

How do we choose our Teaching and Ruling Elders?

Presbyterianism is unique from other church governance structures in that it is neither Congregational nor Hierarchical. It functions when those who have been recognized by calling as having the Spirit of Christ and who are mature in their faith (*Presbyters* or *Elders*) together discern the mind and will of Christ, and lead the people who have selected/called them accordingly.

But there are certain aspects of the life of the church which are given to the congregation at large to decide which includes the calling of a pastor. This comes into play in interesting and wonderful ways when the church chooses Teaching Elders.

Interesting and pertinent points to remember (**G. #-#** stands for our Book of Order Part One – Government, chapter-section):

- It is an irrevocably reserved right of the local church and its members to call its own pastor(s) [therefore they are not assigned by any judicatory or assume the office by any right] *PROVIDED* the Presbytery concurs by receiving such pastor(s) into its membership. (**G. 6-6**)
- Technically, we don't choose someone to be a Teaching Elder. A congregation calls a Teaching Elder to serve as Pastor (or Associate Pastor). All Pastors are Teaching Elders (except for Commissioned Pastors), but not all Teaching Elders are pastors! (**G. 9-5**)
- Whereas the Ruling Elder process can be modified by the local congregation, the call of a Pastor is set by the EPC Book of Order and overseen by the Presbytery. (**G. 10**)
- The role of the congregation is to call, the role of the Presbytery is to ordain, install and/or approve for call and receive the TE into its membership.
- Therefore, a pastor is NOT a member of the congregation being served nor under its oversight. A presbyterian pastor cannot be "fired". They may, however, be removed by the Presbytery with due cause (scriptural) or by the pastor's request (often to take a new call).
- The Session and the Congregation DO have the responsibility to annually review the terms of call, and the Session has the authority/obligation to provide an annual review of the pastor. This is to care for both the pastor AND the congregation.
- If there are grievances, concerns or charges found necessary to be brought against the pastor, these follow the pattern of member to Session to Presbytery. Again, only Presbytery can discipline a duly installed pastor.
- None of this counts for an Assistant Pastor. They are hired by the Session in consultation with the Presbytery, utilizing a specific call limited in scope of ministry and term of service. (**G. 10-6**)

When a congregation desires to call a pastor to serve them they create a Nominating Committee. This committee is representative of the congregation at large, elected and commissioned by them to bring a suitable nominee. Their work involves many aspects:

- Being in regular consultation with the Ministerial Committee of the Presbytery to ensure best results of a Search Process;
- Gathering information about the church and creating a Church Information Form for potential candidates to learn about the church and the pastoral position;
- Posting and advertising the position opening;
- Receiving and reviewing information from interested parties;
- Determining potential candidates through deeper review of their material, initial interviews, references, preaching reviews, lots of prayer and other means;
- In-depth interviews with top potential candidates;
- Prayerful discernment of the Candidate they would like to present to the Session and congregation;
- Establishing the Terms of Call for the Candidate. This includes remuneration and benefits as well as scope of ministry, all of which are subject to the approval of Session and the Congregation.
- Securing the consent of the Ministerial Committee of Presbytery to present the Candidate.
- Notifying the Session of their Candidate.
- Helping to arrange for a Candidate presentation to the congregation (typically a weekend) to have them meet the Candidate (and family), have an opportunity to ask questions and hear the Candidate preach.
- Making a report and recommendations at a Congregational Meeting called by the Session for the purpose of calling the Candidate to serve as pastor.

At this congregational meeting, the members of the church vote whether or not to extend a call to the candidate.

But they're not the pastor yet.

- Presbytery must determine they are suitable to receive the call. They do this through examination by the members of the Presbytery.
- And of course, the Candidate must accept the call!

Once the call has been "placed in the hands" of the Teaching Elder by the Presbytery, a Commission of the Presbytery is formed to install (and ordain if necessary) the Candidate as Pastor of the church.

And then you have a Pastor. Presbyterian-style!

-written by Tom Jameson, ruling elder