IDENTITY–POLITY–PRAXIS

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Introduction

Nowhere do the distinctive convictions and affirmations of presbyterianism come together more clearly than in the presbytery. There we exercise the priesthood of all believers with distinctive clarity when we gather as presbyters—those ordained to ministry of Word and Sacrament alongside those ordained to serve as elders. It is the presbytery that exercises episcopal powers of oversight, encouragement and teaching. Presbyteries are the place where we share in a disciplined life together that extends beyond the local congregation, giving us a concrete taste of the church universal, a foretaste of a reality we live—and die—into.

At least, in theory presbyteries are these things and more. In reality life in presbyteries is often something quite different. We are not theoretical people living a theoretical life together. We are actual people living a real life together and sometimes (often?) it's hard to see how the reality is related to what presbyteries could and should be.

In presbyteries the dying of old patterns of church life and the birth of new patterns come together with particular intensely. It can be difficult to see the opportunities such a moment brings: the challenges, difficulties and losses press in so closely. And yet there are presbyteries all across the PCUSA imagining, seeking the opportunities, gathering for new possibilities.

Paul Hooker's essay, "Identity–Polity–Praxis" is a contribution to this ferment. Rev. Dr. Hooker is Executive Presbyter of the Presbytery of St. Augustine. He served for over twenty years as Pastor of congregations in Tennessee and Georgia. He holds academic degrees from the University of Tennessee, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, and Emory University. He

has taught in academic and church settings. He presently serves on the General Assembly's Form of Government Task Force, working to streamline the *Book of Order*.

Hooker calls us to hear and respond to the questions we face in this time of intense transition—starting with one of the most basic questions: "who are we called to be?" When things are stable we don't need to ask that question. Hooker reminds us that today we *do* need to ask that question, and he points to resources we have at hand to help us formulate strong answers to that question.

The question of who we're called to be is not an isolated question. Answering it is not an exercise in ivory-tower speculation. Who we are called to be is thoroughly woven together with the answers to more immediate questions: "What are we called to do?" and "How are we called to do it?" Part of the power of Hooker's essay is the way it shows the interdependence of these three questions.

I believe that what happens with presbyteries will be key for the future of the PCUSA. They could be places in which we live into a disciplined life together, discovering what it means to be faithful disciples together. Or they could be something quite other. Envisioning presbyteries as embodiments of life together, thinking through how they can become such places—that's a conversation that is energizing. I invite you to read "Identity–Polity–Praxis" as an invitation to continue (or to join) that conversation.

"Identity–Polity–Praxis" was originally presented to the Faculty Initiative Cluster, Group 1 of the Re-Forming Ministry program. Re-Forming Ministry is an initiative of the Office of Theology and Worship, funded in its initial stages by a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment. Re-Forming Ministry brings together pastors, governing body leaders and professors to do theological work together as equals, engaging

in discussion of pressing theological issues in an effort to help the denomination think its faith more deeply, in order that we might be better able to articulate our faith as we bear witness to Jesus Christ in the world. Re-Forming Ministry seeks to be one means by which we respond to Jesus' command to ". . . love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30).

Further information about the Re-Forming Ministry program can be found at the Re-Forming Ministry website: http://www.pcusa.org/re-formingministry. I invite you to visit, read other papers presented there and learn about the program.

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IDENTITY–POLITY–PRAXIS:
What *The Book of Order, The Book of Confessions*, and the Book of Numbers Have to Say About Ecclesiology and the Presbytery

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Asking the Right Questions

Late in 2001 the Presbytery of Saint Augustine, like many presbyteries in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), began a process of strategic planning. We used a model commonly used in the business world and widely accepted in the world of non-profit administration. It contained the following steps:

1. Analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges facing the presbytery;
2. Selection of areas in which to focus our efforts;
3. Development of visions in each of the focus areas;
4. Drafting of strategies appropriate to each vision;
5. Identification of goals and objectives for each strategy;
6. Planning tactical steps toward the accomplishment of the goals.

The strategic planning team drafted a plan that the presbytery approved in October 2002. We then created a manual of operations that went into effect in January 2004.

Since adopting this new structure two primary problems have emerged. First, due to shrinking financial resources at the presbytery level, we have been unable sufficiently to fund our

new structure. Second, presbytery staff has been stretched and overworked as it tries to staff sixteen presbytery committees in addition to carrying out other necessary tasks. Continued shrinking of contributions to the presbytery's operating budget will eventually mean the loss of existing staff positions, worsening the burden borne by those staff members who remain.

We could address these problems by going through the presbytery structure and "weeding out" functions we consider "non-essential." A number of presbyteries in the denomination have already done this, limiting the operations of the governing body strictly to those mandated by the *Book of Order.* Such a strategy would, I suspect, resolve at least temporarily the problem of limited resources. But if we adopt such a strategy, we will not have dealt with the real issue.

I have come to believe that there is a more significant problem, deeper than either budget or staffing limitations. It is one we did not address in our previous efforts at strategic planning. Simply put, we started by asking the wrong questions. When we started the conversation that led to our strategic plan, we assumed that we knew what we needed to be doing, and we focused our attention on the task of reorganizing ourselves to do it. We therefore asked questions about process, structure, and organization. But we assumed too much; we failed to ask the right questions. The "right" question—the one we need to ask from the very beginning of any new planning process—is a theological question. It is the question of *ecclesiology*—the doctrine of the church.

Three Questions

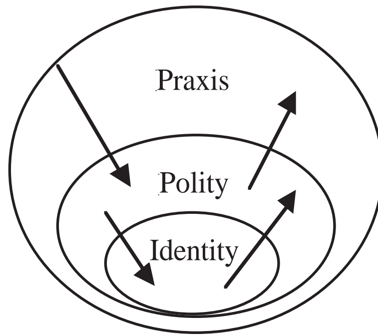
To be a bit more precise, I want to suggest we must ask three basic questions, and that these questions apply to us at all levels: in our congregations, our presbyteries and as a

denomination. The most frequently asked question is *How do we do it?* Some form of this question drives almost every seminar and continuing education event offered for the pastor or the presbytery executive. *How do we do it? "It"* is whatever problem requires solving or task requires accomplishing. How do we manage/resolve conflict? How do we develop working structures of congregation or presbytery life? How do we improve the process of recruiting and deploying leadership? As I see it, these are essentially technical questions, implying that they can be successfully and satisfactorily answered by the application of technique and existing knowledge. The technical question is answered in terms of process; I will refer to it as the question of *praxis*.

Behind the *praxis* question there lies another question, with farther-reaching implications: *What are we being called to do?* This question asks about purpose and direction, rather than structure and process. I suspect that this question may pose an adaptive challenge. An answer to the question, *what are we being called to do?* is likely to require us to accommodate new realities and face new problems that do not respond to the application of technique and existing knowledge. A meaningful ecclesiology will have to provide answers to this question *before* it can answer the *praxis* question, since only by answering it will we know what we need to figure out how to do. I have chosen to refer to this as the question of *polity.*[1]

There is a third and even more vital question for the life of presbyteries, congregations and the denomination: *who are we called to be?* This is a different order of question. It inquires into ecclesial identity rather than activity. It is about *being* rather than *doing*. Efforts to answer it will focus more inwardly than outwardly, and will require theological reflection on the resources of our tradition and on scripture. I will refer to this is as the question of *identity*.

Presented schematically, these three questions might be seen as three circles:



The spatial relationship of these circles is deliberate: I am suggesting that the *identity* circle lies at the center. It is a first-order question, by which I mean that it is of the greatest importance to us. It is also the most difficult question to approach. At the other extreme, the *praxis* question is a third-order question. While it is the easiest to approach and understand, and therefore is the one we spend the most time addressing, it is actually the least important of the three. In the middle is the second-order question of *polity*. Making polity changes is more difficult than changing technical practice, but not as difficult as re-establishing our identity.

The arrows are intended as a reminder that the movement of thought between *identity* and *praxis* is two-way. Who we are influences what we do and how we do it. Simultaneously, who we are is influenced by our interaction with the world. Our identity as individuals, and as churches or presbyteries, is shaped as a result of our participation in community and culture.

The following pages offer what I take to be a *start* toward an ecclesiology for the life of the presbytery. This is certainly not the only place to start, nor is this paper intended to be an exhaustive treatment of ecclesiology. Rather, I hope these

paragraphs will be suggestive of some ways we might answer the three questions I have raised: *Identity*—who are we called to be? *Polity*—what are we called to do? *Praxis*—how are we called to do it?

Identity: The Provisional Demonstration of God's Intent

My search for an answer to the question of our *identity* begins in the *Book of Order*. That may seem a strange place to start, given my statement above that *identity* is a first-order question and polity—what we think of when we think of the *Book of Order*—is a second-order question. But, in fact, the *Book of Order* contains some remarkably clear thinking on the subject of ecclesiology. Thus it becomes a helpful vantage from which to view the first-order question of who and what a particular part of the church is called to be. Nowhere is this truer than in Chapter III of the Form of Government, "The Church and Its Mission."

While this entire chapter is fodder for ecclesiology, I want to focus on one statement:

> 3.0200: The Church of Jesus Christ is the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all of humanity.
>
> a. The Church is called to be a sign in and for the world of the new reality which God has made available to people in Jesus Christ.
>
> b. The new reality revealed in Jesus Christ is the new humanity, a new creation, a new beginning for human life in the world:
>
> (1) Sin is forgiven.
>
> (2) Reconciliation is accomplished.
>
> (3) The dividing walls of hostility are torn down.
>
> c. The Church is the body of Christ, both in its corporate life and in the lives of its individual members, and is called to give shape and substance to this truth.

Note the strongly eschatological character of this language. The church is the "provisional demonstration" in the world of the *telos* (or intent) of God for the transformation of humanity and of creation. The call to the church is not so much to *remember* a past (although certainly it is called to remember God's dealings with Israel and God's self revelation in Jesus Christ) as it is to *anticipate* the future that God is creating for the world. The church participates now—albeit incompletely and imperfectly—in the goal of God's saving work, a work that is not yet accomplished but nonetheless visible and present while that work is still ongoing. Not only the mission but the very identity of the church is grounded in the promised "new reality" that God is constructing for human life. To be the church is to embody the intent of God.[2]

A number of years ago, Wolfhart Pannenberg, in his landmark book *Jesus: God and Man,* described Jesus Christ as the revelation of God's eschatological future.[3] He meant by this term that Jesus fulfilled in his own life, death, and resurrection the reality and pattern of God's vision and intent for human life and the life of creation. Once revealed in human history, this power and pattern of God's intent begins to work, shaping and guiding the course of human events and institutions toward God's *telos*, toward the goal of a new humanity to be realized in the consummation of history. At the same time, however, the presence in history of this power and pattern of the future means that the *telos* is *in the process of being fulfilled*, in that wherever Christ is found, there is found also the eschatological reality God is creating.

To the extent that the church understands itself as the "body of Christ"—and G-3.0200c makes precisely this claim—it is called to practice an *eschatological ecclesiology* of the sort Pannenberg envisions. The church is the embodiment of God's *telos,* God's intended future, insofar as it lives out its call to be the body of Christ. The strength for its mission and the inspiration for its work come not from its past but from God's

promised future, proleptically revealed in Christ. It is the "provisional demonstration of God's intent for all humanity."

An eschatological ecclesiology is a view of the church characterized principally by hope. Our hope is grounded not in our own resources, nor the persuasiveness of our theological rationale, nor in our numbers. The life to which the church bears witness is life as *God intends* for life to be; its realization is not conditioned by vicissitudes of human fortune. Because the new reality is God's intent, and not merely a good idea, the church has confidence that this new reality will finally obtain, and can thus live this reality with confidence. Eschatologically oriented people are not frightened about the future. On the contrary, we are hopeful and optimistic about it, because we believe that at the end of the process of human history stands the God who is Lord of that history. We believe that God is at work in us and in the world to accomplish the divinely intended *telos,* and that therefore we need have no fear.

How does this new reality offer a vision of the presbytery? In brief, the presbytery, like the church of which it is a part, is called to live out of the strength of God's promised new reality. We are called to see ourselves as the embodiment of the new community God intends for humanity. Seeing ourselves in this way yields three basic *eschatological virtues* that should describe the life of the presbytery, three virtues drawn from the brief and suggestive description of God's new reality in G-3.0200(b) and rooted in the language of scripture and theology: humility, reconciliation and trust.

"Sin is forgiven": Humility.

The thumbnail description of the new reality found in G-3.0200(b) begins with the acknowledgment that the church's identity is grounded in the forgiveness of its sinfulness. This requires a prior awareness of sin and willingness to confess it. The church cannot meaningfully sustain a prideful insistence

on its own righteousness. On the contrary, any examination of its history quickly establishes the many examples of our impurity and failure. Indeed, any ultimacy visible in the church inheres in the lordship of Christ, and any righteousness we have is due to our participation in Christ's righteousness. Our humility about ourselves is eschatological and hopeful: it recognizes that we are not yet what we will become as God continues to create the new reality in us.

The great danger in an eschatological ecclesiology is triumphalism, the assumption that the church as it exists is the *telos* of God's creative work in the world. Such triumphalism begins in the legitimate claims of an eschatological ecclesiology: we invite the world to look to the church as it seeks to see the character and shape of God's kingdom. But the church must never confuse its existence with the fulfillment of that kingdom. The metaphorical vision of God's ultimate reality captured in the Revelation to John delivers an important corrective to triumphalist thinking in its declaration that there is "no Temple in the city" (Rev. 21:22). In God's new reality, as it will be fully realized, there will be no further need for the church, whose task is to embody and point the way to that new reality. In the meantime, however, the church cannot become too enamored of its own importance. The church is the "sign in and for the world" of God's new reality; it is not the new reality itself. It stands as a sign for the world only so long as the new reality is still in the process of coming into being. Thus the church must always be careful not to presume the permanence of itself or any of its forms.

Presbyteries are especially vulnerable to such presumptions. The accretion of years of practice and the rigidity of an over-detailed polity lead too readily to the assumption that the way we have done ordination examinations or Committee on Ministry intervention is the way they must be done. The more triumphalist assumptions creep into out identity, the more presbyteries become ponderous, slow-moving, and resistant

to change. A powerful sense of humility, on the other hand, leads us to an eagerness for a more nimble polity that is less dominated by regulatory matter, clearer about the distinction between core commitments and peripheral practices, and more readily adaptable in the face of changing circumstances.[4]

"Reconciliation is accomplished": Reconcilitation.

The Apostle Paul makes it clear that, through Christ, we are both ourselves reconciled to God and charged with the ministry of reconciling the world to God (2 Cor. 5:16–21). The work of reconciliation lies at the heart of ecclesiology; it is part of the identity of the church at all levels, and thus of the presbytery. It is significant to note, however, that reconciliation—in either 2 Corinthians or G-3.0200—is not a matter of commonality of experience, agreement in doctrine, or concurrence on questions of polity. Rather, it is a common recognition that we are being made one with God through the reconciling work of Christ, and we are called to oneness with others whom Christ has similarly reconciled. Our reconciliation is with God, and only as that is true are we reconciled with others. The common life of the church is characterized by this calling: we are brothers and sisters in Christ and are called to live as such. Simultaneously, we betray this calling by our all too frequent warfare with each other within the church. Yet we do not and cannot allow our betrayal to obscure God's intent or defeat our commitment to embodying it. In this latter sense the ecclesiastical work of reconciliation is eschatological, in that it calls us to live out a virtue that is not yet fully realized.

One can look at presbyteries around the church and see this work underway in a wide variety of arenas and efforts: commitments to racial justice or economic fairness in trade, and mutual mission exchanges between American Presbyterians and Christians of other countries. Closer to home, perhaps, are the efforts of many presbyteries to develop accountability

groups among their minister and elder members across the dividing lines of the various controversies that presently affect the church: sexuality and ordination, Christology, and the authority and interpretation of Scripture. Many would regard these efforts at reconciliation as the key to the survival of the PC(USA) as a church body, not because they are likely to result in agreement around these controverted questions, but because they refocus our efforts on reaching across the lines of disagreement in the name of brother- and sisterhood in Christ.

Presbyteries also face particular threats to this eschatological virtue of reconciliation. Recent years have witnessed a growing chorus of voices within the church that would redefine the ecclesiology of the presbytery in terms of voluntary associations based on mutual agreement. The "New Wineskins Movement" has proposed a polity in which presbyteries and synods are defined not as regional governing bodies, but as loosely-knit networks of mutual agreement into and from which congregations may come and go as their perceived needs would indicate.[5] One presbytery overtured the 217th General Assembly to permit the creation of non-geographic presbyteries, and to permit congregations to select membership in such presbyteries on the basis of, among other reasons, common missional or theological criteria.[6]

The ecclesiological movement in the New Wineskins proposal and that envisioned in the overture is toward associations of the like-minded. As such it moves away from the reconciliation to which the church is called in an eschatological ecclesiology. Presbyterian polity is based on the notion of our identity as a covenanted people, bound to each other in relationships of mutual accountability. The great strength of this identity is that it has forced us to be reconciled to each other in matters of sharp disagreement and to deal constructively and creatively with each other within the bounds of mutual forbearance. Movements that base ecclesiastical polity on associations of like-minded individuals miss the fundamental eschatological

vision of the reconciled community of God's people. An eschatological ecclesiology, on the other hand, calls the church to a broader, more generous orthodoxy that is more concerned with communion than with unanimity. The church is called to reflect in its present life the community of all God's people in the new creation, where people "will come from east and west and eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (Mt.8:11).

3) "The Dividing Walls of Hostility are torn down": Trust.

Trust is the result of the reconciling work of God in Christ. The description of the new reality of God in G-3.0200 concludes with an image from Eph 2:14: "For [Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." The writer of Ephesians goes on then to define the dividing wall as την εχθραν, "the enmity" between Jew and Gentile. Some have argued that this image is drawn from the balustrade, or wall, that divided Jew from Gentile convert in the Temple in Jerusalem.[7] As the communities of Jews and Gentiles, once at odds, are drawn together by "one Lord" into "one faith" through "one baptism" to be reconciled to the "one God and Father of all" (Eph 4:5), they are called to tear down (metaphorically) the balustrade, to put aside the "enmity" that has separated them, and in its place to live in new relationship with one another:

> I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead
> a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,
> with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing
> with one another in love, making every effort to maintain
> the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Eph 4:1–3).

Trust, like love, is not earned; it can only be given. Nothing one can do can induce another to trust him or her. No matter how "trustworthy" one's actions, the one who trusts may

always choose not to trust, rendering the trustworthiness of the other's behavior moot. Conversely, no matter how untrustworthy are the actions of another, the one who trusts may always choose to grant trust. Trust is thus not reactive but proactive; it grows not out of what the trustee has done in the past, but out of the self-identity the one who trusts.

Our identity is grounded in the call to embody God's new reality. To the extent that this new reality reconciles us to God and to others, it is the foundation of trust. God in Christ has called us into new relationship, and has entrusted the ministry of that new relationship to us. As we live out the eschatological call to demonstrate that new reality, we must "tear down the dividing wall … of enmity" and replace it with trust in one another.

Trust implies a degree of vulnerability. Just as Christ, trusting in the will of God, accepted vulnerability to pain and death at the hands of the world, so the church of Christ is called to accept vulnerability to pain and loss as it trusts in God. As we live together in the reconciled community, we are called to model that vulnerability in trusting one another. If we as believers have been called together into communion through Christ, even though we are (sometimes disturbingly or even frighteningly) different, we must find a way to reach beyond our fear of our differences and trust each other. We must learn the practice of "mutual forbearance toward each other" (*Book of Order* G-1.0305) in matters where the very survival of our faith is not at stake. Without such trust, the covenantal polity that holds us together will hold no longer, and we will fail in our eschatological calling to be the provisional demonstration of God's intent. Such trust always involves the vulnerability to betrayal. In those cases, we must rely on rules and processes of discipline; and if those, too should fail, then on appeal. But without the basic trust of one another, we cannot survive as a church.

Presbyteries are our denomination's crucible for trust. Indeed, I would argue that trust is largely the issue at stake at the present moment in the life of the church, especially in the context of the church's ongoing struggle over sexuality and ordination. Recent General Assembly actions interpreting G-6.0108 of the *Book of Order* regarding the standards and process for ordination to office[8] have raised the stakes for sessions and presbyteries as they discharge their responsibility in examining candidates for fitness. The new authoritative interpretation of G-6.0108 makes it clear that examining bodies have responsibility to determine whether a candidate's departure from Reformed faith or polity constitutes a failure to adhere to an essential element of our covenantal life. It also makes clear that the decisions made on the basis of such examinations must be consistent with the standards of the church's constitution. The final sentence of the interpretation is striking:

> All parties should endeavor to outdo one another in honoring one another's decisions, according the presumption of wisdom to ordaining/installing bodies in examining candidates and to the General Assembly, with presbyteries' approval, in setting standards

This language must surely be seen as a call to trust each other: trust that all parties will do their constitutionally assigned tasks responsibly and thoroughly, and trust that errors in that process will be remedied in orderly and mutually agreed-upon ways.

If sessions and presbyteries deliberately ordain persons who openly defy the constitutional standards, or if permanent judicial commissions of higher governing bodies sustain such decisions (or refuse to discipline persons who violate them) in protest against aspects of the constitution, then the trust on which our polity rests is eroded, and the health of the church is endangered. If, on the other hand, examining bodies execute

their duties in cognizance of their obligations to the church as a whole, it is more likely that the trust we extend to one another will be amplified, and the church may begin to heal.

Can we give each other the gift of trust? At bottom, that is the question before the church, and especially before each presbytery as it faces questions about who may be ordained and how much tolerance of departure from constitutional standards is too much. Can presbyteries trust sessions to make decisions about ordination of elders and deacons that reflect not only their own convictions but also their concern for the well-being of the presbytery? Can sessions trust presbyteries to examine thoroughly candidates for ministry and to hold them to the standards of the church? Can everyone trust the integrity of permanent judicial commissions who must decide in judicial cases? Can all parties "outdo one another in honoring one another's decisions?" The answers to these questions may well spell the difference between unity and schism.

Polity: The Notes of the True Kirk

Our second basic question is the question of *polity: What are we called to do as a presbytery?* I propose to frame an answer to that question by borrowing language from the confessional tradition of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A).

> The notes of the true Kirk, therefore, we believe, confess, and avow to be: first, the true preaching of the Word of God, in which God has revealed himself to us, as the writings of the prophets and apostles declare; secondly, the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus, with which must be associated the Word and promise of God to seal and confirm them in our hearts; and lastly, ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God's Word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed and virtue nourished.
>
> —Scots Confession, *Book of Confessions,* 3.18.

So declared the six Scottish divines who drafted the Confession in 1560, putting into timeless language their sense of the mission of the then-new Kirk of Scotland. In the four and a half centuries since, Presbyterian churches have continued to regard these three "Reformation Notes"—true preaching of the Word, right administration of the sacraments, discipline uprightly ministered—as consensus statements of the work to which they are called. In a very significant way, the polity of the Presbyterian churches—their sense of their mission and work in the world—has been shaped by these three Notes.

The conflict between Protestant and Catholic in mid-16th century Scotland dictated the terms of the work of the true church. The "true Kirk" was the Protestant communion where the Word was truly and fully proclaimed, as opposed to a medieval Catholic church where preaching the Bible took second place to the Mass; where the sacraments were administered by ministers who connected their administration to the work of preaching and who understood that Baptism and the Eucharist were the means of grace, not acts that bestowed salvation; and where the life of faith resulted in a life of public as well as private righteousness.

But are the three Notes of the "true Kirk" still central to the polity of the church of the 21st century? At first blush, perhaps we should answer in the negative. We live in a post-Constantinian world; the church no longer dominates either the political or cultural landscape of the United States in the way that it did in Scotland during the Reformation. Moreover, there is no longer one single struggle that dominates religious life—between medieval Catholicism and nascent Protestantism—but manifold struggles—between Christianity and Islam, between faith and secularism, between competing interpretations of Christianity, and between "evangelical", "traditionalist", and "emergent" styles of ecclesiastical life. Can such "internal" functions as preaching, sacramental practice, and church order

adequately describe the church's function in a world that no longer understands even the basics of the church's message, let alone assumes its cultural primacy?

I believe the Reformation Notes are precisely the description of the church's mission necessary for the present situation. In a communicational world in which the basic coin of the realm is the sound-bite, there is an ever-deepening need for the thoughtful, coherent space for consideration of the gospel created by competent preaching. In a society increasingly bereft of the symbolic language by which to understand spirituality, there is a cry for the symbol and ritual of sacramental worship. In a world in which anarchy seems only just beneath the surface and relationships are characterized by distrust and deception, there is a yearning for the very sort of covenantal community envisioned by the broad sense of the Reformer's phrase "ecclesiastical discipline."

But I also want to suggest that the Notes will need to be appreciated in a new way, a way that looks eagerly forward toward the church's future rather than wistfully backward at its past. What is needed in the Reformed community is not to abandon the Notes but to *re-understand* them in light of the church's mission to demonstrate to the world at large the new reality God is creating. The eschatological ecclesiology of which we have been speaking offers just such an understanding. It has the capacity to remain fresh and re-inventive, and to move beyond the obsession of the church with its internal problems and toward the call to make new communities of disciples.

How shall we approach the task of re-understanding the Notes in an eschatological ecclesiology? I find the work of Jürgen Moltmann helpful in this regard. In *The Church in the Power of the Spirit,* Moltmann argues that the church is the expression of the messianic activity of Christ. He goes on to consider the "Marks" of the church classically expressed in the Nicene Creed (that the church is "one, holy, catholic,

apostolic"). These marks are, he claims, characteristics not of the church *per se* but of Christ whose ministry calls the church into being. The Marks are true of the church not because of any truth inherent in the church, but because they are true of Christ. This point of departure leads Moltmann to understand the Marks in three ways:

1) as *statements of faith*, because the church is the body of Christ, the ongoing expression of Christ's presence in the world;[9]
2) as *statements of hope*, because the church's existence is the result of the "eschatological gift of the Spirit", the in-breaking of the Spirit of God that transforms a group of disciples into a community reflective of the new reality of God's Kingdom;[10] and
3) as *statements of action*, because they are or ought to be motivations for the actions of the church as it seeks to live out both its faith and its vision.[11]

I want to suggest that we might fruitfully understand the Reformation Notes in this same three-part way: as statements of faith, as expressions of hope, and as calls to action. The Notes claim three characteristics as visible in the true church:

1) true preaching of the Word of God,
2) right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus, which must be associated with the Word and promise of God, and
3) ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered.

As *statements of faith,* each Note is an affirmation of the presence of Christ in the church as it engages in this activity. Thus preaching is "true" only because it proclaims the saving grace of God expressed in Jesus Christ and envisions the new reality embodied in him. The sacraments are "rightly administered" only when they open the portals into the grace of God in Christ through the Spirit. Baptism marks our having

"died with Christ" and been raised with him to new life (Ro 6:4). The Lord's Supper marks that moment when we share bread and cup not merely with one another but also with Christ and with believers in every time and place as they are present to the gathered community in Christ. Finally, discipline is "uprightly ministered" only when it is the agency of the reconciling work of Christ, a work which has also been entrusted into our hands as the body of Christ (2 Cor 5:18). One notes with interest that the Scots Confession refers to discipline as an act of ministry rather than of judgment or application. It is much more than the application of due process and adherence to the rules of process and evidence; it is intended to be an act of compassion that restores and reconciles through persuasive correction, not punitive condemnation.

As e*xpressions of hope*, each note describes an aspect of the eschatological new reality present to the world in the church. Thus preaching is "true" when it articulates the new reality God is creating in Christ through the Spirit and invites its hearers—both within and beyond the church—to conform to that new reality. The sacraments are "rightly administered" when they are shown and seen to be intimations and demonstrations of God's new reality visibly and tangibly present in the life of the church. Understood in this way, Baptism fulfills the eschatological promise of resurrection, and the Lord's Supper becomes the demonstration of the heavenly banquet in the kingdom of God. Finally, ecclesiastical discipline is transformed from a punitive system for correcting wrongdoing to a reconciling process for bringing together those divided by the "walls of hostility." It may perhaps be better appreciated as the force that creates and nurtures our common life as a community of people covenanted with one another to live and work together in Christ.

As *calls to action*, we understand these notes to be both signs of our failure to live out the eschatological vision and as summons to try again to model for the world what God intends

for all humanity. Thus true preaching is not satisfied with compromised faith or cultural accommodation (either of the left or of the right), but redoubles its efforts to imagine a world created fresh and new in the mind of God and embodied in Christ. Rightly-administered sacraments are not mere ritual, to be shunted to one side of the sanctuary or one corner of the liturgy, but placed at the heart of both worship and architecture and celebrated or recalled each time the community gathers. Discipline uprightly ministered is unwilling to be used as a coercive tool in the service of any particular political agenda, and insists on reconciliation in place of retribution.

Presbyteries are, it seems to me, uniquely positioned to assist the church in living out the Notes of its true identity. More than any other aspect of the church's institutional structure, the presbytery has determinative influence in the development of a minister. As we think about theological education (both before and after ordination), should we not be seeking to clarify our vision of God's new reality, and inquiring into whether our ministers have the necessary biblical, theological, and homiletical skills to articulate the invitation into that new reality? Through the regular gatherings of presbyteries for worship and business, should we be more attentive to sacramental practice, modeling faithful and creative liturgy and seeking to provide education for members in the ways in which our theology of Baptism and the Lord's Supper inform our life as a church? Can we transform our Committees on Ministry and Permanent Judicial Commissions and through them seek to transform our practice of ecclesiastical discipline, restoring it to its rightful place as the means of reconciliation and community building?

How might a presbytery look that took seriously the Reformation Notes as the foundation for its mission? In the following paragraphs I want to offer some thoughts toward an answer to that question. I am under no illusions that they form anything like a complete—or even completely workable—

organizational structure for a presbytery. Rather, I hope that these thoughts will stimulate conversations that might lead, in time, to a structure built on the Notes. Such a presbytery might understand its ecclesiastical life as gathered under three descriptors of its ministry: *Proclamation of the Word, Sacramental Practice,* and *Covenant Life.*

i) *Proclamation of the Word*. The presbytery, as the entity in our ecclesiastical community which directly supervises the work of the minister of the Word and Sacrament, has the unique opportunity to require, cajole, encourage, and nudge its member ministers to improve their homiletical theory and practice. I am speaking here not merely of improving pulpit technique, although that improvement alone would be helpful. Rather, I am calling for presbyteries to provide stimulating opportunities for growth and continuing education for ministers of a sort that nourishes deeper biblical and theological reflection and thus funds better preaching. I am urging the development of more accountability groups built around both mutual support and cooperative study of texts for preaching. I am encouraging pastors to enlist the counsel of adults in congregations to think through upcoming biblical texts for sermons, both as a way of broadening the pastor's own perspective and as a way of engaging members of congregations in a heightened act of listening. Too little is done in my own presbytery along this line, and others are often no better.

Preaching is most faithful when it reaches beyond comfortable accommodation to the culture and imagines the hoped-for new reality God is creating. Its task is to depict that new reality in clear and compelling terms, and to invite its hearers to enter it, to have their lives shaped by its norms and values. In so doing, preaching also envisions a world conformed to God's intent, and calls on the faithful community that demonstrates divine intent to make commitments to social justice and peace that reflect that intent. Historically, the revival of preaching lay at the heart of the Reformation;

Reformed preachers opened the eyes of their congregations to the possibilities of God's grace and engaged them in the hope for a better, more faithful church that reflected the New Testament community. The revival of intelligent, enlightened, compelling preaching may well be the most faithful response we can make to the moribund witness of so many of our churches in the present.

ii) *Sacramental Practice*. "Right administration" of the sacraments is not finally a matter of frequency of observation or methods employed, although these concerns certainly have their place. Rather, the sacraments are "rightly administered" when they have a regular place in the liturgical life of the faith community, and when they are understood as the place where the community encounters the means of grace. In addition, when the sacraments are properly situated in the heart of the worshiping community, they not only constitute the community and bind it together, but they also express the solidarity of the community with the world beyond its walls that needs and seeks the grace made available through the sacraments.[12] Lively liturgy that emphasizes the importance of the sacraments even on those occasions when they are not being actively observed is both engaging and nurturing of a congregation's theological and spiritual sophistication.[13]

Presbyteries are uniquely positioned to take the lead in instructing both ministers and church leaders in models for worship and liturgy, and to model in presbytery's own occasions for worship the kinds of liturgy that enhance sacramental practice and restore it to central place. Adult education courses in Reformed worship and sacraments (including those required for commissioning as a Lay Pastor) provide the presbytery a significant opportunity to offer guidance to elders and members concerning sacramental practice and its importance in worship. Session training courses—increasingly provided with presbytery leadership and curricular supplements—should emphasize to a greater

extent the session's responsibility to provide for worship and the observation of the sacraments. In providing this support and nurture, the presbytery is doing more than standardizing liturgical practice (if, indeed, it is doing that at all). Rather, the goal of the presbytery's engagement with sacraments and liturgy is facilitating the reconciliation between Christ and the church that takes place in the sacramental moment. In addition, the presbytery can also play a significant role in establishing connections of common ritual and understanding among congregations in the presbytery.

iii) *Covenant Life*. More than anywhere else, the presbytery is on the front line in the "ministry" of ecclesiastical discipline. Presbytery is the governing body in our polity that both receives appeals and requests for review from sessions and original cases involving minister members. It is thus "ground zero" in the explosion of disciplinary activity that has occurred in the church in recent years. As such, "discipline uprightly ministered" deserves careful consideration.

The practice of ecclesiastical discipline has come to be synonymous with judicial process. In truth, the equation of the two is at the heart of the problem. Ecclesiastical discipline actually has a quite different purpose, as the Preamble to the Rules of Discipline in the *Book of Order* makes clear:

> *Thus, the purpose of discipline is to honor God by making clear the significance of membership in the body of Christ; to preserve the purity of the church by nourishing the individual within the life of the believing community*; to achieve justice and compassion for all participants involved; *to correct or restrain wrongdoing in order to bring members to repentance and restoration*; to uphold the dignity of those who have been harmed by disciplinary offenses; *to restore the unity of the church by removing the causes of discord and division*; and to secure the just, speedy, and economical determination of proceedings. (*Book of Order,* D-1.0101. Italics mine.)[14]

As the italicized clauses indicate, the intention behind the exercise of ecclesiastical discipline is the desire to strengthen the membership of the church, to reconcile disputing parties, and to restore the peace, harmony, and concerted witness of the church. In practice in too many situations, however, the exercise of ecclesiastical discipline has led to an atmosphere of mistrust, anxiety, and apprehension in the church; hardly the sort of system likely to "bring members to repentance and restoration."

If we are to be true to the vision of the church as the provisional demonstration of the new reality of God, this situation simply has to change. If it does not change, we will lose altogether the distinction between an ecclesiastical discipline motivated by the eschatological virtue of reconciliation and a secular judicial system dedicated to the adjudication of guilt and the assessment of punishment.

Permanent Judicial Commissions (PJCs) at every level of the church, but especially at the presbytery level, can change this atmosphere and restore ecclesiastical discipline to its proper function as a process for reconciliation and hope. We can start by remembering that the PJC is entrusted both with protecting the church from offence and with reconciling those who are in conflict. We can—and indeed, must—remember that the decisions made in any case affect the system as a whole, partly through the establishment of precedence and partly through influencing the emotional climate of the church. Thus, special care has to be taken in cases with controversial overtones, especially those involving ordination issues, to ensure that decisions are clear and consistent with the constitution. Cases of an obviously politically motivated nature, especially when they come from individuals who are not injured by the behavior they allege, should be prevented from proceeding through the system. Over time, such decisions will begin to articulate a new vision of discipline as restorative and reconciliatory.

But can "discipline" come to mean more than "judicial process"? Can we come also to understand by this term the norms and practices that bind us together as a people covenanted to share faith and life? Can it also come to imply the nurturing and traditioning process whereby churches educate and enculturate people into the ethos of Reformed belief and spirituality? Can "discipline" become the fertile field from which springs the self-understanding of faithful disciples and in which is nurtured the call to faithful service?

In this vein, I was struck by the comments of Theodore J. Wardlaw, President of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, in a 2003 article about recruiting candidates from among the young people of the church for lives devoted to service to Jesus Christ in ministry. Wardlaw speaks poignantly about his own experience of being nurtured by an "ecosystem"—a common ecclesiastical life that included his local congregation, its presbytery, and the church-related college (Presbyterian College) and seminary (Union-PSCE) he attended, all under the broad umbrella of the denomination (The Presbyterian Church in the United States) in whose bosom he was nurtured in faith and vocation. He calls for a "remembering" (i.e. a recalling) and a "re-membering" (i.e., a reconstituting) of the ecosystem of that common life, which he calls a "splendid chorus of voices":

> One of the great challenges of our time is that of reviving this splendid chorus once again for the sake of the church. At regional and national levels, such a vision requires that much energy and attention be given to inventing new models of denominational life and relationships. It calls for new infrastructures and peer-groups programs that can more effectively nurture and mentor would-be pastors, and pastors themselves, through many of the predictable critical junctures of ministry. It certainly demands that we rethink such persistent problems as inadequate salary levels for servants of the church. It compels us to find more effective ways of responding to

> the dispiriting levels of toxicity and conflict frequently apparent in congregations and judicatories that distract members and leaders from the church's mission and often promote their premature departure.[15]

Wardlaw is calling here for renewal of the common life of the church in a way that nurtures and enables a revitalized sense of the church itself.[16]

In its broadest sense, this is what we mean—or what we *ought* to mean—by "ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered." Presbyteries, I would argue, can and should take the lead in rehabilitating and recreating the "ecosystem" of ecclesiastical covenant life—by themselves becoming communities in which good ministry is nurtured, supported, encouraged and envisioned. We need to broaden the vision of "church" so that "church" comes to mean more than just "my congregation" or "my denomination" and summons up images of an ethos of Presbyterian life. In this way, "discipline" will reach beyond the limited sense of requirement and punishment and recover its true meaning: the pathway of discipleship.[17]

Praxis: Critical and Creative Reflection on Tradition

The Book of Numbers and the right frame of mind

The third question we posed at the beginning of this discussion is the question of *praxis: How do we do the work we are called to do?* In response to this question, I offer in this section not a program or a strategic plan, but rather an attitude or frame of mind. I do this in part because the contextual situation of every presbytery is different, and therefore programs, mission statements, structures, and plans must be unique to that presbytery at that time. At the same time, I think there is a way of thinking about our approach to mission that can be helpful in virtually all programs, statements, structures, and plans. I believe that this approach is best expressed in a biblical metaphor, drawn from the Old Testament book of

Numbers. Admittedly, Numbers is perhaps not the first place we would look for clues about ecclesiology. But I want to suggest that Numbers offers us both a powerful metaphor for the present condition of the church and a vision of the kind of thinking that will create new possibilities within that condition.

Numbers is the story of Israel on the move. As the book begins, the people are making preparations to leave Sinai after the giving of the law; as it ends, the people are still on the road, not yet to the Jordan and the promised land of Canaan. The whole of the story takes place "in the wilderness."[18] The book begins with a census of all those who have seen the deliverance at the Red Sea and witnessed the covenant at Sinai (Numbers 1). After instructions on the construction of the camp and the treatment of the tabernacle (Num 1:1–10:10), we are told the story of the complaints, faithlessness, and rebellion of the first generation of Israelites and how, over time, all of them died in the wilderness (Num 10:11–25:35). By the end of Numbers 25, virtually all of those who had witnessed the deliverance at the Red Sea have been left behind dead in the wilderness, and a new generation has taken their place. Numbers 26 reports a new census for this new generation, and then the book deals with issues of worship and inheritance as they will be practiced in the land of Canaan toward which the new generation looks forward (Numbers 27–36).

Numbers is thus a book about transition: between Sinai and Canaan, between one generation and the next, between the past in Egypt and the future in the promised land, between longing for what was and striving toward what will be. But—and here is the crucial point for our discussion—at no point in the book of Numbers does the community *arrive* at its destination; rather, throughout the book the people of Israel are in progress *toward* a reality they can only continue to anticipate.

It is precisely this transitional character that makes Numbers an important biblical metaphor for a church that

finds itself in transition in many of the same ways. Generational transition is perhaps more pronounced in the 21st century American church than at any other moment in our history. Churches are caught in struggles over questions about identity, purpose, and practice that go to the very core of ecclesiastical life. Speaking of this similarity of situation between Numbers and the church, Dennis Olson observes that in Numbers Israel is

> . . . faced with many competing interests, groups, and issues associated with a tradition in some disarray struggling to define itself and its mission in the world. The church today faces a similar predicament in many contexts in the world. As has often been true throughout its history, the church struggles to discern its way forward in a cultural wilderness filled with competing temptations, conflicts over authority, and both the potential promise and problems involved in encountering the "other" in our society—people of other cultures, other faiths, and other concerns.[19]

The land of Canaan, and specifically the way in which the land will be apportioned and occupied by Israel once it has arrived there, forms the most significant theme in the second part of Numbers. Central to the notion of the land in Numbers 27–36 is the concept of the *nahalah,* or "inheritance". The *nahalah* is the parcel of the promised land apportioned to each Israelite family as their inalienable stake in the beneficence and providence of God. Possession of the *nahalah* by each successive generation represents a continuous, tangible connection with the gracious actions of God that constituted the people as a covenant community and provided for its well being.

Framing the second part of Numbers is a pair of narratives that pose a legal case concerning the *nahalah*. Numbers 27:1–11 and 36:1–12 tell the story of the daughters of Zelophehad.

Zelophehad, a Manassite, was father of five daughters but no sons, a fact of considerable importance since the inheritance of property in ancient Israel was patrilineal (passing from father to son). Zelophehad has died in the wilderness, leaving his daughters without connection to either ancestral house or apportioned land. In Num 27:1–11 they bring this fact to Moses' attention, along with the request that the tradition of patrilineal inheritance be altered to permit the daughters to claim their father's *nahalah* (v.4). Moses seeks direction from God, who instructs him that the daughters of Zelophehad are correct in their request to inherit their father's property. God then goes on to develop case law for other potentially disputatious situations concerning the *nahalah*: if the father has no children, the land goes to his brothers; if he has no brothers, the land goes to the families of his father's brothers; and if the father's father had no brothers, then the land goes to whatever kinsman is closest (vv.8–11). The clear priority in the text is for the retention of the land within the family, even if it means sacrificing the cherished practice of patrilineal inheritance of the *nahalah.*

In the second of the two texts, Num 36:1–12, the matter of the inheritance of the daughters of Zelophehad is brought to Moses a second time, but now by elders of the tribe of Manasseh. The elders do not challenge the decision to award the *nahalah* to the daughters of Zelophehad, but they point out that, if the daughters marry outside the tribe of Manasseh, the *nahalah* would logically pass to any sons born of those unions, sons whose tribal identity would be determined by their non-Manassite fathers. Thus the land apportioned to Manasseh would be lost to other tribes, thereby conflicting with the principle that all Israel should maintain the inheritance of their ancestral tribes. Moses rules that the elders' claims are also right, and declares as solution to the potential dilemma that the daughters of Zelophehad shall be free to marry whomever they will, as long as the husband is from one of the clans of the same tribe as their father. The solution thus simultaneously

preserves both the right of inheritance for the women and the principle of retention of the *nahalah* within its originally apportioned tribe. It accomplishes this solution, however, by limiting the pool of potential marriage mates to the confines of the father's tribe, a limitation the daughters of Zelophehad accept (vv.10–12).

It bears repeating at this point that throughout this discussion of inheritance rights, *Israel has not yet arrived in Canaan.* The entire debate over patrilineal transference versus inclusion of the daughters of Zelophehad in the community of inheritance takes place *in anticipation* of a future that has not yet arrived. It is an *eschatological* discussion, in the sense that its participants assume and live out in their conversation a state of being that has not yet been realized in their daily lives. They are physically wandering in the wilderness, but they are spiritually living in the promised land.

In his insightful treatment of the narratives of Num 27:1–11 and 36:1–12, Dennis Olson identifies three major themes in these stories: a reaffirmation of God's promise of the land; a concern for the inclusiveness of all the tribes; and a model of critical and creative affirmation of tradition.[20] Each of these themes accords well with an eschatological ecclesiology as we have considered it, but I want to focus particularly on Olson's third theme.

Numbers 27 and 36 provide a model for the critical and creative affirmation of tradition. The concern of both the daughters and the elders pits two values—the ancient practice of patrilineal inheritance and retention of the tangible evidence of God's providential care—against each other, forcing Moses, the daughters, and the community as a whole to exercise critical judgment. Their responses identify the core values of the community: a confidence in God's imminent fulfillment of the promise and a commitment to keeping the whole community represented in that fulfillment. At the same time,

they are willing both to create new freedoms (the right of women to inherit land) and to impose limits on other freedoms (by requiring the women to marry within their own tribe) in an effort to preserve and protect those core values. As Olson observes,

> The people of Numbers are a people on the move, and God and God's law move with them…. God's word is not a sterile and entrenched legalism, but a robust and living tradition that leans toward the future in hope and anticipation.[21]

It is my sense that, if presbyteries (indeed, the whole church) are to find our way forward successfully into the future God holds in store—if we are, in a phrase, going to be the "provisional demonstration of God's intent for humanity"—then we must develop an aptitude for this sort of critical and creative reflection on our past. An eschatological ecclesiology requires that we develop a facility for seeing past the letter of our polity to the spirit of our identity, but in such a way as to affirm rather than sacrifice that identity. As presbyteries think about their structures, their programs, their staffing patterns, even their basic way of relating to congregations, we will have to develop the capacity to identify and uplift core values, while letting go of systems and practices that may once have expressed those values but now only inhibit them.[22]

The right frame of mind: Commissioned Lay Pastors

This critical and creative reflection process is already underway in several aspects of presbytery life. As an example, let us take the phenomenon of the Commissioned Lay Pastor.

For most of its existence, the Presbyterian Church (USA) and its antecedent denominations regarded readiness to preach as one of the responsibilities of the elder. While not an everyday aspect of the elder's task, preaching has certainly

been both expected and welcomed as part of the elder's service to the life of a congregation. In more recent decades, some elders have undertaken the role of regular lay preacher, particularly in congregations of insufficient means to call an ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament. These "home grown" lay preachers did not have full theological education, but they did generally understand the congregation and were more sensitive to its dynamics than the temporary and occasional leadership (by ordained Ministers of Word and Sacrament) which the presbytery was able to provide.

In 1996, the church, recognizing the ability and potential of the lay preacher, significantly expanded their role, renaming it "Commissioned Lay Pastor" (hereafter CLP). For the congregation to which they are commissioned (and it only) CLPs may be authorized to administer sacraments, moderate the session, and to have voice and vote on the floor of presbytery. Presbyteries are responsible to create and maintain programs of training and preparation for CLPs and to provide regular supervision of their work.[23]

The benefits of this office are immediately apparent. Because CLPs are not dependent on churches for their primary livelihood, they are able to accept leadership roles in congregations that can provide little or no remuneration. They can thus provide stable, consistent, reliable leadership in congregations whose prior leadership experience had been sporadic, at best. In addition, CLPs find a call to use their gifts in ways not previously available to them. They often express a high degree of satisfaction with the congregation and presbytery that recognizes and receives these gifts. Finally, presbytery executives and Committee on Ministry leaders are relieved of the burden of supplying the "revolving door" of leadership in congregations now served by CLPs.

Over time, however, presbyteries have noted that the CLP system is far from perfect. The main problem is the

preparation process for CLPs, overseen by each presbytery and therefore of inconsistent quality. CLP courses are often superficial, lacking both the time and the tools for more in-depth reflection on the biblical and theological disciplines that fund the work of preaching, pastoral leadership, and church administration. In addition, CLPs generally do not have access to colleagues in the training process beyond the few with whom they go through the training program. Therefore they too often do not develop the collegial relationships that sustain ministry and make it possible to grow in both skill and understanding. This too-frequent failure to acquire either *magisterium* (the body of knowledge) or *collegium* (the community of colleagues) has led some to suggest that the increasing corps of CLPs represent a “second class” of ministers, inadequately trained to appreciate and therefore to use the theological disciplines vital to the church.

At stake here is a core value of Presbyterian life: the importance of an educated ministry. Presbyterians have insisted on college and seminary training, including competence in biblical languages and familiarity with theology, Bible and exegesis, and the sacramental tradition of the church as the irreducible minimum level of preparation necessary to serve as pastor of congregations. We have endured painful divisions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries over this issue. There is great reluctance in the church to retreat from commitments to educational standards we have historically required and that our present ministerial constituency has met.

At the same time, the situation of the church is changing. Costs for theological education (to say nothing of the college education that precedes it) are skyrocketing, and seminary endowments from which scholarship support comes are not keeping pace. In addition, the pressure for higher salaries to meet ever-rising costs of living, and the growth in cost-driven medical insurance coverage rates, combined with the shrinking

size of many congregations means that more and more small congregations are being forced out of the ministerial market. Change in the picture of pastoral preparation and deployment is clearly inevitable. The only real question is: to what degree will we preserve and to what degree relax the expectation of ministerial education as a prerequisite for service in pastoral leadership?

The creation of CLPs represents a process of critical and yet creative reflection on the tradition of ministerial education, a process I believe we are only just beginning. Solutions to the dilemmas posed may come from many angles: distance learning curricula offered through various seminaries, ongoing presbytery-sponsored colloquia led by qualified ministers of Word and Sacrament and designed to improve the acquisition of both *magisterium* and *collegium* on the part of CLPs, the creation of a licentiate of the sort already in place in the Episcopal and Methodist traditions, or some other solution as yet unanticipated. Whatever the route taken from here, presbyteries need to think carefully about the use of CLPs and their expectations for their preparation, lest we lose by default one of the historical strengths of the Reformed tradition. I would submit that this question is basic to our identity and our understanding of what it means to be the church, even though it clearly has implications for both the polity and the praxis of the church, as well.

The CLP process, with all its strengths and weaknesses, is but one example of the church wrestling with its tradition in the face of its situation, seeking to discern the core values it must preserve while adapting to changing circumstances. We would have no trouble multiplying the scenarios. The constant in this complex of tradition and change is the need for a mindset that treasures those things we find to be at the heart of our identity but also adapts them to a still-emerging future. It is a hopeful mindset, believing that the author of that future is God. It reflects humility in that it recognizes that no answer

to the challenges of the present is a permanent answer that lies beyond the need for revision. It is a reconciliatory mindset in that it seeks to hold together the often divergent claims made by the very different constituencies of the church. And it is a trusting mindset in that it regards those with differing interests as partners in the covenanted life of faithfulness, rather than as adversaries whose presence poses a barrier to progress.

Summary and Concluding Thoughts

I have tried to suggest in these pages that our thinking about the shape and substance of presbytery life has, in the main, been too much focused on the level of problem-solving and practice, only occasionally on polity (usually lamely and when forced by the annual or now biennial round of amendments to the *Book of Order*), and rarely if at all on the level of our basic identity as a part of the church. I have sought to frame this discussion as a response to three questions: 1) *who are we called to be? (Identity),* 2) *what are we called to do? (Polity),* and 3) *How do we do the work we are called to do? (Praxis).*

I have sought to suggest that our *identity* is, at its heart, neither an historical nor a sociological commitment. Rather, the presbytery is called to live out its identity as framed by the claim made in our *Book of Order*, G-3.0200, that "the church is the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all humanity . . . the sign in and for the world of God's new reality." This is fundamentally an eschatological task, and thus I have called this effort *eschatological ecclesiology*. I believe that this eschatological ecclesiology is funded and nurtured by three basic virtues, or spiritual resources, born of looking to the *telos* of God's promised new reality. These eschatological virtues are *humility* –a consistent eschewal of religious triumphalism that permits the assumption that all or any part of the church is already righteous and beyond the need for repentance; *reconciliation*—an acceptance of the ministry of

Christ to reconcile the world to God by modeling for the world the shape and substance of God's new reality, and *trust*—a willingness to reach across the dividing lines of difference and to open ourselves in vulnerability to others. Presbyteries are called both to be and to build communities that model God's new reality by practicing these virtues.

I have further sought to suggest that our *polity*—what we are called to do—is persuasively articulated for us in the Reformation Notes of the Scots Confession, if we understand the Notes eschatologically: 1) a commitment to the Word of God "truly preached" that invites its hearers to enter God's new reality and be shaped by its norms; 2) a participation in the sacramental practice of the church "rightly administered" that opens the means of grace to believers and fosters a sense of the sacramental character of life; and 3) a shared ecclesiastical discipline "uprightly ministered" that reaches beyond judicial process and nurtures a renewed covenantal community within the church. Presbyteries are called both to be and to build communities that proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and practice a committed life of worship and covenanted discipline.

Finally, I have sought to use the story of the daughters of Zelophehad in Numbers 27 and 36 to explore a helpful mindset for the *praxis* of the church—how we do the work we are called to do. I have tried to suggest that this narrative offers us a model for critical and creative reflection on our tradition, a process that seeks both to discern and preserve our core values while applying them creatively to the ever-changing situation of the church in the world. Presbyteries are called both to be and to build communities that approach the work of ministry through such critical and creative reflection.

...

In a recent conversation, one of the ministers in my presbytery, Marc Jones, reminded me that, in its earliest days, the Christian community met underground in the catacombs,

among the remains of the dead. It would be hard to imagine a more stultifying atmosphere for the life of the nascent community of faith. Yet it was precisely in this place of death, with the sights and smells of mortality all around, that the church learned its faith in resurrection and in new possibility. It was in the context of death that the word of life was earliest and most clearly understood. It was at the edge of the grave that the church first and best learned to sing the *alleluia.* Marc ended his comment by noting that, in that context, to leave worship and come back up to the streets of the city was quite literally to rise from the dead.

It seems to me, metaphorically at least, that the experience of the church of our time is not unlike the experience of the church in the catacombs. It is possible to look at the controversies and conflicts that buffet the church in our era—controversies and conflicts in which presbyteries are often the front line of battle—and conclude that we are holding our assemblies in places of death, that the odor in our nostrils is the smell of decay, and that we have reached the end of the line.

I believe, however, that an eschatological ecclesiology summons us to rise from the dead. It would have us understand that even in the places of death God is preparing new life, that even as old ways and orders pass God is making a new creation. It would call us to lead the way out of the catacombs and into the streets with the good news that death is not the last reality; that God is calling into being a new reality. The task before the church is to be the community that embodies and signifies that new reality. Within that task, presbyteries are called to train those who will proclaim that reality, and also to establish congregations whose worship will evoke that reality and whose common life will offer a meaningful alternative to the reality of death that surrounds them. Such work is full of life, full of a sense of mission, and full of anticipation that God's new reality is coming, as surely as the morning follows the night. It is God's work. It is also ours.

Notes

1. The term “polity” is most commonly used to refer to the system of rules and practices that govern the life of the church; hence we often think of “polity” as synonymous with the content of the *Book of Order*. However, in its deepest sense, polity is not about rules or practices but about the underlying principles that guide and shape those rules and practices. In the *Book of Order,* those principles are found expressed in Chapters I–IV. It is to this latter sense of “polity” that I refer in choosing this term as a descriptor for this question.
2. Jürgen Moltmann suggests a similar idea: “What we have to learn . . . is not that the church “has” a mission, but the very reverse: that the mission of Christ creates its own church.” J Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology.* Translated by M. Kohl. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, p.10.
3. W. Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man.* Translated by Wilkins and Priebe. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974. Pannenberg’s argument is complex but is founded on the notion that, in raising Jesus from the dead, God has not only confirmed Jesus’ spoken expectation of the imminent coming of God’s kingdom, but confirmed that Jesus is the embodiment of that kingdom, experienced in history ahead of its consummation. “The Christian Easter message speaks of the mode of fulfillment of Jesus’ imminent expectation. It was fulfilled by himself, insofar as the eschatological reality of the resurrection of the dead appeared in Jesus himself. It is not yet universally fulfilled in the way in which Jesus and his contemporaries had expected. In spite of this, Jesus’ resurrection justifies the imminent expectation that moved him and establishes anew the eschatological expectation fulfilled in him for the rest of humanity.” (p.226).
4. It is perhaps a growing sense of humility about the limitations of our polity that prompted the 217th General Assembly to call into existence a new task force charged with the responsibility to draft a new Form of Government (chapters I-XVIII of the current *Book of Order*), one that is shorter, more general and “missional” in nature, and which accords greater flexibility to sessions and presbyteries to address arising needs.
5. The “New Wineskins Draft Constitution”, chap. 6, anticipates the creation of “Support Networks,” which preserve functions most closely identified with the presbytery in our present polity. The “Draft

Constitution" defines these "Support Networks" in this way: "A Support Network is a cluster of Ministry Networks *formed by mutual agreement* between Ministry Networks and with the approval of the National Network. A Support Network is formed when at least three Ministry Networks, ordinarily sharing geographic proximity, *agree and sign a Support Network Covenant* (see sample Support Network Covenant in Appendix, to be developed). The original Covenant, as well as each subsequent revision, is delivered to the National Network for its review and approval. *Support Networks may form, evolve, and re-form in a fluid, ministry-focused manner.*" (Italics added). What is of concern is the highly voluntary and "fluid" manner in which presbytery-like "networks" may form and re-form, apparently at the whim of those who compose them. If governing body affiliation is loosely defined, however, theological orthodoxy is much more tightly controlled. Provisions in the same chapter for the care of candidates for ministry quite explicitly state that "All candidates will affirm the Essential Tenets of Our Reformed Faith *without scruples* and affirm The Declaration of Ethical Imperatives and The Constitution." (Italics added). The polity being built here, while appearing to be flexible, in fact is theologically narrow and ecclesiologically fragile, subject to dissolution upon the whim of its constituents.

6. The overture, item 05–23 from the Presbytery of Beaver-Butler, was defeated at the recommendation of the Committee on Church Polity on a vote of 391-106-1. Presbyterian polity does permit the creation of non-geographic presbyteries; however, these are usually based on ethnic and/or linguistic commonalities rather than on theological or missional commitments.
7. See, for instance, Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon.* Interpretation. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991, pp.34–35.
8. For the full text of the interpretation, see www.pcusa.org and follow the links to the business agenda of the 217th General Assembly
9. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology.* Translated by M. Kohl. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, p.338.
10. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit,*p. 339.
11. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit,* pp-.339–340.
12. See Gordon Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999, pp.178–182. Lathrop cautions against reading the ritual of Baptism in exclusionary or separationist

terms; Baptism is not about purity and isolation from the world. Rather, Baptism begins in the recognition of the solidarity of the baptized community with the world of sin and need:

> Baptism constitutes the "holy people," who are naked and needy, being forgiven, being drawn from death. Baptism gathers an assembly into Christ and so into identification with the situation of all humanity, not into distinction and differentiation. Paradoxically, Baptism is the washing that makes us unclean, with all the unclean and profane ones of the world. In Christ, Baptism makes us part of humanity, witnesses to the grace of the triune God for us all.

13. Reemphasizing the centrality of the sacraments can be as simple as rethinking the locations from which worship is led. For instance, offering the prayer of confession from the baptismal font and announcing the assurance of pardon while pouring or splashing the water therein brings into visible conjunction the sacrament of Baptism and the acts of confession and forgiveness of sins. Or offering the prayers of the people from the Lord's Table visibly reminds the congregation that our "sacrifice" of praise, thanksgiving, and intercession is met at the Table by the one whose sacrifice we celebrate there. See the report and recommendations of the Sacrament Study Group of the PCUSA, received by the 217th General Assembly and commended to the denomination for implementation. The Study Group's report, "Invitation to Christ" can be downloaded at http://www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/worship/invitationtochrist.pdf.
14. Prior to amendments adopted in 2004, the reconciliatory and restorative purpose was even clearer. In 2004, the PC(USA) added several clauses to the Preamble that introduced a comparison with the secular judicial system and sought to insure the "achievement of justice and compassion for all participants" and to "uphold the dignity of those who have been harmed by disciplinary offenses." This legally-oriented language was the result of efforts to insure the protection and involvement of "victims" in ecclesiastical judicial cases, but it has the effect of appearing to compare the role of the church's disciplinary process with the judicial process of the state. It is thus an example of the increasingly juridical mindset of the church on the subject of ecclesiastical discipline.

15. Theodore J. Wardlaw, "A Chorus of Voices: Remembering and Re-Membering an Essential Ecosystem," *Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary.* Spring 2003. p. 8.
16. See also the "The Ecology for Nurturing Faith: Education, Disciplines, and Programs for Faith Development," in M Coalter, J. Mulder, and L. Weeks, *The Re-Forming Tradition: Presbyterians and Mainstream Protestantism.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992, pp.191–222. Coalter, *et.al.,* decry the loss of an encompassing environment once composed of family devotional practice, congregational commitments to education and worship, religiously grounded higher education and theological study, and denominational programs and publications. They argue that the renewal of this "ecology of faith development" is necessary to give shape to Presbyterian life. This renewal, however, is not simply a matter of restoring elements of bygone Presbyterian life and piety, but of the creation of new and meaningful replacements for those elements.
17. See also the excellent short paper, *Ordinary and Extraordinary Discipline: Mutual Accountability in the Reformed Tradition*, by Charles Wiley (Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Church Issues Series, No. 6). (Also at:http://www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/issues/discipline.pdf.) Wiley helpfully separates "extraordinary discipline"—the administration of judicial process to counter heresy and enforce ecclesiastical order—from "ordinary discipline"—the daily efforts of sessions and consistories to enable reconciliation and restoration of relationship between individuals. He points out that Calvin expanded those governed by ordinary discipline to include all members of the church, thus beginning the tradition that still obtains in Reformed churches that all persons, and especially all officers, subject themselves to the government and discipline of the church.
18. Indeed, *bemidbar,* "in the wilderness" is the Hebrew title of the book we know as Numbers.
19. Dennis Olson, *Numbers.* Interpretation. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996, p. 8.
20. Olson, *Numbers*, pp. 165 –166. See also Thomas Dozeman, *Numbers.* New Interpreter's Bible, vol II. Nashville: Abingdon Press, p.220–222.
21. Olson, *Numbers*, p.166.
22. Diana Butler Bass has advanced a similar line of reasoning in her excellent little book , *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church*. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004. Bass points to the

"dynamic relationship between tradition and innovation, between continuity and change…" as productive of "vital communities in which the past becomes part of meaning-making for people striving to make sense of their existence" pp. 43–45.

23. Provisions governing the work of the Commissioned Lay Pastor are found in *Book of Order,* G-14.0800.