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The Elder as Leader

As I come here to Nashville today to join with you in the celebration of the witness and work of our church and our involvement in it, my memory takes me back to some of the associations and experiences that have enabled me to understand more clearly what it means to be a Presbyterian elder.

I recall, for example, what happened in the Bethel Church near where I grew up in the community of Pea Ridge in rural North Mississippi. Bethel incidentally was founded in the early 1920's as a result of the ministry of Dr. John Cunningham, who later was to become the president of Davidson College and moderator of the Presbyterian Church, U.S. General Assembly. As a little boy I attended that church and later, after I moved to the larger church in the county seat, I would go back out to Bethel to teach Sunday School. It was a small congregation made up largely of struggling small farmers who were having a hard time making ends meet.

What they may have lacked in financial means they made up for in their devotion to God and the Bethel Presbyterian Church. Those folks believed in a generous, loving God, and they loved each other. They had a three-member session, two of whom were women, and they didn't allow themselves to get split up over some of the issues that other larger churches were fighting over. The ordination of women certainly wasn't an issue for them.

Then one day a visiting minister from Jackson came up to preach to what in his pious understanding he thought would be an impressionable congregation eager to be rescued from the liberals of the denomination. He was particularly critical of the unbiblical idea of the ordination of women. When the service was over, the two women members of the session and their male colleague were waiting for him.

Nobody knows exactly what these elders said to their visitor, but it is a matter of record that this little church because of the leadership of its session refused to be intimidated by their guest. Those three elders, all of whom I knew well, personified what leadership is all about. They were committed to sustaining the unity of their little congregation and being loyal to the standards of their denomination.

I think also of another elder in the Fondren church in Jackson where my wife, Elise, and I have been members for almost fifty years and where our children grew up. I am proud to tell you that Elise became that church's first woman elder, and one of our daughters is now an elder in the First Presbyterian Church of Oxford, Mississippi. My friend's name was Warren Hood, another country boy come to town in the years right after World War II. He was a small sawmill operator who after borrowing \$500 to buy what be called a "peckerwood sawmill," made a fortune in the lumber business. With little more than a high school education and with little appreciation for the King's English, Warren brought wisdom and a generous spirit to everything he did.

As a member of the session at Fondren during the tumultuous struggles over racial integration in the Deep South in the 1960's, when practically every other white Protestant church in the state barred African-Americans from entering, Warren Hood helped provide the loyal support that enabled our courageous pastor, the late Moody

McDill, to open our church doors to all who came. You had to live through those experiences to fully understand the difference that such leadership made not just in our church but also in showing the entire community the way.

Later in the face of harsh criticism not only from the militant segregationists but also from some of his business and social associates, Warren agreed to head a state committee appointed by the President of the United States to secure orderly compliance in integrating the schools and other public accommodations. Again I hold up this Presbyterian elder as one of the largely unappreciated heroes of those stormy days.

Those two women elders at Pea Ridge and the courageous Warren Hood in Jackson were simply continuing a pattern of leadership by elders in our church going back to its earliest years. In fact, the very existence of our country is based to a significant extent on the role played by Presbyterians and especially Presbyterian elders.

Their influence was unquestionably decisive in winning our independence and achieving victory in the Revolutionary War. Dr. Gaius Slosser in his notable book, They Seek a Country – The American Presbyterians, writes this:

When Cornwallis was driven back to ultimate defeat and surrender at Yorktown, all of the colonels of the Colonial Army but one were Presbyterian elders.

And there was a huge Presbyterian influence in that intrepid body of leaders meeting eight years later in 1787 in Philadelphia who wrote the U.S. Constitution.

We Presbyterians have inherited a record of incredible courage, perseverance and faithfulness going back to the first presbytery meeting in Philadelphia in 1706—seventy years before the Declaration of Independence was signed.

It is a heritage which we present-day Presbyterians cannot ignore and which we have a sacred duty to uphold.

It has not always been easy to do that. Down through the years there have been many intense differences in our church over polity and politics and social issues. But because of the unique features of our representative system of church government, on which our national government is patterned, we have been able to endure.

Fred Heuser, of the Presbyterian Historical Society, writes about why this has happened:

From our origins diversity has been a part of who we are as a people of God. [The...founders] came together not to get everyone to agree on everything, but to structure a governing body that would enable them to do ministry.

Now in a time when our society and our church are faced by other troubling and extensive challenges I would hope that we can derive a measure of inspiration, wisdom and assurance from those old founders and from the likes of those elders whom I have named and from their counterparts who served in so many congregations in years gone by and whose successors are the hope of our church today.

Without taking ourselves so seriously as to be convinced that by virtue of being Presbyterian elders we possess some kind of innate wisdom, let me suggest, though,

that we do have a mandate to lead—to lead not just in our church but in our community as well. But it is a leadership role that must not be characterized by false pride or social status or religiosity or self-righteousness or holier —than —thou arrogance. It is rather the role of the selfless servant as defined by Jesus Christ. It is a leadership that can best be measured in how we live our own lives—in whether we are considered worthy to be followed. It is a leadership that is not always certain that it is right but that is always earnestly seeking to find what is right.

What then can we say about how we exercise that role of leadership in our church and in our communities and in our country today?

That is really what I want to talk about this morning. As Christian people who profess to believe in an all-loving God, how do we use our faith to serve as a reconciling and healing force in our society rather than being a source of dogmatic division and conflict. That task obviously will not grow easier, for we are fast becoming a nation more sharply ideologically divided and more culturally and religiously diverse than ever before. We are faced with a clash of cultures driven by all of the elements that can tear a society apart and are now made more complex in our own country by the clamor of media and internet—driven voices that divide and confuse us. And if, indeed, religion is one of the fault lines in that cultural mix, we must be alert to the hazards of equating religious dogma with political orthodoxy. That makes for a potent devil's brew.

This is by no means a new phenomenon in our society, but today we are seeing to an extent unprecedented in recent history an unabashed involvement by para-religious groups who seem intent on erecting religious litmus tests on many social and secular issues. If some of our political leaders insist on adding a religious dimension to

many of these issues, we have the making for real trouble that poses a special dilemma for mainline churches and exacerbates the problems for many people who are already confused.

As Robert Bellah writes in The Good Society:

The danger inherent in socially narrowed religious movements focusing on single issues is not so much that they will aggravate social-class cleavages but that they may set an example of religion in public life that shrinks the moral vision and shirks the moral responsibilities borne by mainline and evangelical churches alike.

Throughout our country's history we have seen the involvement of religious groups in the active political arena. These forces have from time to time emerged to create great mischief. In the South before the Civil War the churches for the most part lent spiritual affirmation and respectability to the defense of slavery, just as so many of them a century later aligned themselves on the side of segregation.

As I have already indicated, this latter period was a particularly troubling time for the church of which I was a part in those difficult years of the 1950's and 1960's. The issue of racial segregation dominated every presbytery and synod meeting that I ever attended in the 1960's, caused many a conscientious minister to leave the state, and ultimately was the force that precipitated the splitting of the old Southern denomination.

But it was also the spiritual leadership of the church that provided the voice that led to the racial reconciliation and understanding that has served to erase much of the stain of those bitter years. This was effected, for example, in Mississippi by the forming of the Mississippi Religious Leadership Conference led by a Catholic bishop, a Jewish rabbi, an Episcopal priest, a Southern Baptist educator, the pastor of the state's largest Methodist church and the Reverend Moody McDill, the minister of my own Fondren

Presbyterian Church in Jackson. These people did not have a selfish, narrow, politically driven agenda. They were motivated solely by an understanding of their responsibility to speak out for justice, to bring people together, to heal their wounds, to acknowledge their common humanity. But they also rebuilt churches that had been bombed or burned. They sustained one of their own, the Jewish rabbi, when his home, just up the street from my own, was blown apart by a religious fanatic's bomb. In our denomination it was their words of vision and prophecy that inspired courageous elders like Warren Hood to assert their indispensable leadership.

This is the kind of work that must continue to be our mission. Rather than letting ourselves get caught up by and preoccupied with the narrow and confining issues that limit our capacity to lead, let us bring to the table the messages of reconciliation and healing and understanding. Our role must be to educate, to be the example, to provide the unifying and prophetic voice that brings people together, not divide them. There is something paradoxical about where we find ourselves in our church and in our country today, though.

In our Presbyterian Church, USA, after more than a century of division we came together in the 1980's in a recognition of our common heritage and faith and a commitment to serve God as one united denomination. So many on both sides had struggled for so long to reach the promised land of unity and trust and understanding. Most of us thought that the issues that had separated us had finally been put behind us.

But now at a time when we should feel gratitude and fulfillment that come with the closing of old wounds, what do we find? We are seeing ripples of discontent spreading ominously across some areas of our denomination—discontent by dissident

individuals and groups who seemingly are unable to look at issues through anybody else's eyes but their own and who will not try walking in anybody else's shoes.

The result sadly is that in some places, including my own presbytery, a number of churches are in the process of separating from our denomination that only twenty-five years ago was celebrating its reunification. I cannot bring myself to believe that this strengthens the ability of any of us to witness for God in our increasingly diverse and fragmented society. If we insist on pursuing this course, we will undoubtedly wind up in even more little groups alienated from each other and telling ourselves only what we are comfortable in hearing.

In our larger secular society we are seeing some of the same things happening. Now when we have largely put behind us so much of what divided us in the past and when we seemed to be moving closer to the achievement of a more just and compassionate society, we find instead that we are haunted by fear, distrust and alienation, retreating into cultural enclaves to get away from people with funny names and different skin colors and odd customs, while they live in ignorance of us. These fears have obviously and understandably been greatly escalated by the events of nine-eleven. I do not minimize the impact of that horrible event, but I would say to you that it is not terrorism per se that we need to be primarily worried about. What we must be most concerned about is the unreasoning fear of terrorism that causes us to respond in ways that make a mockery of our most cherished liberties and diminishes our moral standing as a people.

We must face up to the fact that we still have a long way to go to create a shared vision of what we want our society and our church to be. We have to recognize what

some of us white Southerners learned the hard way forty years ago — that none of us is really free of the bondage of prejudice and ignorance and poverty and injustice and neglect until all are free.

One day when we were living at the Governor's Mansion in Jackson, we hosted a luncheon in honor of Myrlie Evers, the widow of the heroic civil rights leader, Medgar Evers, who had been assassinated at his home in Jackson by a Klu Klux Klan member in 1963. I said to Mrs. Evers at that luncheon, "Mrs. Evers, we white folks owe your martyred husband as much as black folks do, for he freed us, too."

It is this understanding that helps us to forge the links that can finally unify us as Presbyterians and in a larger sense as Americans. It is the furtherance of this vision that must constitute our mission.

I am not sure that I can define how we do this, but I know that there are many examples across our church and across our country where this mission is being carried out in exciting ways. For instance, I wish that you could have been with Elise and me last Sunday afternoon in Jackson, Mississippi. There more than 200 of us gathered at the Ascension Lutheran Church—Protestants like us, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Hindus—white folks and black folks and Hispanic folks and Asian folks.

And what were we coming together for? It was to celebrate the completion of the second Habitat for Humanity Peace House built in Jackson in the last two years by people of every religious faith and ethnic background.

This project was the result of our Fondren Presbyterian church minister and some of his elders collaborating with some members of the local Jewish temple and people of other faiths to build houses for people who didn't have a decent place to live. This is the kind of shared vision transmitted into shared effort that can transform our church and our society. All of us who profess to be church leaders must be involved in broadening that vision. I know this for sure — we cannot sustain over the long haul a stable society and a thriving church if that society and that church are not concerned with all people and especially society's most vulnerable members.

We cannot permit ourselves to be divided into contrasting and adversarial groups of people — those who look like us and those who don't —those who have the advantage of a good education and those who don't— those who worship God in one way and those who worship Him in another and maybe not even at all—those who are affluent and prospering and those who are poor, left out and in despair. They are all our neighbors and we know what Jesus said about that. If we Presbyterians will concern ourselves with working together to solve these problems, then we won't have time to be swept up in the self-defeating quibbling over what some obscure verse of scripture may mean. As elders we are not supposed to play God. We are simply called on to follow God.

Over the years we have left too many people out. I can talk about this out of my own experience. In the little rural one-room, six-grade school that I attended as a boy I was the only student ever to graduate from high school. All of the others did not finish. Many did not even start. They were relegated to the ash heap of poverty. They are the people that the world has gone off and left. There are millions of them still out there struggling to make it in an age of high technology, and the economic gap between them and us is actually widening.

My good friend, Bill Friday, the former distinguished and long-time president of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, was talking about this one day. He quoted the words of a North Carolina writer who had described these people. She was originally one of them herself. Ruth Moose of Route 2, Albemarle, North Carolina had written this:

Poverty is a stick the world beats you with and when the world no longer uses that stick, you use it on yourself. There's always the shame that somehow you did something to deserve this; that somehow you brought this social disease upon yourself, some simple act and there you are...guilty.

We Presbyterians have to get our priorities straight. Those priorities must transcend the narrow, special interest agendas that have caused so much misunderstanding within and outside our church. The question in fact is often asked, "Are religious institutions simply one more instance of the problem?" Are we regarded as a part of the proliferating lobbying apparatus seeking to sway public policy in a single issue power game? In the last forty years, some 500 new national religious para-church groups—some of them within our own denomination—have sprung up for the purpose of mobilizing support for one cause or another. These groups have grown faster than some of the churches they claim to represent. Many of them were not even originated or sponsored by a recognized denomination. They come from all sides of the political spectrum. They have raised hundreds of millions of dollars. They are accomplished users of the mass media. Each is confident that it speaks for God.

A spokesman for a Methodist advocacy group talks of the distortion of purpose now afflicting religious discourse:

There is a sickness setting in that affects many of our churches. It's as if people have lost a vision that stretches outward over society. So now we're turning inward and tearing at each other.

The fact is that these narrowly-focused efforts are making it more difficult for our churches to convey a vision of what a good society ought to be or to exert the kind of moral influence that can lift the discourse above the self-serving rhetoric of single issue politics or schismatic theology.

Without assessing blame or entering harsh judgments our church must help build the moral will that has as its focus the attainment of justice in its broadest sense. Preserving a healthy social and natural environment is absolutely essential to the well-being of our children and grandchildren. It must be understood that these are not matters of charity, of people of privilege and social status and power grudgingly giving to the poor and the neglected, it is rather a matter of solidarity and hope for all of us who share a love for our neighbors and our church and our country.

This may be the greatest contribution that our denomination and those other religious bodies who share our vision and faith can make to the larger society. For at a time when meanness and greed and selfishness make life difficult for many of our fellow citizens, when fear and suspicion and distrust drive us apart, when a lack of compassion and concern for others is manifest in so many thoughtless ways, and when an increasingly technologically driven economy is squeezing the personal relationships out of much that we are involved in, why can't we who purport to be leaders in our church provide the inspiration and the force at least in our denomination to restore our unity and let civility and joy and grace and love be the characteristics by which we are known.

Why can't we simply let the voice of our church and our voice as individual members be one that leads us to a true sense of community, that strengthens our concern for justice and that recognizes and celebrates in our increasing multi-cultural diversity the reality of our common humanity.

That is the work that will ultimately determine the kind of church and the kind of country and the kind of world that we will pass on to the next generation that includes my and Elise's five young grandchildren. It is that work of leading and healing and unifying and elevating that must define and justify our role as elders of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.