaspora. By
23 the time of Christ, there were synagogues in most places where Jews were found in the Roman
24 Empire.

25 B. New Testament

26 There is much that the early Church inherited from the Old Testament origins of the Church
27 and the influence of the synagogue in the areas of worship³ and polity. The New Testament
28 primary example of Presbyterian polity in operation is Acts 15, the Council of Jerusalem
29 because:

- 30 1. A single church appealed to the larger Church to resolve a theological issue (Acts 15:2,
31 22) with the expectation that the larger Church had the wisdom and authority to
32 resolve the issue.
33 2. Ecclesiastical authority was shared by a plurality of elders, not just the apostles (Acts
34 15:6, 22, 23).

¹“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching” (ESV). All biblical quotations in this section of the report are from the English Standard Version.

² For a fuller discussion of the office of elder, see “Presbyterianism,” L. Roy Taylor in *Who Runs the Church. Four Views of Church Government*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004. Steven B. Cowan, General Editor.

³ The early Church christianized the synagogue liturgy and added the giving of tithes and the weekly celebration of communion.

- 1 3. The decision of the representative assembly was an act of “the whole Church” (Acts
2 15:22).
3 4. The theological issue resolved constituted a binding confessional standard on all the
4 churches (Acts 15:23, 30). It was not the suggestion of a convention, but the binding
5 confessional standard of a representative assembly.
6 5. Acts 14:23, “presbyters were elected by show of hands,” may be considered in keeping
7 with the classical use of the term (*cheironteo*) used by the Greeks and Romans in an
8 election, “to vote by show of hands.”⁴ The elders were elected representatives of the
9 churches.

10 Incipient Presbyterian polity is also evinced in the New Testament in other places. Paul
11 ordained elders in every city (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5), and there was a plurality of elders in each
12 congregation (Acts 20:17, 28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-2; 5:17). Moreover, the terms *presbuteros*
13 (elder) and *episcopos* (bishop, overseer) are used as synonyms in the New Testament (see Acts
14 20:17-38; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4).⁵

15 **Decline and Restoration of Plural Elder Ministry**

16 A. Decline of Presbyterianism and Rise of Episcopacy

17 Documents of the early Church indicate that plurality of elders in local churches continued
18 into the mid-second century.⁶ Episcopacy (rule of the Church by bishops) developed early on
19 for a number of reasons.⁷ The incipient episcopacy of the mid-second century led to an
20 institutionalized episcopacy of the fourth century, which later led to the development of the
21 papacy with Leo I claiming authority over the whole Church in the mid-fifth century.

22 B. Restoration of Presbyterianism

23 With the dawn of the Reformation in the 16th century, there was a concern to reform the
24 Church not only in theology, worship and sacraments, but also in polity.⁸ Calvin was able to

⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, Book IV, Ch. III.15. See also Liddell-Scott, *Lexicon*, 1986 for numerous such examples. See also Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* on the same term.

⁵ Interestingly, one of the strongest arguments for these terms being synonyms has been from a bishop of the Church of England, and New Testament scholar, J. B. Lightfoot. See J. B. Lightfoot *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953) 96-98.

⁶ Several non-canonical documents reflect a situation where a plurality of presbyters was at the head of a congregation (*Polycarp*, Ep.5-6, cf. 11; 2 *Clem.* 7.3; *Asc. Isa.* 3.23f; *Orac. Sib.* 2.264f.), even where the single bishop was clearly distinct from the presbyters, as in Ignatius, *Polyc.* 6; *Trall.* 3; *Smyrn.* 8). The church at Alexandria, according to their later reports (Jerome, *Ep.* 146; Eutychus, *Annals*, PG 111.982), was led by twelve presbyters, who chose a president as bishop out of their own number.

⁷ As persecution increased, the role of the senior pastor became more prestigious and authoritative since he was the custodian of the scriptures, most directly involved in discipline, and presided at the weekly communion. The senior pastors of churches where the apostles had ministered were given higher honor. The senior pastors of churches in the five patriarch cities (Jerusalem, Antioch of Syria, Alexandria, Rome, and Constantinople) were looked to for leadership. Over time urban bishops developed more influence than rural bishops. The Church patterned itself after the Roman government in an effort to have a more efficient operation.

⁸ See John Calvin's apology for the Reformation, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, written to the Emperor, Charles V in 1544.

1 re-institute Presbyterian church government in Geneva. Some, though not all, of the
2 continental Reformed churches adopted Presbyterian polity. John Knox and Andrew Melville
3 were effective in implementing Presbyterian polity in the Church of Scotland. In the 17th
4 century, the Westminster Assembly adopted an ecclesiastical form of government that was
5 Presbyterian, which was adopted in Scotland by both Church and State but never fully
6 implemented in England. In the 18th century, Presbyterianism in colonial America first
7 developed in a more democratic (or as we are keen to say in the PCA, “grassroots”) system
8 appropriate to the American culture and Free-Church situation.⁹ The PCA was founded on the
9 grassroots Presbyterian model of colonial Presbyterianism, and was strongly influenced by J.
10 H. Thornwell and others, with a strong emphasis on the role of ruling elders. The formation of
11 the PCA itself in 1973 was due, to a large degree, to the efforts of ruling elders. The PCA has
12 a unique polity within the broad category of Presbyterian church government.¹⁰

13 **Qualifications of Elders**

14 A. Spiritual Qualifications

15 The most detailed qualifications for elders given in Scripture have to do with spiritual maturity
16 (Num. 11:26; 1 Tim. 3:1-3, and Titus 1:5-9). Certain *general characteristics* are expected:

- 17 • “Known as leaders” – recognized as spiritual leaders by others
- 18 • “Filled with the Spirit” – godly, living in dependence on the Holy Spirit
- 19 • “Filled with wisdom” – able to apply biblical principles to practical situations
- 20 • “Not a recent convert” – not a relatively new Christian.

21 Characteristics are expected in the elder’s *family life*:

- 22 • “Husband of one wife” – literally “a one-woman kind of man,” faithfully devoted to his
23 wife
- 24 • “Manages his own household well” – leads his family in a godly way
- 25 • “Having his children in subjection in all honor,” “his children are believers, and not
26 open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination” – an effective father to his
27 children still in the household
- 28 • “Wives who are dignified, not slanderers but sober minded, faithful in all things.”

29 Specific characteristics are expected in the elder’s *life within the Church*:

- 30 • “Prudent” – sensible, of sound judgment
- 31 • “Of good behavior” – lives a well-ordered life
- 32 • “Hospitable”
- 33 • “Able to teach,” “Able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also able to rebuke
34 those who contradict it”
- 35 • “Not addicted to wine” – does not abuse alcohol
- 36 • “Not stubborn”
- 37 • “Not quick tempered”
- 38 • “Not argumentative”

⁹ See Paul R. Gilchrist, *The Distinctives of Biblical Presbyterianism* (Atlanta: World Reformed Fellowship, 2002).

¹⁰ See Robert C. Cannada and W. Jack Williamson, *The Historic Polity of the PCA*. (Italics in original.)

- 1 • “Uncontentious”
- 2 • “Gentle” – kind, patient
- 3 • “Not a lover of money” – not greedy
- 4 • “Loves what is good”
- 5 • “Just”
- 6 • “Devout.”

7 Finally, there are characteristics expected to be true in the elder’s *community life*:

- 8 • “Above reproach” – having no glaring inconsistencies of life that would bring
- 9 dishonor to Christ and the Church.
- 10 • “Well thought of by outsiders so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the
- 11 devil.”

12 In determining whom to put onto the ballot for election as elders, the session is to determine
13 that the candidates meet the biblical qualifications for spiritual maturity (*BCO* 24-1). In his
14 ordination, an elder takes a vow (*BCO* 24-5, q 4) reflective of his responsibility to live an
15 exemplary life:

16 Do you accept the office of ruling elder (or deacon, as the case may be) in this
17 church, and promise faithfully to perform all the duties thereof, and to
18 endeavor by the grace of God to adorn the profession of the Gospel in your
19 life, and to set a worthy example before the Church of which God has made
20 you an officer?

21 B. Theological Qualifications

22 In the Reformed tradition, we place a premium on theological understanding and doctrinal
23 fidelity. In the PCA, we expect and require our ministers to be well trained and vigorously
24 examined theologically (*BCO* Chapter 21). We expect ruling elders and deacons to have an
25 appropriate level of instruction and doctrinal acumen (*BCO* 24-1) in order to take the
26 ordination vow of belief in the inspiration, inerrancy, and authority of Scripture and
27 subscription to the *Westminster Standards*, knowledgeably and sincerely (*BCO* 24-5, qq. 1, 2).

28 C. Polity Qualifications

29 Elders are also to have a working understanding of our church government (*BCO* 24-5, q. 3).
30 Elders sharing ministry means more than simply referring to appropriate sections of the *Book*
31 *of Church Order* for procedures; sharing ministry means exercising spiritual leadership and
32 carrying out the biblical responsibilities of elders. (See below). PCA officers should be aware
33 of the uniqueness of the polity of the PCA. The PCA is a spiritually connectional Church, but
34 not connectional in the civil, corporate or legal sense. PCA polity is a democratic, grassroots
35 Presbyterianism as distinguished from a hierarchal, top-down type of Presbyterianism as one
36 would find in the Church of Scotland.

37 Presbyterianism in America was not identical to the Church of Scotland.
38 American Presbyterianism was more democratic. In Scotland the General
39 Assembly was established before the Presbyteries were established. In colonial

1 America, the Presbyterian Church began first with congregations, then with the
2 organization of the Presbytery of Philadelphia in 1706, the Synod of
3 Philadelphia in 1717, the Synod of New York in 1741, and the General
4 Assembly in 1788 (also formed in Philadelphia). When the General Assembly
5 was formed in 1788, eight preliminary principles of representative church
6 government were adopted that reflected the American Free Church and more
7 democratic perspective. These eight Preliminary Principles¹¹ were adopted
8 instead of duplicating the Church of Scotland's polity, which most of American
9 commissioners regarded as an aristocratic, top-down perspective, giving the
10 General Assembly too much authority.¹²

¹¹ The Presbyterian Church in America, in setting forth the form of government founded upon and agreeable to the Word of God, reiterates the following great principles which have governed the formation of the plan:

1. God alone is Lord of the conscience and has left it free from any doctrines or commandments of men (a) which are in any respect contrary to the Word of God, or (b) which, in regard to matters of faith and worship, are not governed by the Word of God. Therefore, the rights of private judgment in all matters that respect religion are universal and inalienable. No religious constitution should be supported by the civil power further than may be necessary for protection and security equal and common to all others.
2. In perfect consistency with the above principle, every Christian Church, or union or association of particular churches, is entitled to declare the terms of admission into its communion and the qualifications of its ministers and members, as well as the whole system of its internal government that Christ has appointed. In the exercise of this right it may, notwithstanding, err in making the terms of communion either too lax or too narrow; yet even in this case, it does not infringe upon the liberty or the rights of others, but only makes an improper use of its own.
3. Our blessed Saviour, for the edification of the visible Church, which is His body, has appointed officers not only to preach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments, but also to exercise discipline for the preservation both of truth and duty. It is incumbent upon these officers and upon the whole Church in whose name they act, to censure or cast out the erroneous and scandalous, observing in all cases the rules contained in the Word of God.
4. Godliness is founded on truth. A test of truth is its power to promote holiness according to our Saviour's rule, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20). No opinion can be more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon the same level.
On the contrary, there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. Otherwise it would be of no consequence either to discover truth or to embrace it.
5. While, under the conviction of the above principle, it is necessary to make effective provision that all who are admitted as teachers be sound in the faith, there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good character and principles may differ. In all these it is the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other.
6. Though the character, qualifications and authority of church officers are laid down in the Holy Scriptures, as well as the proper method of officer investiture, the power to elect persons to the exercise of authority in any particular society resides in that society.
7. All church power, whether exercised by the body in general, or by representation, is only ministerial and declarative since the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice. No church judicatory may make laws to bind the conscience. All church courts may err through human frailty, yet it rests upon them to uphold the laws of Scripture though this obligation be lodged with fallible men.
8. Since ecclesiastical discipline must be purely moral or spiritual in its object, and not attended with any civil effects, it can derive no force whatever, but from its own justice, the approbation of an impartial public, and the countenance and blessing of the great Head of the Church.

If the preceding scriptural principles be steadfastly adhered to, the vigor and strictness of government and discipline, applied with pastoral prudence and Christian love, will contribute to the glory and well being of the Church.

¹² Taylor. *Op cit.*, p. 95. For a fuller discussion see Paul R. Gilchrist, *Distinctives of Biblical Presbyterianism* (Atlanta: World Reformed Fellowship, 2002), in which he discusses the differences between a "democratic Presbyterianism" espoused by continental Reformed churches, the sixteenth-century Church of Scotland, some of the Scots commissioners to the Westminster Assembly, such as George Gillespie and Alexander Henderson, and an

1 Presbyterian polity is connectional, i.e., we are *spiritually* connected (*not civilly* connected) and
2 Presbyterian churches are inter-dependent, not independent.¹³ This connectionalism is expressed
3 in our confessional theology, our system of government and discipline, and our cooperative
4 ministry.¹⁴ Or as Cannada and Williamson have well said,

5 The thing that is special about the PCA is that there is a clear and vital spiritual
6 connection between the Congregations, the Presbyteries, and the General
7 Assembly. Accordingly, it is entirely proper to designate the polity of the PCA as
8 being “connectional” as long as it is made clear that the connection is a spiritual
9 connection between the Congregations, the Presbyteries and the General
10 Assembly and there is no connection of any kind between the civil entities formed
11 by them. The members of the Congregations, the Presbyteries and the General
12 Assembly make up the membership of the respective civil entities formed by them
13 and are, therefore, in complete control of those civil entities. *Accordingly, since*
14 *there is a vital spiritual connection between the Congregations, the Presbyteries,*
15 *and the General Assembly in the PCA and each has complete control of the civil*

“aristocratic Presbyterianism” advocated by Samuel Rutherford and Robert Baillie. In the former, ecclesiastical authority flows from the lower courts to the higher with the consent of the governed. In the latter ecclesiastical authority flows from the higher courts to the lower. See also Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1939), 583-584; William Cunningham, *Historical Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1969, reprint of 1862 edition) I, 57, II, 536; James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974, reprint of 1869 edition), 266.

¹³ “By ‘connectional’ we mean that local churches see themselves as part of the larger Church, that local churches are not independent but are accountable to the larger Church, and that local churches do not minister alone but in cooperation with the larger Church.” (Taylor, *Who Runs the Church*, p. 75). Such a definition does not require or even imply that churches must be civilly connected in order to be connectional.

¹⁴ *Doctrinal Fidelity*: No system of church polity can absolutely guarantee theological integrity among its ministers and office-bearers. Apostasy and heresy have cropped up in branches of the Church with all types of church government. Nevertheless, Presbyterian church polity has built-in safeguards that will work, *if* the system is faithfully followed. First, a Reformed-Presbyterian Church has a binding confessional doctrinal standard that is not just an advisory consensus statement. Second, the doctrinal standards of a Reformed-Presbyterian Church are derived from Scripture, relying upon the Holy Spirit, benefiting from the wisdom of the theological consensus of the Church throughout the ages. Finally, ministers and office-bearers are required to adhere to the biblical system of doctrine for ordination and continued ministry.

Mutual Accountability: In a Church with a presbyterian-representative-connectional system, there is mutual accountability not only in doctrinal integrity, but also for one’s manner of life. Historically, the Reformed-Presbyterian Churches have regarded the “marks of the Church” to be (1) the faithful preaching of the Word, (2) the proper administration of the sacraments, and (3) the practice of discipline. In a Presbyterian system the members of the local church are accountable to the elders of that church, ministers and churches are accountable to the presbytery, and presbyteries are accountable to the general assembly. There are carefully detailed procedures to be followed, once a judicial process of discipline has been instituted. Moreover, there is the possibility of appeal to the larger Church, the Presbytery, or even the General Assembly.

Cooperative Ministry: To be a Presbyterian church involves not only a mutual commitment to a confessional doctrinal standard and mutual accountability, but also a commitment to cooperative ministry. That is based on an ecclesiology which posits that the Church is more than the local church, that local churches ministering together as a regional Church or national Church can accomplish more in ministry than local churches ministering separately. Because the Church is a covenant community of the people of God, local churches are not independent, but interdependent, not only in doctrinal confessions and accountability, and in cooperative ministry. This is not to say that churches with other forms of church government cannot have effective cooperative ministries, but that for Presbyterians cooperative ministry is a matter of theological principle, not merely practical strategy. (Taylor. *Op. cit.* pp. 96-97).

1 *entity formed by it, the PCA does not consist of a group of independent local*
2 *churches that are free to teach and promote whatever they see fit.*¹⁵

3 **Responsibilities of Elders**

4 Elders have numerous duties as spiritual leaders. Elders together are to share the burden
5 of leadership (Num. 11:17). Elders are to pay careful attention to themselves (set a godly
6 example), to oversee, and to care for the Church (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-3) as under-
7 shepherds of Christ. Elders should be able carefully to consider, debate, and decide
8 theological issues (Acts 15). Elders together ordain others to office (Acts 6:6; 14:23;
9 1 Tim. 4:14). Elders are to pray for the sick (James 5:14) and for all of the people of God
10 (Acts 6:2, 3, 4; 20:36).

11 All elders rule (1 Tim. 5:17), i.e., exercise ecclesiastical authority and spiritual leadership
12 (Heb. 13:7, 17, 24). Both in the synagogue and the church, a senate of elders handled
13 matters of spiritual discipline when members fell into sin. Therefore, elders are involved
14 in the practice of discipline. Elders oversee the finances of a local church (Acts 11:29,
15 30), though they often delegate some of that responsibility to deacons. Teaching elders, or
16 pastors in the local church, have responsibilities to teach and preach the word of God
17 (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17), to administer the sacraments (Matt. 28:19-20) under the oversight of the
18 session. Our *Book of Church Order* delineates these responsibilities in Chapters 8 and 12.

19 The biblical pattern on the role of elders sharing ministry together is sometimes in conflict
20 with the reality of what one finds in churches. Just as the early Church, in its quest for
21 efficiency, was affected by the governmental model of the Roman Empire (that led to
22 episcopacy), the contemporary Church sometimes adopts a business-MBA model in its
23 quest for efficiency. The pastor becomes a more of a CEO than a minister, and the session
24 becomes more of a board of directors rather than under-shepherds. Elders may see their
25 role as meeting to act upon staff or committee recommendations, hear reports, vote on
26 receiving or dismissing members, or carrying out official functions such as assisting in
27 administering communion, and examining and ordaining other officers.

28 **Training Elders for Ministry**

29 Biblical eldership involves spiritual maturity, theological and biblical understanding,
30 ecclesiastical leadership, and active engagement in shared ministry. Yet much of officer
31 development courses give a lot of information and training in theology and polity and little
32 on leadership, discipleship, and ministry involvement. In order for ruling elders to be
33 properly prepared so that they may knowledgeably and sincerely take their ordination
34 vows of subscription to the *Westminster Standards* and their affirmation of our
35 Presbyterian polity, there must be thorough instruction in theology and church
36 government. It is important also, in order for ruling elders to become more involved in
37 shared ministry, that appropriate attention be given to training in ongoing discipleship,
38 biblical leadership, and ministry involvement.

¹⁵ Robert C. Cannada and W. Jack Williamson. *The Historic Polity of the PCA*. pp. 34-35. (Italics in original.)

1 **Engaging Elders in Ministry**

2 A. Ministry in the Local Church and Community

3 A recurring problem in local churches is making a transition from the board-of-directors
4 corporate mentality to the shared-ministry biblical model. This challenge may be addressed
5 in several stages: 1) the elder selection process, 2) the elder training process, 3) the elder
6 deployment process, and 4) the ongoing training of elders.

7 The biblical qualifications for elders are clear (Num. 11:26; 1 Tim. 3:1-3, and Titus 1:5-9).
8 Elders are to be chosen on the basis of their spiritual maturity and proven leadership.
9 Church members are urged to nominate men for office only if they meet the biblical
10 qualifications, “each prospective officer should be an active male member who meets the
11 biblical qualifications set forth in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1” (*BCO* 24-1).

12 Sadly, sometimes elders may be nominated and elected on other bases such as family
13 connections, prestige, wealth, local traditions, or factors other than the serious biblical
14 qualifications. The session has the responsibility to examine candidates and to present to the
15 congregation only properly qualified candidates for election, “If there are candidates eligible
16 for election, the Session shall report to the congregation those eligible, giving at least thirty
17 (30) days prior notice of the time and place of a congregational meeting for elections” (*BCO*
18 24-1). Since being placed on the ballot is tantamount to election in some congregations,
19 sessions must be willing to exercise their discernment and authority in determining those
20 candidates who will be eligible for election.

21 The elder training process should include instruction on Reformed theology (*Westminster*
22 *Standards*) and PCA polity (*BCO*). The elder training process should also contain instruction
23 on personal spiritual growth in such areas as individual piety, utilizing the means of grace,
24 building and maintaining Christian marriage and family life, and a Christian view of work and
25 vocation. The specific biblical duties of elders need to be delineated and instructions given on
26 how to become adept and effective in carrying out those ministry responsibilities. Elders
27 are, by the nature of the case, leaders. Therefore, instruction on the principles of biblical
28 leadership is appropriate. With the variety of spiritual duties placed upon elders and
29 ministry being shared among them, men would naturally be attracted toward ministries in
30 which they have providential gifts through personality endowments, education, training, and
31 experience. It would also be helpful for instruction to be given on the nature of the ordinary
32 spiritual gifts, how to discern one’s gifts and use them in ministry.

33 Deploying elders in shared ministry is more than ordaining and installing them so that they
34 are eligible to attend and vote in session meetings. It is helpful and effective for sessions to
35 allocate ministry duties of elders according to individual elders’ gifts, interests, and abilities.

36 Continuing education is required in such occupations as medicine, law, accounting, and
37 some types of teaching. Some denominations require continuing education of their
38 ministers. It would be appropriate for sessions and the broader assemblies of the Church to

1 provide continuing education opportunities for elders in order to be prepared better to
2 understand and fulfill effectively specific elder ministries.

3 B. Ministry In and Through the Higher Courts of the Church

4 Ideally, to be a Presbyterian elder (whether ruling elder or teaching elder) is to be a
5 churchman. A consistent Presbyterian is concerned for and active in the broader Church,
6 not just his local church. Our theology leads us to understand that the kingdom of God
7 extends beyond the visible Church. Therefore, we may be legitimately involved in
8 “kingdom work” through networks and alliances, institutions and movements that may
9 include others outside the PCA.¹⁶ Yet we recognize the importance of the visible Church
10 along with the early father of the Church, Augustine of Hippo, who taught that he who has
11 God for his father will have the Church as his mother.¹⁷ In this day of declining
12 denominational loyalty in our culture, there is a tendency of churches to move immediately
13 from local church ministry to “kingdom work” without viewing ministering through the
14 broader assemblies of the Church (presbyteries and General Assembly) as essential or even
15 important.

16 Prior to the formation of the PCA, evangelical Presbyterian and Reformed believers and
17 churches often resorted to ministry through para-church agencies due, in part, to a lack of
18 confidence in an increasingly theologically pluralistic denomination. After the formation of
19 the PCA (a denomination committed to being “Faithful to the Scriptures, True to the
20 Reformed Faith, and Obedient to the Great Commission”) it would be logical to assume,
21 since it is our understanding that the Great Commission may not be completely fulfilled
22 totally apart from the visible Church, that PCA individuals and churches would, over time,
23 channel the bulk of their efforts, energies, and support they expend outside the local church
24 to the cooperative ministries of presbyteries and the General Assembly. The expectation has
25 *not* been realized. If the PCA is to be more than a credentialing and disciplinary agency for
26 ministers or a mere association of plural-elder Congregationalist churches, there must be a
27 greater use of the broader assemblies of the Church as means of cooperative ministry.
28 Greater involvement of ruling elders is necessary to the realization of the ideal.

29 The lack of participation of ruling elders in the broader assemblies of the Church may be
30 due to a variety of reasons. Some sessions do not send ruling elder commissioners to
31 presbytery or General Assembly because they do not see the importance of doing so.
32 Whether or not ruling elders participate in the broader assemblies of the Church is
33 dependent to a large degree on the training they receive from the pastor and the example set
34 by the pastor. Basically, if a pastor does not have a theological conviction of the biblical
35 nature and necessity of Presbyterianism and spiritual connectionalism, it is unlikely that the
36 ruling elders with whom he serves will develop such a conviction on their own. In short, if

¹⁶ See *BCO* 14-1 item 6: “the Church recognizes the right of individuals and congregations to labor through other agencies in fulfilling the Great Commission.”

¹⁷ See *WCF* XXV-2, “The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children; and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.”

1 the pastor is not a churchman, it is unlikely that the ruling elders will be churchmen. Local
2 churches are concerned about effective ministry. The cooperative ministries of presbyteries
3 and the General Assembly must be carried out in ways that are biblical and effective or PCA
4 churches will find other means of ministry. Some ruling elders may be repulsed by the
5 technicalities of parliamentary procedures in presbytery and General Assembly meetings. In
6 order to alleviate those concerns, some presbyteries are delegating more work to their
7 committees and placing more emphasis on worship, fellowship, prayer, and ministry
8 training. The Strategic Planning Committee is recommending some changes to the
9 operation of the annual meeting of the General Assembly to make the meeting more
10 accessible and attractive to ruling elders.

11 **For Recommendation to the 2006 General Assembly**

- 12 1. That ruling elder training adequately cover information and training not only in theology
13 and polity, but also in leadership, discipleship, and ministry involvement.
- 14 2. That pastors and sessions avail themselves of the resources and materials for officer
15 training available through Christian Education and Publications and other appropriate
16 sources.
- 17 3. That Christian Education and Publications gather materials and resources from pastors
18 and sessions that are training elders well, to collate such materials and resources, and to
19 make such resources and materials available to the Church at large so that Christian
20 Education and Publications could expand its resources and service to the Church.
- 21 4. That presbyteries consider providing ruling elder continuing education opportunities on
22 a periodic basis.
- 23 5. That ruling elder continuing education opportunities be provided, from time to time, at
24 the annual meeting of the General Assembly (for example, pre-Assembly seminars on
25 developing under-shepherd ministries in the local church).