

Thought Provoking, but Insufficient: A Reply to William J. Weston's
"Rebuilding the Presbyterian Establishment"
by John L. Williams

Did the Presbyterian Church dismantle its authority structures, its establishment, in the 1960's and 1970's? Does the Presbyterian Church (USA) need to rebuild its establishment? Weston's article answers "Yes" to both questions and raises the question of what organizational structures will best serve the flourishing of our denomination in the future.

Weston defines establishment as "an integrated body of authoritative leaders."(p. 8) At its best an establishment helps an organization run smoothly, works for a clear purpose, and settles crises. It brings "the best leaders into positions of power in the most efficient way."(p. 25) It develops these leaders and creates mechanisms "through which dissenting leaders can be heard."(p. 25) In the Presbyterian Church establishment members tend to share common maturing experiences (church camps and conferences, colleges, seminaries, and committee service). They are loyal to denominational theology and polity and are often heads of denominational agencies or national committees, governing body officers or executives, pastors of larger congregations, or key elders with years of church service.

Weston believes that the Presbyterian Church intentionally dismantled its establishment in the 60's and 70's. He applauds the church's removal of barriers to the participation of African-Americans and women and the new consciousness of most Americans; but he argues that the Presbyterian Church overreacted to the exclusions of the 1950's when it mandated representation of women, racial-ethnic

minorities, and youth; created Youth Advisory Delegates and Committees on Representation; required the rotation of session members; diluted the authority of denominational leaders; and enlarged committees and agencies to accommodate representation. Loss of the church's natural leaders, staff-dependency, and denominational drift and indecision were the negative consequences of its overreaction.

Weston's plea for rebuilding the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s establishment follows from his analysis of the 60's and 70's. He argues that generations "now coming to power take it for granted that sex and race are no reason to exclude an individual from anything" (p. 12) and that representational mandates and structures should therefore be abolished (although he wants to maintain the parity of elders and ministers). He also proposes the removal of constraints preventing the emergence of the PC(USA)'s natural leadership and strategies for including pastors of larger congregations and presbytery executives in the denomination's leadership establishment.

My comments on Weston's article in the following paragraphs arise from a lifetime of Presbyterian experience. I am an oldest son of Presbyterian parents. I was baptized, nurtured, and professed my faith in Jesus Christ in a large Presbyterian congregation. I was active in its youth program and attended church camps and conferences. The congregation's pastors, elders, and educators influenced and befriended me. I attended a Presbyterian-related college and received Master of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry degrees from Presbyterian seminaries. I was pastor of two small Presbyterian congregations and a committee

moderator in my Presbytery. I have served as a Presbytery Associate General Presbyter, a Presbytery Executive, a Synod Executive, and on General Assembly committees. I've attended 30 General Assemblies. I suspect that Weston would have considered me a part of the PC(USA)'s establishment.

Based my Presbyterian experience, I agree with many of Weston's proposals, have serious reservations about some of them, and would raise questions about all of them. In general I find his analysis and his proposals thought provoking and believe that his proposals need additional deliberation and/or major revisions.

Based on my experience, I also doubt the accuracy of Weston's statements that church officers "are no longer expected to be bound by any confessional statement" or that "it is common for church officials to ignore" the PC(USA)'s polity and discipline. (p. 28) A few well publicized cases of confessional or polity defiance do not make such practices widespread or common.

My major concern about Weston's article, however, is its limited perspective. Weston analyzes only the Presbyterian Church's organization and organizational history since the 1950's; and his proposals for change are really a set of organizational fixes, thus giving us a one-dimensional view of the PC(USA). My experience has convinced me that the way forward in the PC(USA) is not through one-dimensional approaches and not through planning, management processes, organizational changes, or polity revisions. Don't misunderstand me. I am not opposed to planning, management, or organizational changes. I have used these techniques in my work. Nor am I opposed to polity revisions. I believe such revisions can help us, and I support the present revision process. But, I am also

persuaded that planning, management, reorganization, and polity revisions are at best short-term fixes or solutions to limited problems. They merely scratch the surface of the PC(USA)'s more deeply rooted dilemmas and often leave entrenched, long term, and systemic patterns untouched.

What then will propel us forward? I believe it will require a yet-to-be-defined combination of theological restatement for our time, deep contextual analysis, clarity of purpose, shared vision, courageous leadership, and attention to congregational worship, nurture, and spiritual formation, remembering always that Jesus Christ is Lord of all and head of the church. In short, the way forward is through foundational questions and systemic, multi-dimensional approaches, a way much harder to conceive, much less achieve without divine help, than a set of organizational fixes.

Weston's article touches lightly or not at all on theology, context, purpose, vision, courageous leadership, and congregational work. It specifically mentions theology twice, once to consider the pros and cons of theological representation and once to complain that the adoption of The Book of Confessions meant church officers are no longer bound by confessional statements. The first is a helpful, reasoned discussion; the second feels more like nostalgia for the Westminster Standards than something substantive, not to mention its questionable accuracy. Missing from the article is any attention to the role of belief, theology, or theological reflection in the life of the PC(USA). Missing is an examination of the role theology, especially Christology and ecclesiology, can and should play in rebuilding an establishment and in an establishment's behavior. As a previous General Assembly

said, "Theology matters." It cannot and should not be disconnected from the church's organizational arrangements.

Absent also from Weston's article is any mention of the context in which the PC(USA) works. Surely the PC(USA), as it carries out Christ's mission at home and abroad, needs to ponder philosopher Charles Taylor's A Secular Age on the rise and pervasiveness of unbelief in North Atlantic societies. Surely the PC(USA) must ruminate on the meaning of the digital age, the new Christian movements in the Global South, the current economic crisis, and dozens of contextual phenomena. And surely such deep contextual analysis is and will be an essential part an establishment's work as it leads the PC(USA).

Weston's article does say that an establishment helps an organization "work for a clear purpose" (p. 7); and it criticizes, perhaps correctly, the church's use of "visioning exercises". (p. 29) But, it does not analyze either the role of an establishment in identifying a clear purpose or shared vision or the complex exchange of information and ideas between leaders and followers that is necessary to maintain purpose and vision. Nor does it consider the difficulties an establishment will face in a democratized church where many members feel entitled to express their views about the church's purpose and vision.

The article appears on the surface to comment extensively on leadership, but a closer examination reveals that its discussion of leadership is limited primarily to identification of those who are members of the establishment and their backgrounds and training. The article neglects entirely more profound questions about leadership: the nature of leaders' work; the effects of leaders' being or

presence on church systems; and why imaginative, courageous leadership is essential in all social settings from familial to institutional to societal. To reflect on these questions, we must turn from Weston's article to other works, such as Ronald Heifetz' Leadership Without Easy Answers or, better, Edwin Friedman's A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix, a work that describes leadership as an emotional process in an emotional field.

To its credit, Weston's article recognizes that congregations are "the fundamental institution of church life" (p.23); but beyond that assertion, the article says little about congregational worship, nurture, and spiritual formation that are the foundational building blocks in the development of leaders. If the PC(USA) decides intentionally to rebuild its establishment, I would respectfully suggest that it is more important to begin with attention to congregational nurture and formation than to our organizational arrangements. From attention to congregational nurture and formation all can grow in faith and knowledge, not just a few.

I challenge Weston and all who are interested in and concerned about the PC(USA)'s future to expand their repertoire of perspectives on and responses to the PC(USA)'s life and dilemmas; to entertain systemic, multi-dimensional approaches; and to look beyond organizational fixes to more foundational questions. In the final analysis organizational fixes alone won't save us from ourselves. More, much more, will be needed, including a heavy dose of prayer and the grace of God.

