

On July 28, 2009, I was elected and installed as the Stated Clerk of the Presbytery of Western North Carolina (though my term actually began on August 1st). That was almost 4 months ago, and this is my first written message to my presbytery family in this capacity. These few simple facts may lead you to wonder (quite legitimately) "What's taken you so long?"

Here's my one-word answer: overwhelmed. I've simply been overwhelmed. And not because I've been working around the clock, because I haven't exactly. To be sure, two jobs make for busy, well-filled days. What has overwhelmed me is the diversity and scope of the tasks that fall under the "stated clerk" job title.

It has taken me this long to write about this new calling because I've only just begun to find some sense of the structure that it rests on - it's place in the universe of Presbyterian service to God and to his children. I'm in kindergarten again, and I am reminded that I dropped out of kindergarten. But that's another story . . .

I have progressed this far, so far, in my quest to comprehend the position only by the grace and patience of the stated clerk search committee, of my predecessor, Rev. Dr. James Aydelotte, of our General Presbyter, Bobbi White and, very importantly, of our presbytery staff, not to mention the chairs and members of the COM, the Coordinating Council, etcetera, etcetera.

As job descriptions go, the stated clerk's position isn't the clearest or most explicitly defined one a person could hope for, and not because of a failure on anyone's part locally. In fact I was told early on that the job description varied from presbytery to presbytery. This week I learned how true that statement was.

Last night my wife picked me up at the airport in Charlotte after I had spent four days in Louisville, Kentucky, training with 14 other newly elected stated clerks from around the country. It was there that we learned the truth of something we had all suspected prior to coming together: no two stated clerk job descriptions are the same! One-hundred seventy three presbyteries, one-hundred seventy three job descriptions.

Our hosts in Louisville were the staffs of the Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, and of the Office of Constitutional Services of the General Assembly. These are the people who truly comprehend church polity at the deepest levels. Theirs is a comprehensive understanding of the stated clerk's role in the local presbytery.

Bobbi White went to this same conference a few years ago, and she told me that by the time I had spent four days with the experts at the General Assembly office I would realize that there are at least a hundred things the stated clerk must know how to do well, many of them from memory.

Thanks Bobbi. I knew the day would come when I would regret dropping out of kindergarten!

It turns out - surprise! - that the stated clerk's job is to know, understand, and help facilitate the local working of our denominational polity.

In fact, there are more than a hundred things the stated clerk must know because the job is designed, within some important boundaries, to be adaptable to changing circumstances. My favorite of those boundaries is this: Neutrality - my new favorite word. The stated clerk is required by the Book of Order to be neutral. That's the one thing I feel fully prepared to be and to do as I continue to function in the role and learn my way through the complexity of our polity.

The more of that detail I was exposed to by our hosts in Louisville, the more I came to understand that our institutional complexity is both blessing and curse: It guides us into community, helps us frame our manner of worshiping together and relating to each other, provides order and predictability in the day-to-day functioning of the church, and periodically leads us to split hairs or, in the worst of times, to split the body of Christ over things both great and small.

I understand better now what may have motivated the General Assembly to undertake its proposed New Form of Government, ostensibly in the interest of simplification. But the bigger lessons I learned in Louisville, which I hope you will ponder with me for a moment, are: 1. The quintessential fact of who we are as believers connected together by a common faith, standing by choice within a denominational circle that is never a perfect fit; 2. The necessity that all of us participate in the process of being the church, giving and accepting leadership and submitting ourselves to Christ.

As you have now seen, I can do "verbose." But I leave you with these words from Cynthia M. Campbell, President of McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, writing in the foreword to "Presbyterian Polity for Church Officers" (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1999) by Joan S. Gray and Joyce C. Tucker:

"Confidence in the sovereign grace of God enables us to live together and work out our differences while we recall that the hope of the world does not rest on our shoulders. The government and discipline of the Presbyterian Church have at times become demonic: Procedures have taken precedence over people; supposed purity has led to schism and rejection of each other; order has been used as a club and not a guide. The only thing that can save Presbyterians from confusing the *Book of Order* with God is grace. Only a constant recollection of who made us and brought us together, only the continual affirmation that it is mercy alone by which we live, enable us to make of our form of government what it is: a way of being the church by the grace of God."

Ministers, preach the Reformation; elders, reclaim the role and accept the duties prescribed for you in G-6.0300 and especially those in G-6.0304; people, all believers, be the church. Be the mercy.

Peace to you and thanksgiving to God. Your servant,

Bert Sigmon