



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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**Leadership**  
Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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*The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted (Matthew 23:11-12).*

Today we ordain and install elders and deacons to share in the church's leadership. Deacons in the Presbyterian Church are ordained to ministries of "sympathy, witness, and service," as the old description says, while ruling elders are responsible, together with the teaching elders, or ministers of the Word and sacrament, for overseeing every aspect of the life of the church.

It's an awesome responsibility, especially for elders, so we say that the first qualification for office is a healthy sense of inadequacy. We joke, but we're only half joking, that if the Nominating Committee calls to invite a church member to consider becoming an elder, and the member says, "Well of course, I've been waiting for your call, in recognition of my exemplary spirituality and superior skills in leadership," the caller is to say, "I'm sorry, I must have the wrong number," and hang up quickly.

A certain humility is a prerequisite for any kind of leadership, but especially leadership in the church. There's a story in the gospel where the mother of James and John, two novice disciples of Jesus, comes to the master and asks him to save the best seats of honor for her boys in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus says that's not for him to grant, and in any case, that's not the way leadership works where he comes from. Jesus says,

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be

great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Leadership in the kingdom of heaven is about power and glory and honor – but for God, not for us human beings. Christian leadership is servant leadership, in service first to God, and then to God’s people, to help us all live a life worthy of the calling to which we’ve been called. If Jesus himself, the Son of God, models humility in leadership, then for anyone who claims to follow Jesus to get puffed up about being in charge would not only be silly, but an awful caricature of Christianity.

The church is, among other things, a laboratory of leadership, and God knows, we live in a time that cries out for good leadership. Almost daily we hear about people – most of them men, it seems – abusing their power in business or entertainment or public office, or even in education or medicine or the church itself – for the sake of greed or lust or simple vanity.

The corruption of leadership brings suffering upon a great many individuals; and beyond that, it undermines trust in the very institutions that hold our society together. Trust in most of our institutions is at or near an all-time low, largely because of the colossal failure of leadership in so many places. If people see mostly selfishness and hypocrisy on the part of their leaders, that gives free rein to those who would imitate them, and tempts more decent people simply to despair.

The consequences of poor leadership come most obviously from those in positions of power, but a great deal

also depends upon how ordinary people respond. If the rest of us simply shrug our shoulders and give a pass to bad behavior, either out of apathy or some misplaced sense of tribal loyalty, we add to the damage they do. We enable those behaviors, and in the long run we help to weaken the fabric of society itself.

But not here. We won't do those things in church, because leadership here means a humble stewardship of responsibility – the responsibility to serve God and help all of us grow in our ability to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves.

Leadership in church begins with humility, knowing that it's an awesome thing to work for God. I did a reference check not long ago for a new staff member, and when her old employer told me how great she was, I said I knew she was wildly overqualified for the position we had. He said, "Overqualified? How can she be overqualified? Nobody's overqualified to work for God!" I wanted to hire that guy too, because he knew that we all depend on God to guide us, and equip us to do whatever God calls us to do.

There's power in serving God, but that power only flows in the direction of love and grace and God's redemption. God's power gets shut off when people try to abuse it for selfish gain or unworthy ends – which is why we can sense the vitality of a church by the way the Spirit of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit flow in and through it.

Leadership here seeks consensus about where God is leading and how we can best follow. Our Session at Westminster is made up of thirty people, partly because it's a large church, but also because each of us brings a portion of the perspective we need to discern God's will. Our

Presbyterian system recognizes that God spreads wisdom around, by way of reminding us that we need each other, and that no one of us, or no small group, is likely to hear every word spoken by the Spirit of God. Churches fall apart when individuals arrogate too much to themselves, but they grow stronger when the Holy Spirit flows through more people, and especially the elders who are called to be servant leaders.

Leadership here involves a commitment to integrity, which includes transparency and a relentless effort to avoid hypocrisy. Almost everything we do here is open to anyone to learn more about and participate in, except for the obvious responsibility we have to protect people's privacy.

And because honesty and humility are core values, we know that we all sin and fall short of the glory of God. So we try to show grace to one another, as God is gracious to us, but we also do our best to grow more fully into the image of God. That means we acknowledge our faults and try to correct them, not sweep them under the rug, or hypocritically divert attention by focusing on other people's faults. Here in church we confess our own sins before we confess the sins of others. We take the log out of our own eye so that we can see more clearly – though we own the responsibility to call out evil when we see it, and work to overcome it.

Leadership requires a fair amount of courage too. People don't always agree on a course of action, so leaders need to bring them together, not shying away from conflict, but acknowledging differences while seeking consensus, and encouraging everyone to build the bonds of community even in the midst of disagreement. Leaders need to tell the truth, especially when the truth is hard to hear; and that takes courage, too, because people sometimes have strong

incentives not to acknowledge the truth. But in church we learn to speak the truth in love, because, as St. Paul says, if we have all knowledge but have not love, we're just a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

Leadership requires lots of gifts, and unselfish dedication to using those gifts in service. Leading can be hard, which is why we need to pray for our leaders – here in church, and wherever else we are, and in our society as a whole. But God knows we need good leaders, so God raises them up and gives them the guidance they need, especially when they know they need it. Pray, then, for everyone in leadership, and support them in every way you can, because leaders have a great responsibility, and God has called them to care for all of us.





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