Recommendation

The Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley respectfully overtures the 224th General Assembly (2020) to direct the Stated Clerk to send the following proposed amendment to the presbyteries for their affirmative or negative votes:

Shall the fourth paragraph of G-3.0106 (Administration of Mission) of the Form of Government be amended as follows: [Text to be added is shown as italic.]

“All councils shall adopt and implement a sexual misconduct policy and a child and youth protection policy, and an antiracism policy with suggested training for all members of each council.”

Rationale:

From Selma to Montgomery, from Tuskegee to Tuscaloosa, from Auburn to Anniston, from the Black Belt to Birmingham, the Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley knows the pain of our racist history and the difficulty of changing behavior. We recognize the General Assembly’s call for “Facing Racism,” for study and action, and give thanks for the resource materials provided. Nevertheless, we see that councils have been slow to respond. Councils have adopted and enforced sexual misconduct policies and policies to protect vulnerable populations. Why have councils not been doing the work of “Facing Racism”? Why have councils responded differently? The responses regarding sexual misconduct and protecting vulnerable people have been directed by “shall,” while “Facing Racism” merely urges, makes available, encourages, and commends. This presbytery, whose very name reflects black and white, women and men, working together in mission for education and health care, calls upon the General Assembly to turn overcoming racism into a “shall” for all our councils.

Concurrence:

North Alabama Presbytery
On Establishing the Authority of Presbyteries to Define Severance Plans for Installed Ministers

Recommendation

The Presbytery of Beaver-Butler overtures the 224th General Assembly (2020) to direct the Stated Clerk to send the following proposed amendment to the presbyteries for their affirmative or negative votes:

Shall G-3.0303c be amended as follows: [Text to be added is shown as italic.]

“c. establishing minimum compensation standards, *including provisions for severance payments*, for pastoral calls and Certified Christian Educators and Certified Associate Christian Educators within the presbytery;”

Rationale

In 1993, the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission ruled in the case *Saurbaugh v. the Presbytery of Great Rivers* that “The Book of Order does not give the presbyteries power to require congregations to pay compensation upon dissolution of pastoral relationships” (*Minutes, 1994, Part I, p. 155, Remedial Case 206-13,11.094 attached*)

In subsequent years the church has maintained that while a presbytery can have guidelines and policies concerning severance for ministers at the dissolution of a pastorate, the presbytery has no authority to enforce those policies.

This overture seeks to remedy that omission in the *Book of Order* by making explicit the authority of presbyteries to create and enforce severance policies by linking that authority to the power to set minimum wages and approve calls.

The overture does not attempt to set a national severance policy, but to clarify the presbytery’s relationship to both the session and the minister during times of transition.

Concurrence

Blackhawk Presbytery
Detroit Presbytery
Florida Presbytery
Grace Presbytery
Hudson River Presbytery
Kiskiminetas Presbytery
Mission Presbytery
New Castle Presbytery
North Alabama Presbytery
Northern New York Presbytery
Pittsburgh Presbytery
San Fernando Presbytery
San Gabriel Presbytery
Shenango Presbytery
Upper Ohio Valley Presbytery
Utah Presbytery
Utica Presbytery
On Amending W-4.0403 Regarding Laying on of Hands at an Installation Event: 224th General Assembly (2020) Sponsor: West Virginia Presbytery Type: General Assembly Full Consideration

Recommendation:

The Presbytery of West Virginia overtures the 224th General Assembly (2020) to direct the Stated Clerk to send the following proposed amendment to the presbyteries for their affirmative or negative votes:

Shall W-4.0403 be amended to read as follows: [Text to be deleted is shown with a strike-through; text to be inserted is shown as italic.]

“A service of ordination, installation, or commissioning focuses on Christ and the joy and responsibility of serving him through the mission and ministry of the church. Following the sermon, the moderator (or designee) of the appropriate council briefly states the nature of the ministry to which persons are being ordained, installed, or commissioned. Those who are being ordained, installed, or commissioned gather at the baptismal font. The moderator (or designee) of asks them the constitutional questions (see W-4.0404). A ruling elder asks the corresponding questions of the congregation. When all questions have been answered in the affirmative, those to be ordained will kneel, if able, for the laying on of hands and the prayer of ordination. (The presbytery commission lays on hands at the ordination of minister of the Word and Sacrament†; its moderator may invite other ministers of the Word and Sacrament † and ruling elders to participate. Members of the session lay on hands at the ordination of ruling elders and deacons; the session may invite other ruling elders and ministers of the Word and Sacrament † to participate. Because ordination only takes place once for each office, the laying on of hands is not repeated. The moderator may invite the commission and all members of the congregation to participate in the laying on of hands for commissioning and blessing the newly installed minister of Word and Sacrament, ruling elders, or deacons.) Those previously ordained will stand, if able, along with the congregation, for the prayer of installation. After this, the moderator makes the declaration of ordination, installation, or commissioning. Members of the session or presbytery welcome the newly ordained, installed, or commissioned person(s). In the case of the installation of a minister of the Word and Sacrament†, persons may be invited to charge the minister of the Word and Sacrament† and congregation to faithfulness in ministry and mutuality in relationship. When a minister of the Word and Sacrament† is ordained or installed, it is appropriate for that person to preside at the Lord’s Supper in the same service; she or he may also give the blessing at the conclusion of the service. When ruling elders or deacons are ordained or installed, it is appropriate for one or more of them to give the charge to the congregation at the conclusion of the service.”

Rationale:

The laying on of hands is not a sacrament but an act of diverse meanings as witnessed in Scripture and the Reformed tradition. It is affirmed by the Book of Order!Directory for Worship as an act that is appropriate to various situations in the worship of life of Presbyterians, an act that conveys the “gracious action of God and communicate[s] our grateful response” (W-1.0303, see also W-2.0202, W-3.0407, W-4.0401–.0403, W-5.0204).
Ordination is not a sacrament in the Reformed tradition either, but an action by which the institutional church sets apart “those who have been called by God through the voice of the church to serve as deacons, ruling elders, and ministers of the Word and Sacrament” (W-4.0401). The Reformed tradition recognizes the priesthood of all believers, that “in baptism each Christian is called to ministry in Christ’s name” (W-04.0401), and that no special grace or power is conferred through the laying on of hands to an individual at ordination.

There is no clear example of ordination in scripture, nor is there any word in either biblical Hebrew or Greek that bears the full connotations of our understanding of ordination. Examples of laying on of hands in Hebrew scripture include blessing others (Genesis 48:14; Leviticus 9:22); the transfer of human guilt to sacrificial animals by the priest (Leviticus 4:4); the consecration of the Levites as the priestly tribe—a once-for-all-generations event (Numbers 8:10); and the commissioning of Joshua by Moses as the next leader of the nation of Israel (Numbers 27:23).

In the New Testament the phrase “laying on of hands” occurs twenty-five times and is most often associated with healing and blessing (for example, Mark 10:13–16; Luke 4:40, and Acts 28:8). Several times the laying on of hands occurs in association with the reception of the Holy Spirit following baptism (Acts 8:17, 19:5–6, Hebrews 6:2). 1 Tim 4:14 may also be included in that list, as it refers to the laying on of hands on Timothy by the elders in a context that suggests it was following Timothy’s baptism. The laying on of hands is clearly associated with endorsement of Christian servants in only two accounts, i.e., the setting apart of the seven to wait tables (Acts 6) and the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13 for missionary work. It is impossible to ascertain the occasion that called for the laying of Paul’s hands upon Timothy recounted in 2 Timothy 1:6.2 Finally, 1 Timothy 5:22 simply states that the laying on of hands should not be done hastily, and recent scholarship suggests this is to be interpreted as a caution against hastily accusing an elder of wrongdoing.

The semantics of Christian ordination can be traced back to Tertullian (ca. 160-ca. 220 AD). Tertullian was the first to use the Latin terms *ordo* and *ordinatio* for Christian ministry. In Tertullian’s time these terms were used for secular positions that not only separated the ordained from ordinary people but allowed them to exercise governmental, jurisdictional, or cultic authority that demanded submission of others. The shift to the hierarchical view of Christian ministry after these terms were adopted contributed to the eventual limiting of the laying on of hands to ministerial ordination: since the laying on of hands elevated one’s status, it could only be appropriately used for a certain class of people. Thus, Tertullian’s writings helped create a status and ranking that did not appear to exist among New Testament Christians.

The Reformers chose not to adopt the Catholic Church’s theology and practice of ordination as a sacrament because it violated their understanding of the priesthood of all believers: through baptism all are received as equal members of the family of God and given the gift of the Holy Spirit, which includes gifts for ministry. Ordination is mentioned substantively only three times in the *Book of Confessions*. It is mentioned twice in the Second Helvetic Confession, first in the section on the process of ordination (5.151), then as clarification that ordination is not a sacrament, but a “profitable ordinance” (5.171). The Confession of 1967 includes these words in 9.39–9.40:

In recognition of special gifts of the Spirit and for the ordering of its life as a community, the church calls, trains, and authorizes certain members for leadership and oversight. The persons qualified for these duties in accordance with the polity of the church are set apart by ordination or other appropriate act and thus made responsible for their special ministries.
The church thus orders its life as an institution with a constitution, government, officers, finances, and administrative rules. These are instruments of mission, not ends in themselves. …

Our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is an institution, albeit one created to bring glory to God, to bring the “gospel into all the world,” and to bear “witness to Christ’s saving love to the ends of the earth.” Ordination is an act of the institution, one of the ways we order our life for mission. Candidates are ordained to a particular service, a call, emphasizing the pragmatic, functional nature of ordained ministry. As the Book of Order says,

In Baptism each Christian is called to ministry in Christ’s name. God calls some persons from the midst of congregations to fulfill particular functions, so that the ministry of the whole people of God may flourish. … (W-4.0401 emphasis added)

Because the ordered ministries are not the call of all believers but limited to those with the spiritual, mental, emotional, intellectual, and physical abilities to serve in particular capacities, every effort should be made to avoid the literal or figurative elevation of the ordained above those who are gifted in other ways. The ordained are “set into a disciplined and purposeful activity in the life of the church” not set above. To mystify and sacramentalize the act of ordination, and the laying on of hands as practiced on that occasion, undermines the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

The Reformed tradition does not allow for the belief that any spiritual power or grace is literally transferred from one person to another through the laying on of hands. Calvin and many other Reformers took the position that avoiding it altogether might be the safest way to curtail the superstitious belief in such magical powers. Limiting its use to an ordination and prohibiting its use at an installation is imbuing it with an authority and mystique that is unjustified.

There are equally valid reasons to include the laying on of hands at an installation as there are reasons against prohibiting it. As stated above, in W-1.0303 the laying on of hands is included in a list of “symbolic actions” with “strong ties to … biblical practices” that convey the “gracious action of God and communicate our grateful response.” Later in the Directory for Worship, the laying on of hands is mentioned in W-2.0202, the section on Prayerful Participation. Prayer is here defined as “the primary way in which we participate in worship.” Various methods of prayer are listed: “Prayer may be spoken, silent, sung, or enacted in physical ways.” This section is closed with the following paragraph:

The gifts of the Spirit are for building up the Church. Every action in worship is to glorify God and contribute to the good of the people. Worshipers and worship leaders must avoid actions that only call attention to themselves and fail to serve the needs of the whole congregation.

As “enacted prayer,” the unrestricted laying on of hands by the whole congregation avoids calling particular attention to those who have been ordained to church office and gives each member of the community an equal role in the prayer of blessing and commissioning of those being installed. This truly “corporate” experience not only offers the gathered community the opportunity to show their support of the one(s) being installed, it is a “corporal” action, an outward physical expression of an internal attitude—something that is rare in our often mind-focused worship.

Furthermore, the act of laying on hands demonstrates the connectional nature of ministry in an unparalleled way. As hands are outstretched and rested on the shoulders of those whose hands are outstretched to other shoulders, everyone gathered around is woven together. While this action neither bestows magical power nor transmits special spiritual gifts, the connection experienced by
Participants is real. It communicates support, collegiality, and comradery, and breaks down feelings of isolation and insufficiency. In this human touch we experience the love of God and each other beyond words. Such experiences should be recommended, not restricted.

If there is a concern laying on of hands at an installation might be interpreted as part of a “re-ordination” it could be diffused in two simple ways: by creating a new order of worship for the installation service that is not identical to an ordination service in every respect except for the laying on of hands; and/or by educating worshipers verbally and/or in print at the service that the laying on of hands is an act of prayer, blessing, and commissioning, not ordination.

The proposed change to the Directory of Worship is from language that is restrictive to language that is permissive: the laying on of hands would not be required at installations as there may be occasions when, because of ecumenical considerations or a candidate’s preferences regarding physical contact, it would not be appropriate or edifying. In such a change we reaffirm Calvin’s own guide for worship practices: “But love will best judge what may hurt or edify; and if we let love be our guide, all will be safe.”

Endnotes

5. https://www.presbyterianmission.org/who-we-are/.
8. *Institutes*, IV.x.30.

Concurrence:

Redstone Presbytery

de Cristo Presbytery