

Gale Watkins

April 24, 2004 Presbytery meeting — Orientation

This is Presbytery 101. I'm speaking especially to those who are here for the first time, though there are some others who could use a refresher course.

What is a presbytery? A presbytery is geography. It is a certain defined area, a specific place. The Presbytery of Grand Canyon includes cities and deserts and forests. This presbytery extends all the way from Yuma to Lake Havasu to the Four Corners. We are a very large presbytery.

What is a presbytery? A presbytery is people. There are nearly 17,000 of us in this Presbytery. We have seventy chartered congregations, along with chapels and fellowships that gather each week. We have more than two hundred ministers, and seven commissioned lay pastors (we'll most likely have nine after today's meeting).

What is a presbytery? A presbytery is a governing body. The Presbyterian Church (USA) has four kinds of governing bodies: sessions, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly. As a governing body, we exercise authority in this geography and among these people.

A great deal of our governing is delegated to smaller groups — Presbytery Council, committees, commissions. But from time to time, we meet as a presbytery, as we are doing today. The people in this geography gather as a governing body of the church. Our Constitution states that this church is governed by presbyters, both ministers and elders. We gather as a presbytery in roughly equal numbers of ministers and elders. There is parity among us. Both ministers and elders have voice and vote. If you are a newly ordained elder attending your first presbytery meeting today, you have equal standing with the biggest "know-it-all" among our two hundred ministers! If your session has commissioned you to be here today, you are empowered to take part in the governance of the church at this level.

What does the presbytery do when it meets? We do four things here. We worship God. We encourage each other. We learn. And we decide. We worship because God is worthy of our praise. Worship is the single most important action of the church, whether it's a congregation or a gathering of the wider church. We encourage each other by listening to our joys and sorrows, both in this large group and in smaller, less formal conversations. You will be encouraged today by stories of transformation in some of our congregations. God is at work among us. We learn from the reports made to us and from the insights of those around us. Today's meeting includes a presentation and small group interaction on a matter of great importance for every pastor and every congregation: ethics. I hope you will learn something today that will make a difference in your ministry. And we decide. Some matters in the presbytery require the wisdom and the consent of the whole body. Today, for instance, we will be making decisions concerning church leaders and our constitution.

In a large group like this, we make better decisions in a better way if we agree to abide by certain rules. The parliamentary procedure we use is not a weapon that one person uses to unfairly take advantage of another. Rather it is meant to enable us to make decisions in a way that preserves the unity of the body. We agree to speak the truth in love in some concrete ways. For instance, speak to the whole body after you've been recognized. Begin by identifying yourself — your name, and your congregation or ministry. Address your comments to the moderator. Stick to the topic at hand. Questions are always welcome. If you are unclear about the meaning of an upcoming vote, seek to be recognized so that you can ask a clarifying question.

Every governing body in the Presbyterian Church has these two officers — a moderator and a clerk. When the presbytery meets, the moderator presides and the clerk advises. If we become confused, we will do well to seek the clerk's advice on how to proceed. The moderator and the clerk are both here to serve the presbytery.

One practical matter that hasn't yet become part of our Constitution — cell phones. If you have one, please turn it off or switch it to the vibrate mode during our meeting, lest you be subject to church discipline!