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Studies & Actions of the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in America

THE ROTATIONAL SYSTEM OF OFFICERS IN THE PCA

by Dr. L. Roy Taylor, Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church in America

I am asked from time to time regarding the validity of a rotational system of offices in the PCA. When the PCA was founded, some of the founding churches had a permanent system of officers and some had a rotational system. Our *Book of Church Order* (*BCO*) was written in such a way to allow for either a permanent or rotational system as a local option. What is now [BCO 25-8](#) was originally 25-7 first *BCO* adopted by the First General Assembly. Overtures 1973-12 and 1973-13 which called for rotational systems were answered by reference to the adoption of BCO 25.

The minutes of the General Assembly are informative on this point. This was an issue discussed at several General Assemblies. As far as the actions of the General Assembly are concerned, the General Assembly of the PCA has never stated that a permanent system of officers is the only biblical and historically presbyterian position. With regard to the rotational system. . . **the *BCO* was deliberately written neither to promote nor prohibit the rotational system of Church officers. The General Assembly has repeatedly affirmed this position** [emphasis added] [see *Minutes of the First General Assembly* (1973), item 1-46, p.35 and 1-81, p.64; *M2GA* (1974), 2-98, p. 72; *M7GA* (1979), 7-41, p. 105 and 7-41, p. 105; *M8GA* (1980), 8-88, p. 118; *M12GA* (1984), p. 127, item 12-20; see also *M6GA* (1978), 6-103, p. 105].

[**Note:** [Click here](#) to access *Minutes of General Assembly*.]

A rotational system of officers is in keeping with the early history flowing from the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century. John Calvin led in restoring the office of Ruling Elder in reforming the polity of the Church in Geneva in the Reformation. Those who hold to Presbyterian polity trace their theological-polity lineage to him. Calvin instituted a rotational system of officers. It is interesting to note that they had one-year terms.

The first ruling elders in the Church of Scotland were elected on a rotational basis. The reference is *The First Book of Discipline of 1560*, Sixth Head and Eighth Head, which specifies that Ruling Elders were to be elected on an *annual* basis. John Knox was the major influence in the formation of the Church of Scotland in the writing of its church order (*The First Book of Discipline*), its doctrinal standard (*The Scots Confession*), and its liturgy (*John Knox's Liturgy*). John Knox had spent time in Europe where he was under Calvin's tutelage, where Calvin had instituted a rotational system of officers in Geneva. The same committee (Knox, Winram, Spotswoode, Row and Doug) who wrote the *Scots Confession* also wrote the *First Book of Discipline*. It is also interesting that attendance at the First General Assembly in December, 1560, was six ministers and thirty-four ruling elders. Evidently the ruling elders, who were in the overwhelming majority and could have determined it otherwise, were in agreement with the rotational system. The rotational system in the Church of Scotland continued, "For some time after the Reformation in Scotland, ruling elders were annually elected . . ." (Charles Hodge, *The Church and Its Polity*, London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1879).

A permanent system of officers became customary in the Southern Presbyterian Church. So there is that historical precedent in later Presbyterianism. But to argue that a rotational system of ruling elders is "contrary to historic Presbyterianism" is historically inaccurate given the earlier history of Presbyterianism.

To argue that a rotational system is "unbiblical" is to infer that Calvin, Knox and the First General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (to which we trace our lineage) were either ignorant of the biblical teaching, in the least, or deliberately chose to ignore the biblical teaching.

"Ordination is perpetual" ([BCO 24-7](#)), but service on a given Session is not necessarily perpetual. Once one is ordained as a Ruling Elder, he is an Elder until he dies, or he demits his office, or he is deposed from his office. *It does not follow, however, that once he is elected to a particular Session he is a member of that Session until he dies.* That is another issue.

A Ruling Elder's relationship with a Session may end without his ordination being removed.

1. His relationship with a particular Session may be dissolved at the request of the congregation and the action of the Session, without disciplinary charges ([BCO 24-7](#)).
2. He may request to be relieved of the active duties of his office without deposition ([BCO 24-7](#)).
3. He may rotate off a Session and be re-elected ([BCO 24-8](#)).
4. He may be removed from the Session by the Session if he cannot or will not perform the duties of his office for a period of one year ([BCO 24-9](#))
5. He may move and join another church ([BCO 24-8](#)).
6. He may be suspended from office for a definite period ([BCO 36-4](#)) as a censure.
7. He may be suspended from office for an indefinite period ([BCO 36-5](#)) as a censure.

8. He may be temporarily suspended without censure ([BCO 31-10](#)) when undergoing a trial.
9. He may become a Ruling Elder Emeritus ([BCO 24-10](#)).

In all of those instances he is still ordained, but he is a *not* a member of the Session. His status is somewhat analogous to a minister without a call; he has no call, but he is still an ordained minister ([BCO 34-10, 13-2](#)). There are some differences. The RE without call is not a Session member and therefore cannot vote in the Session. A minister without call remains a voting member of Presbytery (but not of a Session). A minister may be without call for only three years, but a Ruling Elder may be without call the rest of his life. After a definite or indefinite suspension, an officebearer (TE, RE, or DE) may be restored to his official functions. If he was temporarily suspended without censure under [BCO 31-10](#), and is subsequently found not guilty of charges, he is restored to his official duties.

The question is sometimes asked, “What are the privileges of officers whose terms have expired?” Officers in such circumstances do *not* have voting privileges on the Session or Diaconate when their terms of service have expired (*BCO*, “Preface, II [Preliminary Principles,](#)” #6. and [24-8](#)). If the meetings are open meetings, they may attend. The Session or Diaconate may vote extend to them the privilege of the floor. If there is an executive session (see *Roberts Rules of Order* §9 on “executive session”), ordinarily officers whose terms have expired would be excluded. Only after they have been re-elected and installed would they have voting privileges (*BCO*, “Preface, II Preliminary Principles,” 6. and 24-8).

There are several ways in which a Ruling Elder or Deacon may cease to be an officebearer and consequently may not serve any longer on the Session or Diaconate.

10. He may die.
11. He may request that his ordination be removed without censure ([BCO 34-2](#)).
12. He may be deposed from office ([BCO 24-7](#)) as a censure.
13. He may join an heretical church ([BCO 38-3 b.](#)) and thereby lose his ordination by default.

I am aware of some cases in which a church adopts a rotational system in order as a non-judicial means of dealing officers who are not fulfilling their duties when the question arises, what can be done to deal with situations where there are officers who do not fulfill their responsibilities in example or action? There are really only two answers; 1) the Session has to be willing to make some hard decisions, or 2) adopt a rotational system.

The hard decisions would be:

14. He may be removed from the Session or Diaconate by the Session if he cannot or will not perform the duties of his office for a period of one year ([BCO 24-9](#)). The Session has to make that decision and then report it to the congregation.
15. His relationship with a particular Session or Diaconate may be dissolved at the request of the congregation and the action of the Session, without disciplinary charges ([BCO 24-7](#)). This usually happens as the result of a congregational petition

to the Session under ([BCO 25-2](#)). Even if the congregation votes to ask the Session to remove an elder from the Session or a Deacon from the Diaconate, the Session makes the decision and must report the decision to the congregation. A complaint may be filed if the Session does not call a congregational meeting within thirty days ([BCO 25-2](#)) or if the Session declines to remove the elder from the Session or a Deacon from the Diaconate ([BCO 24-7](#)).

16. He may be deposed from office as the result of a trial ([BCO 24-7](#)). The Session would have to prefer charges of dereliction of duty, try and convict him, and then depose him from office as a censure.

Interpretations of *The Book of Church Order*, *The Westminster Standards*, “The Rules of Assembly Operation,” “The Operating Manual of the Standing Judicial Commission,” and/or *Robert’s Rules of Order* by the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the PCA or staff members of the Office of the Stated Clerk are for information only and are not authoritative rulings that may only be made by the courts of the Church. Responses to inquiries are based on information supplied by the inquirer, which may not necessarily be comprehensive. The Office of the Stated Clerk does not represent parties in ecclesiastical judicial cases. Parties to potential cases or cases in process are responsible for their own constitutional and procedural knowledge and understanding. The Office of the Stated Clerk does not give legal advice. When legal advice is needed, professional legal counsel should be secured from one familiar with applicable laws and regulations.

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