

COMMISSIONED LAY PASTORS IN THE PCUSA

As our offices continue to receive inquiries regarding the church's expanded use of Commissioned Lay Pastors¹, we have prepared a comprehensive overview of the history, functions, and learnings with respect to their role. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) now has had over a decade of experience with commissioned lay pastors (hereafter referred to as CLPs) and this document is intended to remind us how we got here.

History:

Commissioned Lay Pastors are missional leaders.

The role of Commissioned Lay Pastor for elders came about as a missional strategy. In 1984 the Presbyteries of Yukon and Geneva overtured the General Assembly to create the role because they did not have enough ministers of the Word and Sacrament to fulfill the basic mission need of congregational leadership – “the Word preached and Sacraments rightly administered.” There was a need for pastoral leadership in congregations in geographically isolated communities that had few financial resources but where there was an opportunity for a Presbyterian witness to Christ.

Soon thereafter, other presbyteries echoed the mission need. The presbyteries in Appalachia found that the concept of the CLP fit their need for leadership despite their proximity to the Eastern Seaboard, seminaries, and a wealth of ordained ministers. In their collective experience, these ministers were not eager to move to small, rural communities in the mountains, nor to learn to minister in a culture very different from what they had known. Other presbyteries in Texas, Nebraska and Kansas asked for expanded CLP functions for similar reasons. Seattle and California both seized on the new role for elders to lead new immigrant populations.

Functions:

At first they were “Commissioned Lay Preachers,” but mission demanded expanded functions. In 1995, they became “Commissioned Lay Pastors.”

The role evolved to authorize CLPs to carry out more of the functions of pastoral ministry: first, to preach² and administer the Lord's Supper³, then additional responsibilities to baptize⁴, moderate sessions⁵ and perform marriages⁶.

Now after several decades during which presbyteries have trained and deployed CLPs, it seems important to highlight key understandings related to this role:

- CLPs are ordained elders. This is an extension of the office of elder with its responsibilities found at G-6.0304. “They should cultivate their ability to teach the Bible and may be authorized to supply places which are without the regular ministry of the Word and Sacrament.”
- CLPs are locally authorized. They have no standing beyond their presbytery and the particular ministry to which they are commissioned. Since each presbytery has its own unique preparation

¹ The Constitutional foundation for Commissioned Lay Pastors is found at G-14.0560

² G-14.0560

³ G-14.0562a

⁴ G-14.0562b

⁵ G-14.0562c

⁶ G-14.0562d

requirements, there is no national educational standard⁷. At least one seminary is providing distance learning resources to some of the presbyteries⁸.

- Expanded functions were created to help presbyteries advance their mission with a particular group of believers⁹. It was never about providing for pastoral positions for individual elders. Presbyteries have granted additional functions in a wide array of mission opportunities and settings. Commissioning a particular elder depends entirely on meeting a presbytery- determined mission need.

Learnings:

Since the authority to grant expanded functions was given to assist a presbytery to carry out its strategy for mission, the focus has always been on the presbytery's mission needs and not the gifts or needs of elders to be commissioned.

- A presbytery is not required to prepare and commission lay pastors if the mission needs of the presbytery do not indicate it. "When a presbytery, in consultation with the session or other responsible committee, determines that its strategy for mission in a local church requires it,..." (G14.0801 c.) A presbytery with many ministers on its roll might determine that those ministers can serve the needs of small congregations or other mission outreach and commission no CLPs. It is reasonable for a presbytery to ask active ministers who are not serving a congregation to exercise their ministry with under-served congregations. At least one presbytery limits its use of the CLP to new immigrant leadership.
- If a particular mission need does not include pastoral work, gifted individuals may be commissioned to serve without being trained and commissioned as lay pastors (and without the sacramental and other authorizations). "Other persons called to perform special services in the church or in the world may be commissioned by the appropriate governing body of the church through a service of dedication." (G 14.0102)
- CLPS work in partnership with and under the guidance of ministers of the Word and Sacrament, especially the moderator of the session of the congregation the CLP serves. The perspective and experience of such dedicated ordained elders coupled with the theological education and experience of ordained ministers brings a wealth of gifts to enrich the ministry of Jesus Christ in the community served.
- CLPs are not permitted to use the Church Leadership Connection to seek opportunities for service outside of their presbytery. When secular career or family circumstances cause a CLP to relocate, he or she must unite with a new PCUSA congregation; such individuals may then offer themselves for service to the new presbytery. A presbytery may agree to recognize training provided to a particular elder by a sister presbytery. That presbytery in consultation with the former presbytery will determine whether the individual meets the requirements and needs of the new ministry context.

We hope that this document has served both to clarify and to reinforce the missional character of the role of Commissioned Lay Pastor as we continue to address the concerns and challenges inherent in this unique calling.

⁷ There have been a number of attempts to direct the national offices to create denomination-wide training for CLPs; all have been rejected by the General Assembly.

⁸ Dubuque Theological Seminary (<http://udts.dbq.edu/>)

⁹ "strategy for mission" G-14.0562