



Ruling Elders

Workbook Two: Transformation

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Introduction

Thank you for your service!

If you are reading this, you are a ruling elder of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). You may have served your church for only a few weeks or perhaps for a few years. Through your service, you undoubtedly have sensed that something is missing. Transformation as a spiritual leader sounds promising!

Transformation also sounds frightening. Change can be traumatic. Consider the old joke: “How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb?”
“CHANGE?!”

The resource you hold in your hands has been designed to introduce six aspects of becoming a transformational leader for your church. The resource may be used in different ways: as a self-guided study, as a group study, and as a ready reference for session reflection. For a self-guided study, you simply can start at the beginning, reading the sections and completing the reflective activities at your pace, perhaps meeting regularly with a friend or two. For a group study, suggested lesson plans are offered (see p. 43).

In addition, you will need a Bible, copies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s constitution (*Book of Confessions* and *Book of Order*), and a pen or pencil.

Turn the page and let’s get started.

Transformational Leaders Embrace Change and Discomfort

The church affirms *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*, that is, “The church reformed, always to be reformed according to the Word of God” in the power of the Spirit.¹

For my doctoral project, I spoke with many ruling elders about their understanding of ordination. I was encouraged; most ruling elders I interviewed have a profound faith and desire to serve God and the church. I heard passionate testimonies about their love for their congregations and their strong sense of responsibility. It gave me assurance that Christ’s church is in good hands.

I was discouraged, though, when I heard the struggles that some elders experience as they serve the church without an adequate understanding of leadership. I heard frustration in their voices as they talked about the burdens of conflict, money woes, membership loss, and lack of active participation by members. I talked with ruling elders who completed their session service exhausted, angry, or hurt. Pastors have told me of wonderful session members who left the church because of their experience on the session.

What do ruling elders need to know that will help them seek God’s will for the church and be the kind of leaders needed for today? What needs to change so that ruling elders are nurtured, energized, and empowered to be spiritual leaders? What is missing in our polity that causes the frustration and destructiveness that I was hearing?

Elders in today’s church need more than an orientation on the *Book of Order* and the *Book of Confessions*. To be effective spiritual leaders, ruling elders need to understand their calling as a lifelong journey of spiritual and personal growth. They need to be self-aware and Spirit-aware. Leadership today is challenging. It can be scary and frustrating. But effective and healthy leaders are willing to be changed. They trust that the Spirit is working in the midst of change.

Transformation Defined

Transformation comes from the same root word as *formation* and *reformation*. While affirming that God forms and reforms the church, we use the word *transformation* to convey a stronger sense of urgency for radical change. The prefix *trans-* means “across” or “beyond.” When we are transformed, we go beyond the usual routine and cross over boundaries. The boundaries are set in place: “We’ve never done it that way before,” “The children are the future of the church,” or “We just need to work harder.” The boundaries we set up provide a comfort zone for the church. When we allow the Spirit to move us out of our comfort zones, and

1. *Book of Order 2013–2015*, Part II of *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2013), F-2.02. Reprinted with permission of the Office of the General Assembly.

into a new way of being and doing, transformation can happen. The Spirit invites us to greet each new endeavor with fresh eyes and open minds. How can we keep those fresh eyes and open minds?

Paul considers transformation to be a mind-body commitment to God's grace (Romans 12:1–2). He calls us to offer our “bodies”—our whole selves—to God, as a living sacrifice. We offer ourselves in the ways our lives take shape, or are transformed, in relation to Christ (v. 2). We shape our lives to reflect the God we profess.

Many people who call themselves Christians are shaped by the prevailing cultural values in a way that contradicts anything that Christ might have wanted for them. Paul urges the Roman Christians to be shaped, or transformed, by Christ and not by fleeting national, political, and social values. Paul calls us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds—a process of renewal that changes our attitudes and our behavior. Transformation is relationship based, not rule based. Paul sees this as the basis for developing discernment about God's will.

Our *Book of Order* echoes biblical notions of transformation—God transforms. “The good news of the Gospel is that the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people.”²

When we talk about transformation in the church, we concern ourselves with ways we open our minds and bodies to be changed by God's grace. God does not change us for the sake of change; God calls us to transformation to better suit us to ministry. Whatever we call it, God is the one doing it and calling us to respond with faith and courage.

When we talk about transformation in the church, we invite increased anxiety among church members and pastors. Change implies risk; risk makes us vulnerable. When we open our minds and bodies to be changed by God's grace, we risk the possibility of losing friends; even worse, we risk losing members and money. But remember: concerns about membership and money are cultural values and not necessarily what God is calling the church to embrace.

Transformational leaders fully engage change and embrace the discomfort that accompanies it. This statement undergirds everything I have to offer in this resource. It will take courage on your part to invite God's transformation; it will require discernment and wisdom from the church to open itself to God's desire.

Engage Change

Transformation means change. Change is not for the sake of novelty, but for the sake of Jesus Christ and his mission. Ruling elders who desire transformation examine their attitudes about God, about grace and mercy, about salvation and justice, and about the church and its ministry. What attitudes do you need to change? Are you satisfied with your relationship with God? Do you truly believe God has called you into this ministry? Do you have confidence in your ability to lead? Are you engaged in leadership or simply fulfilling your session term? Do you sincerely desire transformation?

Like any healthy and meaningful relationship, our relationship with God requires something of us. As Tom Hanks said to Geena Davis in *A League of Their Own*, “If it wasn't hard, everyone would do it.” We all want great relationships, but healthy and authentic relationships take a lot of effort and practice.

2. *Book of Order*, F-1.01.

Likewise, being a healthy, transformative spiritual leader requires attention and intentionality. It is hard work, and often uncomfortable. It is also exciting, challenging, and rewarding. The more we open ourselves to the Spirit in transformation, the more we are able to be agents of transformation ourselves. I begin with the assumption that our transformation requires self-examination; we necessarily open ourselves to discomfort and change.

It doesn't matter if you are a new elder or one with years of experience. This resource invites you on a spiritual journey, to move out of your comfort zone and to grow closer to being the leader God calls you to be and you want to be. Sections 2–6 of this resource correspond to the following convictions about transformational leadership in the church:

Transformational leaders practice spiritual discernment as the most faithful way to make decisions. Congregations place a lot of responsibility on their elders. Church members expect their sessions to do what is right for the church. Spiritual discernment enables leaders to make right decisions.

Transformational leaders understand work as worship. Ordination is a lifelong commitment to spiritual leadership. It is not just a task we do for a time; it is who we are. Thus, it is worshipful work, intended to bring glory and honor to God.

Transformational leaders keep Sabbath as a way of life. Sabbath is a gift of time and attention that gives us the opportunity to rest, reflect, and grow. By making Sabbath an integral part of our lives, we intentionally get in touch with God and ourselves.

Transformational leaders engage discipleship and intentional daily practice of spiritual disciplines. We center our lives and leadership on God when we spend time with God, Scripture, and God's people. Spiritual practices put us in the right state of mind to be transformed by God's Spirit.

Transformational leaders commit to self-awareness. We are not truly ourselves until we become the people God intends. Spiritual leaders seek to align their will with that of God. Our identity is shaped by our call, and our call empowers us to lead.

Before we explore these five convictions, it will be helpful to understand the discomfort of chaos and change.

Embrace Discomfort

Presbyterians feel it in our bones: we are not who we were, and we are not who we will be. We are somewhere in between. Change agents refer to uncomfortable in-between experiences as the “groan zone.” Today's leaders who care about the future of the church will experience the groan zone at some time.

The groan zone is that place where you find yourself frustrated, confused, and ready to give up. Think of the Israelites wandering in the desert after their escape from Egypt (Exodus 16ff.). They were not happy. They complained about everything, distrusted Moses' leadership, and believed God had abandoned them. You can relate. So can I. We are leading in challenging times.

In these days of rapid and traumatic change, do you sometimes wonder if God is abandoning the church? Parishioners look to us, their leaders, to give them answers, but we do not have them. I sometimes feel like Moses—trying hard to follow where God is leading, but worried that I will not be able to be the leader people need. I have to remind myself to accept and embrace this chaotic existence.

Change is chaotic. In chaos, confusion and resistance are the norms. Presbyterians love order. We have a strong desire to move quickly out of chaos and into order. However, God is calling us to stop trying to control everything. Be OK with the confusion, and have patience. Engage the Spirit and one another in the wild and crazy wilderness journey. There will be disagreement, because change and conflict go hand in hand. There always will be congregants who do not want to change. There will be leaders who “just want to get on with it.” You might be one of them.

Embrace the chaos of the groan zone, trusting that God is in it. The Spirit of God is moving through the church as it did over the waters of creation. Imagine the groans of the church as the groaning of the earth being formed and reformed by the hand of God. We cannot rush through it, and we cannot go back. We are not in charge. We can engage the chaos and the groaning. We can be alert and attentive to what the Spirit is doing and join God in this transformative work. Out of the groaning of creation and innovation emerges the new creation that God is calling us to be.

Your Personal Groan Zone

In a few words, jot down an experience of a personal groan zone—for example, learning a new language, undergoing pregnancy and giving birth, changing jobs or moving to a new location, enduring an unexpected crisis—any “time between.”

What did you feel during the experience?

How was God present with you through the change?

Anger and conflict are not bad things. They are natural. If we respond calmly and responsibly to other people's anxiety, we can turn those situations into positive experiences. We can continue moving in the right direction and keep everyone connected. The goal for leaders is to be pastoral but not to give in to the anxiety of others.

The eighth ordination question asks if you will serve with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.³ We understand why leaders need energy. To serve well requires it. Presbyterians value intelligence. We want our leaders to have knowledge and wisdom. We also understand that we are to love one another. Jesus showed us the kind of love that God requires. But what about imagination?

Today, more than ever, leaders need imagination. We need to be able to think outside of the box and reach across our boundaries. To paraphrase Star Trek, God is leading us "to boldly go where no one has gone before." Transformation is about being open to where God is leading and about boldly going where we have not been before, even when it is scary, confusing, and chaotic. Transformational leaders are imaginative and hopeful. They trust that God is with us in this journey and that God knows where we are going even if we do not.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Read Exodus 2:23–25; Romans 8:22–23; and Psalm 22:1. How would you define *groaning* in these passages? In what way do these passages speak to you as a congregational leader?

Review the story of Moses and the Israelites (Exodus 16). How do you think Moses felt when the people continually complained? How do you feel when you hear people in your congregation complaining? What can you learn from Moses' story that can help you respond appropriately to the anxiety of others?

Spiritual Practice

Search the Internet for the Serenity Prayer. Find the original, full version attributed to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Commit to praying these words daily as part of your journey through this resource.

3. *Book of Order*, W-4.4003h.



Sessions for Group Study

Transformational Leaders Embrace Change and Discomfort

Preparing to Lead

Read section 1: “Transformational Leaders Embrace Change and Discomfort” (pp. 5–9).

Read this study session, and select questions and activities that you will use. What other questions, issues, or themes occur to you from your reflection?

Each session includes a hymn. Provide copies of your congregation’s hymnal. If you do not have a piano or keyboard and someone to play, consider asking someone to record the music to help the group sing the hymn.

Gathering

- Provide name tags and pens as people arrive.
- Provide simple refreshments; ask a volunteer to bring refreshments next session.
- Since this is the first session, agree on simple “ground rules” and logistics: e.g., time to begin and end the session, location for meetings, welcoming all points of view, confidentiality, etc. Encourage participants to bring copies of this book and Bibles.
- Review the format for these sessions: Gathering, Opening Worship, Conversation, and Conclusion.

Opening Worship

Prayer (unison)

O Lord Jesus Christ, be with us and lead us in your way, helping us to trust you as we go. Amen.

Spiritual Reading

- Read aloud Romans 12:1–2. Invite all to reflect for a few minutes in silence.
- After reflection time, invite all to listen for a word or phrase as you read the passage a second time and to reflect on that word or phrase in silence.
- Read the passage a third time, asking all to offer a silent prayer following the reading.
- Invite volunteers to share the words or phrases that spoke most deeply to them.

Prayer

Loving God, hear our prayers today as we seek to follow you more faithfully:

(Spoken prayers may be offered.)

O Lord Jesus, help us know the opportunity of discipleship so that as we follow you we will experience the true life you want us to have as your disciples. Hear us now as we pray together, saying, “Our Father . . .” (Continue praying your congregation’s version of the Lord’s Prayer.)

Conversation

- Review section 1: “Transformational Leaders Embrace Change and Discomfort” (pp. 5–9). Share observations, reflections, and insights on the readings.
- Invite each member of the group briefly to share a story about change or a moment, a relationship, or an event that could be described as “transformational.” Then reflect on common themes or characteristics from those stories.
- Note that Romans 12:1–2 is one of the most significant Bible passages about transformation. Ask: *What are some of your reflections on Romans 12:1–2? What does the passage tell us about transformation?*
- Invite members of the group to name personal groan zones.
- Review the questions for reflection and discussion (p. 9). Challenge one another to do the spiritual practice (p. 9).

Conclusion

Prayer

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: *And also with you.*

Leader: O God, help us face the future with the assurance of your grace.

All: *Amen.*

Hymn: “Change My Heart, O God”