

**The Commission Model: An Alternative  
to the Professional Model in the Presbyterian Church**  
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## INTRODUCTION

*The professionalizing of pastors in the Presbyterian Church has probably contributed to the denomination's decline. An alternative in the Book of Order, the Commission Model, could contribute to recovery in some communities. The Commission Model is not "better than nothing"; it is better than the Professional Model in selected communities. It is also much more than a Commissioned Lay Pastor.*

It seems obvious to many that the Professional Model is the norm. In fact, it is the aberration. The Professional Model had a late beginning in the history of the church when Emperor Constantine in 325 AD organized churches into congregations with a paid head pastor who sat in the biggest chair during Sunday worship. {Barna & Viola 2008:428} In the early New Testament Church, throughout history, around the world today (with exceptions), and in many growing congregations in North America, variations of the Commission Model have been and are the norm for leadership.

This paper compares the Professional and Commission Models with specific recommendations about how to expand and use the Commission Model in the Presbyterian Church. I hope that this paper contributes to the discussion about revitalizing the Presbyterian Church.

It took me forty-five years to write this paper. Those years were spent working as a pastor and working with Commissioned Ministries doing leadership training in the Two Thirds World, among Native Americans, with growing Evangelical Churches in North America, and working on my recent PhD in Distance Education. My travels and work in Southeast Asia, South America, Southern Africa and Canada opened my eyes about the Commission Model and motivated me to write this paper. To see the church flourish in these countries without the Professional Model was a revelatory experience.

Proving or disproving my thesis about professionalization probably serves no useful purpose. The Presbyterian Church is not about to abolish the office of ordained pastor and I am not arguing that we should. By discussing the limitations of the Professional Model, I hope to shift some attention to the possibilities of the Commission Model.

It is not the pastors who are the problem. It is the "office" of Pastor and how that office has been professionalized so that leadership is now seen as a pyramid with a "pro" at the top despite what the Book of Order says. Many articles and books argue that the pastor is the "center," "head" or "master." For example, Jan Paulsen in Ministry Magazine says, "The local church pastor is key—absolutely central—to everything we are and do as a church. It's a truth that's been expressed so many times that perhaps it's acquired the air of a cliché." {Paulsen 2010} Samuel Blizzard of

Princeton Seminary said, “The pastor has the master role in an occupation distinguished from the occupational role of other persons.” {St. Clair 1963:24}

Today we even have “Executive Pastors and Executive Presbyters.” Recently we discovered that we have “Tall Steeple Churches” where I guess the real professionals are. Even Interim Pastors have become professionals with their own accreditation system. I know. I am a certified Interim Pastor. During my training I learned that we have Interim starters and closers. The starters shake the system to start the process of change and the closer does what a closing pitcher does in baseball. Soon we will be talking about the number of innings served instead of years. Even more startling was the payment of a signing bonus to a pastor in a large Presbyterian Church in the Southwest.

This paper is not a polemic against high standards in the Presbyterian Church. It is a reminder, however, that we should not confuse education with schooling, a sense of call with a job, knowledge with wisdom, or authority with certification. The Commission Model focuses on a set of values and practices different from the Professional Model.

## THE WORD “PROFESSION” DEFINED

A review of dictionary definitions of a “profession” includes the following characteristics: A long period of study, a standard of ethics, admission and dismissal criteria, status and authority. The term comes from the Latin and always had a religious context until the mid 1700’s when the term referred to a general calling and not just a religious one. {Professionals}

Professionalism began in the United States in the 1800’s to protect people from imposters. Back then a person basically became a doctor or lawyer by self appointment after a period of time spent with a mentor. It wasn’t until the 1950’s that the majority of Protestant clergy were college or seminary trained. Mentors in the parish were replaced with seminary professors after WWII.

Despite the process of professionalization, a recent Gallop Poll shows that only 56% of the public think that clergy have high ethical standards. A previous Gallop Poll showed that less than half of the population thought clergy could be trusted. {<http://www.Ama> 2005} A punch line to a popular joke today ends with the statement that now we need protection from our professionals.

## THE RISE OF PROFESSIONALISM IN THE CHURCH

In the middle 1960’s, a Master’s degree became standard for ordination in the Presbyterian Church. Until then, a bachelor’s degree was the norm. Shortly after this, the Presbyterian Church further professionalized by adding standard ordination exams like those used by lawyers and doctors. An attempt at a standardized professional review of compensation was tried but dropped in the late 1970’s. Management by objectives, a professional management tool, was widely used during the “accountability era in the 1980’s.” Even with changes in the new Book of Order, clergy are still referred to as “professionals.” {Office of the General Assembly 2011:G-10}

Some people would say that professionalizing has led to a “Tailor Driven Church.” David Ryser suggested this term in his modern allegory entitled “The Pastor Has No Clothes!” {Ryser 2011} In

Ryser's version, the pastor of a healthy but small congregation wanted a larger church where he could preach on television. A tailor made him a spiritual suit that only the spiritual could see. The pastor called it his birthday suit since he first wore it on Pentecost Sunday. Everyone laughed when a child yelled out that the pastor wore no clothes. Soon families that could not see the birthday suit began to leave. The pastor never preached on TV because of a FCC ruling against birthday suits worn on air. Professionalism in the ministry could be a birthday suit tailor-made for clergy.

The healthy and growing Evangelical congregations I visited avoid being "Tailor Driven Congregations." The Evangelicals I know try to act "un-professional" by wearing casual clothing, by giving informal sermons, by preaching without a pulpit and without the lights dimmed. They avoid referring to their degrees and show no preference to ordained clergy.

A more important distinction I found between Evangelicals I know and Presbyterians has to do with integrity. In the Evangelical Churches where I worked, clergy integrity is personal rather than attached to the office of clergy. Evangelical members seem to believe that it is more important to know how much one cares than it is to care how much one knows.

Professionalization has been difficult for clergy as well as congregations. Zens cites a number of studies in his book, *The Pastor Has No Clothes*.

- 1,500 pastors leave the church each month
- At least 100,000 pastors suffer occupational burn out) at any given time
- 80 percent of seminary students leave within the first five years of service
- 80 percent of pastors' spouses want their spouse to choose another profession. {Zens 2011:458}

## EMPLOYMENT AND MINISTRY

The distinction between ministry and employment, as this paper suggests, is not a new idea. Even today the Roman Catholic priest is not paid for ministry. He is provided a stipend so that he can concentrate on ministry. That is what my first written "call" was attempting to say by using the phrase "we will pay you money to free you from earthly cares to do ministry." Ministry is the calling of all Christians and not a paid job among other paid jobs.

I received a B.D. in 1966 from McCormick Seminary and then received a M.Div. in the mail several months later. My first church "contract" said something like this, "To free you from worldly cares so that you can do ministry, the church agrees to provide..." How silly I thought that was at the time. Today it seems like we have clergy contracts for jobs instead of calls for ministry and in the process we might have lost something.

The New Testament word for "call" meant to be set apart and not set above. Try as I have, I have never found the word "Executive" in the New Testament and please, do not try to convince me that Bishops were the first professional in the early Church.

## PROFESSIONALISM AND ENTITLEMENT

How did we get to the point where the priesthood of all believers is celebrated once a year on layperson Sunday? How did worship become a spectator sport? How did ministry become what is done in the institution? How did lay leadership in the minds of many people become associated with ushering and hosting the coffee hour? I contend that clergy professionalism in the Presbyterian Church has created a leadership pyramid never intended in the New Testament church where leadership was plural.

The elevated office of Pastor can lead to a sense of clergy entitlement and proprietary attitudes. I first encountered the entitlement attitude in a seminary library where the librarian talked about the high rate of book theft among seminary students. He said some students felt they had a right to books since they were called to ministry.

A destructive form of entitlement occurs when there is preoccupation with organizational boundaries such as issues of ordaining women and gays. Another example is our preoccupation with re-organization of the denomination every few years since the 1970's. Entitlement and proprietary attitudes cause distraction in any organization.

## PROFESSIONAL CLERGY AND DENOMINATIONAL DECLINE

My concern, again, is not with pastors but with the professionalization of the office. In Ephesians 4, Paul states that Christ gave leaders to the church including pastors. The model is plural. Leaders. Pastors were not the first in the list nor were they singled out as the most important

As leadership was becoming "more professional" in the Presbyterian Church in the 1960's, membership was declining. Was this a coincidence or is there some relationship? Kennon Callahan, a recognized leader in the field of church development, hints that there is a connection. He said, "The day of the professional minister is over. The day of the missionary pastor has come. The day of the church culture is over. The day of the mission field has come."  
{[www.gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/church-growth/church-transformation/](http://www.gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/church-growth/church-transformation/) }

## DIFFERENT VIEWS OF THE INDIGENOUS CHURCH

Callahan does not use the term "indigenous" but it is implied in his statement that "the mission field has come." Professional clergy and Commission leaders usually differ about the importance of a church being indigenous. What defines indigenous people is the importance and authority of a place with a history and culture. The term indigenous shares a common Latin root with the word dignity. Local leadership is not parochial among indigenous leaders as it is viewed by some Professional clergy. The Commission Model of leadership values the indigenous church.

Whether a local church can and should be indigenous, including its leadership, is a controversial topic. For example, the professional ordained pastor is authorized to minister in all zip codes. The Commissioned Lay Pastor is restricted to a specific zip code. The professional pastor's credentials

must be laminated since they last a long time. The CLP's credentials have a shelf life of three years although they can be renewed.

If you think indigenous means foreign then you are mistaken. The issue is how much one values knowledge of local customs, the local language, history of the community, and awareness of how decisions are made and by whom. These matters are of less importance in suburbia than in urban neighborhoods, small communities, and on reservation.

## COMMISSIONING AND THE BOOK OF ORDER

There are four types of commissioning in the Book of Order.

1. ALL MEMBERS. Commissioning to full membership and governance. (Office of the General Assembly:W-3.3502, W-3.3602-.3608; W-3.3701, W-4.2004)
2. CLP'S. Commissioning of elders to pastoral service. (Formerly called CLP) (Office of the General Assembly: Preface).
3. ROLES. Commissioning "for service in and to the church in such roles as Christian educator, church school teacher, organizational officer, or group advisers." Section W. 3701 of the Book of Order
4. WITNESS. Commissioning for specific corporate and personal acts of evangelism, compassion, justice, reconciliation, and peacemaking in the world. (Section W-4.3000, W-3.3701a- .4004(2) of the Directory of Worship in the Book of Order)

These last two types (Roles and Witness) make it possible to expand the Commission Model beyond the CLP to recognize a team of parish leaders. Commissioning for these leaders is done by a Session.

The new term for CLP's is the "Elder Commissioned for Pastoral Service" but I will continue using the abbreviation CLP because it is widely recognized. A paper done by the denomination says of the Commission Lay Pastor ". . . the focus has always been on the presbytery's mission needs and not the gifts or needs of elders to be commissioned." (Office of Constitutional Services)

This interesting distinction between the Professional Pastor and the Commissioned Lay Pastor further illustrates some of my previous points. Shouldn't the gifts of the CLP and all Christians be the focus of the Presbytery's mission and not just the professional?

## ELEMENTS OF THE COMMISSION MODEL

To further define the Commission Model, I will compare and contrast it with the Professional Model. By making comparisons, I am not advocating that we eliminate the professional model. I am urging, however, that we consider the Commission Model INSTEAD of the Professional Model in selected situations.

I am using the word “model” loosely. A “model” since the days of the philosopher David Hume (1711-1776), has meant a comprehensive representation of reality so complete that problem solving can be done in the abstract. What I have described as two models should probably be labeled as “clusters” of similar concepts. Models need to be taken as a whole. One can pick, choose and mix elements of clusters. For reasons of brevity, however, I will continue to use the term “model.”

#### THE PROFESSIONAL MODEL

- 1 Symbolized by a vertical line of authority
- 2 Historically a new model
- 3 Prevalent in declining churches
- 4 Emphasis on leadership training
- 5 Works well in selected suburban churches
- 6 Pastors self select themselves for training
- 7 Emphasis upon knowledge
- 8 Emphasis on scholarship
- 9 Education confused with schooling
- 10 Worthiness proven in a classroom
- 11 Emphasis upon skills
- 12 Expensive because of minimum standards
- 13 Training of an individual leader
- 14 Preachers are often stars on a stage
- 15 Instructed by other professionals
- 16 Training proceeds recognition
- 18 Basically a pre-service model
- 19 Success defined as numerical growth

#### THE COMMISSION MODEL

- Symbolized by a circle of authority
- . The traditional model in the Bible and history and around the world today.
- Prevalent in thriving churches
- Emphasis on the selection of people already proven as leaders
- urban neighborhoods, family congregations, and reservations
- Leaders are selected by the community
- Emphasis on wisdom
- Emphasis on being practical
- Many leaders are well educated but not well schooled
- Worthiness proven in the community
- Emphasis on spirituality and maturity
- Less costly because less dependent upon buildings and professional benefits
- Training of a congregation
- Leaders are often coaches on the sidelines
- Instructed by the community and church mentors
- Training follows recognition
- Basically a continuing education model
- Success defined as improved wellness in the congregation

20 Retirement is a key concept	No such thing as retirement
21 Found in many dying congregations	found in many flourishing congregations
22 Being indigenous is seen as negative	Being indigenous is seen as essential and a matter of pride
23 Emphasis upon gate keeping functions	Organizational controls through social traditions instead of written rules
24 Emphasis on the institutional church	Emphasis on the Kingdom

## PROFESSIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND COMMUNITY WISDOM

Wisdom, sometimes called emotional intelligence, is an important characteristic of the Commission Model. To be fair, the Book of Order says that “wisdom” is a factor in the selection of clergy for ordination. {Office of the General Assembly 2011:G-2.0607} In the Commission Model, education is more important than schooling because of the value of wisdom gained from experience.

There is an important relationship between wisdom and transformational leaders, a concept of importance in the Presbytery of South Louisiana. Transformational leaders “raise the game for those around them” like Drew Brees does for the New Orleans Saints. Emotional intelligence correlated highly with all components of transformational leadership with the components of understanding of emotions the best predictors of this type of leadership style.” {Gardner & Stough 2002:68β-78}

## IMPLEMENTING A COMMISSION MODEL

How could the Commission Model be expanded and implemented? The following are some basic suggestions that will need further amplification:

1. Train a team of leaders and not just an individual. The team could include other commissioned leaders.
2. Training should be based on gifts assessment of the commissioned leaders.
3. Training should be planned as continuing education and not pre-service training which terminates with graduation.
4. Education should be done by extension. Technology such as video conferencing makes it possible to bring in resource persons beyond the Presbytery.
5. Trainers should include mentors. Mentors are the community elders who know the local culture, history, and language and community power structure.
6. The case study method of training should be used where possible. Training should be organized around a series of realistic parish situations instead of a list of books. The new

Book of Order eliminates the seven categories required for commissioning found in prior editions.

7. Study success instead of problems. Start with the strengths of the leaders and the congregations.
8. Create a Presbytery based peer support system for Commissioned leaders
9. A training program in a parish should consider what the Presbytery and congregation consider wellness to be.

#### DEFINING SUCCESS AS WELLNESS IN THE COMMISSION MODEL,

A major problem with church “re-vitalization” programs is that they often lack a consensus among leaders about what the re-vitalized church looks like and what evidence is acceptable to make a judgment. Without criteria and evidence identified before a project begins, evaluation becomes little more than a political exercise. Criterion referenced evaluation is needed where success is measured against criteria. The typical form of evaluation uses norm referenced measures where one congregation is measured against another when all of them might be below standards.

Success in the church growth movement usually means numerical, financial and/or spiritual growth. I prefer the word “wellness.” Wellness is different from growth. Wellness includes but is more than resiliency which implies survival and recovery. Wellness is also different from health because health often implies the absence of disease instead of the presence of factors making a person well. This means that even a dying congregation can display wellness if they understand the difference between the demise of their institution and the continuation of their ministry (i.e. the use of endowments from the sale of property). Rubrics are a proven tool that can be used to measure wellness when measurement is subjective. (Rubrics)

#### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This paper advocated for the expansion and use of the Commission Model authorized in the Book of Order not because it is better than nothing but because it is a better model in some situations. The limitations of the Professional Model were presented in the hopes of focusing increased attention on the Commission Model.

The Commission Model is appropriate in situations where there is a sense of place and not just space, where the dignity of local culture, history, language is valued and where the church is viewed as an extended family. The Book of Order allows for commissioning leaders for specific roles in the church such as teachers, youth leaders, etc. It also allows for commissioning people to specific ministries beyond the institutional church such as community evangelists, relief workers, those engaged in reconciliation and a host of other missions.

The heart of the Commission Model is found in the word Co-Mission, mission done together where authority is shared rather than delegated by an Executive Pastor. Such a model if widely and wisely implemented, can contribute to the recovery of the Presbyterian Church.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gary Kush is an active retired Presbyterian pastor living in Phoenix, AZ. He earned the degrees of B.S. in Education from Bradley University in Peoria, IL, a M.Div. and M.A. in Adult Education from McCormick Theological Seminary, an ABD (all but dissertation due to health) in Educational Administration from the Arizona State University, and a recent Ph.D. In Distance Education and Education Technology from Trinity College/University of Liverpool, England. Much of his career was spent doing leadership training with indigenous and marginalized people.

For years, Gary worked in Diversified Theological Education, including Theological Education by Extension (TEE), in North America and abroad. During a fifteen year period, he managed a TEE program that enrolled about six hundred students each year in about forty extension sites in North America and the Marshall Islands. Leadership training was the focus. In the TEE program, Gary help author sixteen extension textbooks, recruited and trained mentors, taught some seminary professors how to write books readable at the sixth grade level, and helped negotiate course credit with several colleges and seminaries. He was an academic dean in two Arizona private colleges. In recent years he visited churches and did training in Canada, Equator, South Africa, Zambia, Costa Rica, India and Indonesia.

In the Presbytery of South Louisiana (PSL), he recently visited three congregations, attended a Presbytery of SL Council meeting, a SL Presbytery Committee dealing with the closure of a church, interviewed the Interim Executive Presbyter and visited a meeting of the PSL Candidate's Committee. He developed a wiki site for the pending PSL Wetlands Theological Education Center and a website for Bayou Blue Presbyterian Church.

For more information about his recent work, go to his website at [www.webucators.org](http://www.webucators.org)

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