

A Brief Overview of the Offices of Elder and Deacon in the Presbyterian Church (USA)

Beliefs and Practices

As Presbyterians, we empower our officers/leaders to do much more than make decisions on behalf of the congregation. This empowerment requires some significant and specific qualities in order to thrive during a three-year term and be successful during your tenure on Session or the Deacon Board.

Elders and Deacons should be persons of faith, dedication, and good judgment and their manner of life should be a consistent demonstration of the Christian gospel, both within the church and in the world.

You should expect to learn as you lead since the offices of Elder and Deacon will bring you into deeper contact with the theology, polity (the way we govern ourselves), and the discipline that the Church requires.

You will also need to affirm some very specific aspects of life in the faith. You will affirm that the Scriptures of the Old and New testaments both represent and reveal the nature and persons of God and as such form the basis for the faith and practice of our church. You will also need to know – up front – that these positions require a significant amount of time as you will be meeting as the Session/Deacon Board at least once a month for 2 hours or so, you will be assigned/volunteer for committee leadership roles, and that as a leader of the church, you will need to be a consistent presence in worship and church-related events. On top of all this, you may be asked to spend additional time visiting and communicating with the membership of the church in addition to opportunities for developing as a servant leader at FPC. This continuing education will come at various times of the year and will include an annual leadership retreat for training and planning.

Responsibilities of Elders

Elders are, first of all, to serve as contributing members of the Session. The Session consists of all Elders in active service and all of the congregation's ordained pastors. The Book of Order describes the responsibilities in this way:

- a. to provide opportunities for evangelism to be learned and practiced in and by the church...
- b. to receive members into the church...
- c. to lead the congregation in participation in the mission of the whole Church in the world...

- d. to provide for the worship of the people of God...
- e. to provide for the growth of its members and for their equipment for ministry...
- f. to develop and supervise the church school and the educational program of the church;
- g. to lead the congregation in ministries of personal and social healing and reconciliation in the ...
- h. to challenge the people of God with the privilege of responsible Christian stewardship of money and time and talents...
- i. to establish the annual budget, determine the distribution of the church's benevolences, and order offerings ...
- j. to lead the congregation continually to discover what God is doing in the world and to plan for change, renewal, and reformation under the Word of God;
- k. to engage in a process for education and mutual growth of the members of the session;
- l. to instruct, examine, ordain, install, and welcome into common ministry elders and deacons on their election by the congregation and to inquire into their faithfulness in fulfilling their responsibilities;
- m. to delegate and to supervise the work of the board of deacons and the board of trustees and all other organizations and task forces within the congregation, providing for support, report, review, and control;
- n. to provide for the administration of the program of the church, including employment of non-ordained staff, ...
- o. to provide for the management of the property of the church...
- p. to maintain regular and continuing relationship to the higher governing bodies of the church...
- q. to establish and maintain those ecumenical relationships necessary for the life and mission of the church in its locality;
- r. to serve in judicial matters in accordance with the Rules of Discipline;
- s. to keep an accurate roll of the membership of the church...

Wow! That's a lot to keep track of. Fortunately, the Session does not carry out these tasks alone. We have staff to assist in most areas, and most of the "hands on" responsibilities of the Session are delegated to committees and ministry teams.

Responsibilities of Deacons

The office of deacon as set forth in Scripture is one of **sympathy, witness, and service** after the example of Jesus Christ. Persons of spiritual character, honest repute, of exemplary lives, brotherly and sisterly love, warm sympathies, and sound judgment should be chosen for this office.

It is the practice of deacons...

- First of all, to minister to those who are in need,
- To minister to the sick,
- To minister to the friendless,
- To minister to any who may be in distress within the community of faith.
- To minister to any who may be in distress *beyond* the community of faith.
- They shall assume such other duties as may be delegated to them from time to time by the session, such as leading the people in worship through prayers of intercession, reading the Scriptures, presenting the gifts of the people, and assisting with the Lord's Supper.

The work of the deacon as set forth in Scripture is one of compassion, witness, and service, sharing in the redeeming love of Jesus Christ for the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lost, the friendless, the oppressed, those burdened by unjust policies or structures, or anyone in distress. Persons of spiritual character, honest repute, exemplary lives, brotherly and sisterly love, sincere compassion and sound judgment should be chosen for this ministry.

The Process

As you are no doubt already aware, Presbyterians usually try to do things “decently and in order” so there should be no surprise that there is a process for becoming an elder or deacon so here it is:

1. The Nominating Committee begins to solicit suggestions from the congregation regarding potential candidates for office as well as considering folks on their own.
2. The Nominating Committee will pray over the pool of candidates and then begin the vetting process; visiting with the candidates and going over the basics with each. These basics may include speaking with you about your faith journey, your spiritual gifts (an assessment will be given), why you want to serve, and to answer any questions you may have. There may be a short training/informational meeting so you can get more information regarding the roles of each officer and ask more in-depth questions.

3. The Nominating Committee will select those individuals they believe are best suited for the needs of the Church to serve as Elders and Deacons and then give that slate of officers to the Session for their review.
4. At a duly called Congregational Meeting the church will elect the nominees to their respective positions. There will be opportunities for nominations from the floor.
5. Following their election, there will be a formal examination by the Session of each Elder/Deacon – elect.
6. Following Session approval, the church will schedule a Service of Ordination and Installation where we celebrate both those who are passing the torch of leadership and those who are continuing the race.

Thank you in advance for considering service as an officer at FPC. We will be praying with and for you as the process unfolds and God blesses you and the church!

ORDINATION VOWS FOR OFFICERS

The minister shall ask those preparing to be ordained or installed to stand before the congregation and to answer the following questions:

- a. Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?
- b. Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you?
- c. Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?
- d. Will you fulfill your office in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions?
- e. Will you be governed by our church's polity, and will you abide by its discipline? Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God's Word and Spirit?
- f. Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world?
- g. Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?
- h. Will you seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?
- i. (For elder) Will you be a faithful elder, watching over the people, providing for their worship, nurture, and service? Will you share in government and discipline, serving in governing bodies of the church, and in your ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?
- j. (For deacon) Will you be a faithful deacon, teaching charity, urging concern, and directing the people's help to the friendless and those in need? In your ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?

The elders and deacons elect having answered in the affirmative, an elder shall stand with them before the congregation and shall ask the congregation to answer the following questions:

- a. Do we, the members of the church, accept (names) as elders or deacons, chosen by God through the voice of this congregation to lead us in the way of Jesus Christ?
- b. Do we agree to encourage them, to respect their decisions, and to follow as they guide us, serving Jesus Christ, who alone is Head of the Church?

