

A PASTORAL RULE

The Apostle Paul begs us to live a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called. A *Pastoral Rule* is offered to you, not as a set of regulations, but as a guide that leads away from burdensome demands toward authentic freedom in Christ. It invites you to attend to three aspects of ministry: personal disciplines, personal conduct in ministry, and mutual encouragement and accountability. Read the Rule slowly and prayerfully, in the hope that God will speak to you through it, and that you will discover renewed patterns of faithfulness. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Personal Disciplines

*Put these things into practice, devote yourself to them,
so that all may see your progress (1 Tim. 4:15)*

Fundamental rhythms and patterns of pastoral life – often called practices of faith, spiritual disciplines, or exercises in piety – are designed to reshape us. Sanctification, growth in holiness, is the work of the Holy Spirit. The experience of Christians over the centuries shows us that personal disciplines of faith become instruments of the Holy Spirit. Disciplines open up a space in which we become aware again of God’s great mercy, leading us to respond in gratitude and to recommit ourselves to lives of righteousness before God.

If we want to remain rooted in our baptismal identity, true to our ordination vows, and open to the Holy Spirit,

- we will commit ourselves to regular, daily devotional practices, alone or with others.
- we will commit ourselves to regular opportunities for growth in theological and spiritual health.

Pastors’ devotions are formed around reading and meditating on Scripture, praying, and reading and reflecting on great Christian theological and spiritual literature. We all know this, but do we do it?

Read Scripture.

Presbyterian Panel research indicates that few pastors read the Bible devotionally on a regular basis. While we do read Scripture as we prepare to preach and teach, we often neglect listening for God’s word to us personally. Apart from preparation for preaching and teaching, we read Scripture sporadically and according to no particular plan. Little wonder that our efforts do not sustain themselves.

Examine your own Bible-reading habits. How much time do you make for God to speak to you through Scripture, nourishing your faith and life? Do you long to be more faithful? We all want to say “yes,” deepening attentiveness to God’s word.

Two principles can guide us:

1. Select daily Scripture passages according to a plan, reading from both the Old and New Testaments.

- You may read from a lectionary that offers Old Testament, Gospel, and Epistle readings each day. These lectionaries ensure coverage of the Bible's breadth of narratives, promises, and exhortations. They also place us in the company of a larger community of faith with whom we read the Scriptures together, even when we are by ourselves.
 - You may read through books of the Old and New Testaments from beginning to end (*lectio continua*) in order to keep larger themes and patterns of those books before you.
 - You may use a devotional guide that selects readings for you and offers brief meditations on them.
2. Set aside a regular time and place to read and meditate on Scripture.
 - You may shape time and place by daily and weekly rhythms.
 - You may read and meditate by yourself, or with your spouse, your family, a friend, or a small group.
 - You may gather regularly with a group of elders or members of a Bible study group in the congregation.

Whatever plan you use, it is important to make a regular time to listen to the text as God's living word, and to discern what God is saying to you personally.

Pray.

Pastors regularly pray in worship, in hospitals, at church luncheons, and other public settings. But we do not always have a disciplined approach to our personal prayers. Prayer easily becomes a professional duty rather than a way of life.

Examine your own practices of prayer. How often do you pray? What do you include in your prayers, and what do you neglect to mention? We all want to deepen our prayer life.

Two principles can help:

1. Select good models of prayer that help you grow in your prayer life.
 - Learn to pray the Psalms, praying through the psalter or using a lectionary's psalms for the day. The psalter has been Israel's and the church's prayer book from the beginning. Reformed Christians in particular have been shaped by praying and singing the psalms. The Psalms shape all of our praying by expanding the range of our adoration, confession, thanksgiving and intercession. They also remind us that we pray with the whole church through time and space, even when we pray by ourselves.
 - Pray for your congregation, elders, colleagues in ministry, your presbytery, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and sister churches across the globe.
 - Use the appointed prayers for each day in a prayer book or worship book (such as the daily prayer portion of the *Book of Common Worship*, which offers prayers for each morning and evening of the week). These prayers call us to concerns of the larger church that we easily forget, and repeating the same concerns week after week helps to internalize them.
2. Set aside a regular time and place to pray.
 - It may be as you first wake up and are still lying in bed.
 - It may be at the end of the day before you go to sleep.

- It may be at the beginning or end of a meal.
- It may include gestures that help you to make space for prayer, such as kneeling, making the sign of the cross, folding your hands and bowing your head, or lifting up your hands and head.
- It may be alone or with others.

Regardless of how you pray, what matters most is that you pray the prayers that the Holy Spirit prays through you for your own life, including its connection to those around you in church and world.

Read theological and spiritual literature.

Most pastors have a wealth of classic theological and spiritual literature on their bookshelves, but many of us have not opened them since seminary. Pastors have copies of the *Book of Confessions*, but too often we treat the confessions as museum pieces rather than words of wisdom that call us into prayerful meditation.

We know that we need help from the wider church if we are to grow spiritually, for we are not wise enough to make sense of Christian faith and life on our own. We need more than books on church management or new social trends, as important and helpful as they are. We need nourishment for our minds and souls.

Examine your own reading habits. Are you regularly drawing from the treasures of the church's greatest thinkers, teachers, and guides?

Two principles can help:

1. Read the church's theological and spiritual classics regularly.
 - You may read the creeds, confessions, and catechisms in *The Book of Confessions* according to a schedule (such as that provided by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s Company of Pastors), reflecting on how these confessions guide our reading of Scripture and challenge us to give account of our faith today.
 - You may read several significant books on a particular topic such as Trinity, Christology, salvation and sin, science and theology, medical ethics, and ecclesiology.
 - You may read through Calvin's *Institutes* in a year, or even Barth's *Church Dogmatics* at a measured pace over several years. Both of these theological giants wrote for the church and its pastors.
 - You may read volumes from a series such as *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, *The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*, or *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*.
 - You may read great novels, poetry, and essays that struggle with the deepest questions of human existence, and thus our lives before God.
 - You may read significant books and articles on the natural and social sciences that examine life and the cosmos.
2. Read slowly and deeply, differently from the way you read a newspaper or a committee report. Immerse yourself in the words, reading not only for intellectual content but also for growth in your living of the faith in prayer and action, word and deed. Reflective reading requires us to be disciplined and to set aside time and space.

- You may close your office door at a set time each day, turn off the phone and the computer, and read and think for an hour.
- You may form or join a covenant group that reads in common and gathers for discussion that will broaden and deepen understanding.
- You may share insights from your reading with the session.
- You may make use of an on-line reading program that includes a chat room.
- You may keep a journal of your reflections.

Attend to theological and spiritual health.

Daily rhythms of Scripture reading, prayer, and theological reading are strengthened and complemented by practices that take place on a weekly, seasonal, or annual basis. Weekly Sabbath-keeping is especially important. Other key disciplines include participating in a theological reflection group, making good use of study leave, caring for your body, honoring commitments to others, preparing to lead worship, examining your call to ministry, and confessing sin.

1. *Keep Sabbath.*

Pastors understand Sabbath-keeping in two senses. We know that we need regular time to rest and refresh. We also know that we need regular time to focus on God. These two concerns sometimes intersect, but they are not identical, and we should be attentive to both.

The problem is that pastors are easily tempted to think that our work is so important and our presence so indispensable that we cannot make time either for ourselves or God. Do you work unreasonable hours? Do you take on too much?

The Christian tradition includes practices that offer us guidance:

- *Make time for yourself.* Pastors need time to rest from their labors so that we may see and enjoy God's work in us. Reserve time to rest from your pastoral labors, enjoying family and friends, and reveling in the goodness of God's creation. You may protect time each day, or take a whole day each week to rest from labors. Pastors' Sabbath will not always take place on Sunday, for it is filled with church responsibilities. You also benefit from the longer periods of vacation and rest that are provided in your terms of call.
- *Make time for God.* Pastors need regular times during which all tasks and responsibilities are set aside so that God can speak and we can listen. Extended prayer, focused biblical and theological study, and intentional conversation are especially important ways to discipline our listening. Attending to great literature, art, and the sciences can also direct us to the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.

The challenge before us is breaking the cycle of endless work. Several possibilities help to ensure times of rest.

- You may set aside a twenty-four hour period each month for prayer, reading, and reflection, in addition to your daily devotions.
- You may make regular prayer retreats, listening for God's voice.

- You may ponder how the Lord's Day can truly be the *Lord's Day* rather than the busiest day in your week. Let your preaching and leadership of worship be characterized by the special joy to which God calls you on this day. Live more spontaneously, open to the Spirit's guiding, whether you spend time with your family, pray and read, or run errands.

A commitment to the Lord's Day includes a commitment to participate in Lord's Day worship as regularly as possible, even when we are not leading it and even when we are on vacation or at conferences or meetings that take us away from our congregations or make going to church inconvenient.

2. *Participate in a theological reflection group.*

Pastors know that we benefit from each other's insights into the Faith and the practices of ministry. We know that we need people whom we can trust to encourage us and hold us accountable. Yet our experience of theological friendship is sporadic, too often restricted to occasional conferences or retreats. We then fall back into neglect of theological work and trying to do ministry on our own.

Find or organize a group of pastors with whom to meet regularly to discuss key issues of faith and faithfulness. Communities of theological friendship can be shaped in many ways, and possibilities for sharing are endless.

- You may write about an important question of Christian life or doctrine, presenting what you have written to a group of colleagues as a basis for discussion.
- You may listen together to a theological lecture – live or on-line – and then discuss it.
- You may exchange and discuss the sermons that all of you preached on the previous Sunday, asking each other, "Did the congregation hear the gospel in this sermon?"
- You may ask each other for guidance on admission to Baptism or the Lord's Supper, pastoral care to those at the end of life, or other difficult pastoral questions.
- You may explore what you are doing to make new disciples.
- You may examine each other's efforts to teach the faith to elders and other church leaders.

3. *Take study leave.*

Presbyterian pastors receive two weeks of study leave each year as part of their terms of call. Yet too many pastors fail to take study leave, or use it for vacation rather than study, and too few presbyteries and sessions hold pastors accountable.

- Pastors are challenged to take seriously the church's provision for disciplined reading and reflection. Do not squander it.
- Presbyteries and sessions are challenged to hold pastors accountable for their use of study leave by asking for proposals, reports of learning, and plans for further exploration during the year ahead.
- Pastors, sessions, and presbyteries are challenged to plan and support sabbaticals that last for several months. Sabbaticals should center on prayer, engagement with Scripture, and disciplined reading and reflection.

4. *Care for your body.*

Take the time and make the effort to be as physically healthy as possible, so that you will be able to serve joyfully and energetically in your ministry. Pay attention to diet, sleep, and exercise.

5. *Honor commitments to others.*

Honor your commitments to family – spouse and children, parents and grandparents. In your service to the church, do not neglect the “little church” to which you belong by virtue of your personal relationships.

6. *Prepare to lead worship.*

Pastors make many practical arrangements for leading worship – consulting with musicians and other worship leaders, planning the order of worship, selecting hymns and prayers, writing and rehearsing sermons, and more. However, it is easy to neglect spiritual preparation for leading worship and for being a worshiper.

Preparation for every worship service should include both personal prayer and prayer with other worship leaders. Specific possibilities include arriving early for extended prayer at the baptismal font or communion table, and asking some elders to pray for leaders and the congregation throughout the worship service. Disciplined preparation for celebrating Baptism and the Lord’s Supper is especially important. Pastors take hours to prepare sermons, yet too many simply read sacramental liturgies from a book rather than prepare to lead congregations into deeper communion with Christ.

7. *Examine your call to ministry.*

Every pastor faces moments of boredom in ministry, and few pastors escape moments of conflict with a congregation. We sometimes imagine that boredom or conflict means that we are supposed to leave for another place of ministry. But boredom and conflict are inevitable parts of life. When they appear, they may present an important, even if sometimes painful opportunity to reflect again on whom God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do.

If you do not reexamine your call regularly you can become complacent, or discouraged by doubts about the effectiveness of your ministry. Seek out people who can help you reflect on your call, and assist you to focus time and energy on the heart of the pastoral calling – proclaiming the gospel of Christ by interpreting it faithfully in your preaching, teaching, and pastoral care.

8. *Confess sin.*

Make regular confession of sin. You join with others in general prayers of confession in Lord’s Day worship. In addition, you may seek out a person whom you can trust to hear your personal confession of sin. This person may be a spouse, a spiritual director, another pastor, or a trusted friend. Their responsibility is simply to witness to your confession before God and to assure you of God’s forgiveness.

The church calendar regularly calls us into seasons of self-examination and confession. Throughout the centuries, Advent and Lent have been distinct opportunities for Christians to draw back from “the way things are,” pray, fast, and examine their spiritual lives. Pastors find it particularly difficult to observe Advent and live a good

Lent in the midst of intensified church programming. We may be able to plan in advance of these seasons so that we, as well as our congregations, may receive blessings.

Personal Conduct in Ministry

*As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves
in all your conduct (1 Pet. 1:15)*

Personal disciplines of faith focus us on Jesus Christ and the way of life that he makes possible. As pastors, we are to display the character of new creation in Christ so that our ministry may be credible. When we cultivate virtues of personal integrity, generosity, and hospitality, we fulfill our ordination vow to seek “in [our] own life . . . to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love [our] neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world.”

The shape of the holy life is no different for pastors than for all other baptized Christians. But pastors have an especially visible role in the life of the church. Our way of life can display the shape of Christian living to our congregations or communicate that Christian faith makes no practical difference in the way life is lived. Our way of life can be one reason for the world to listen to our proclamation of the gospel or bring discredit to the church and its message.

The holy life cannot be reduced to an abstract formula. On the contrary, the holy life is embedded in our communion with the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and in our relationships with others. We are called to cultivate sensitivity to persons both within and without the church.

Attending to others

Individuals:

Pastors are to know and respect the individuals to whom we minister. You may ask:

- What do they think about?
- What do they care about?
- What do they hope for?
- What are their idols?
- What are their gifts and callings?
- What pressures and stresses do they live under?
- What temptations do they struggle with?

Congregations:

Pastors are to know and respect the character of the congregation in which we minister.

You may ask:

- Can I see more clearly how God has been at work in this congregation throughout its history?
- Can I avoid the tendency to impose my own hopes and fantasies on the congregation?
- Do I equip the saints for the work of ministry, build up the body of Christ, and lead the congregation to the unity of faith and the measure of the full stature of Christ?
- Will I regularly give thanks for the privilege of serving God and people in this place?

The world:

Pastors are to understand the culture in which we live, the society in which we minister, and the world for which we pray. You may ask:

- Have I learned to take an active interest in the dynamics of the social-cultural context within which I minister?
- Am I actively interested in events beyond my congregation and denomination, locally, nationally, and internationally?
- Am I alert to the missional imperative and to particular challenges both nationally and internationally?
- Do I struggle with what it means to be “in but not of the world”?

My ministry:

Ministry is not only a matter of intellectual content. The *way* in which we proclaim the gospel, administer the sacraments, and offer pastoral care also makes a powerful witness to the gospel. You may ask:

- Do I preach the gospel with conviction and clarity? Am I able to instruct and, if necessary, challenge church members who have embraced teachings contrary to the gospel?
- Does my worship leadership guide the congregation to a deeper experience of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen?
- Do I have the strength of character to make decisions that will be unpopular when I believe those decisions are faithful to the church’s teaching and liturgical practice?
- Do I nurture an evangelistic spirit? Do I preach, administer the sacraments, and offer pastoral care in ways that invite non-believers to discover life in Christ? Do I invite believers to rediscover their life in Christ, remembering that the church itself is always in need of conversion?
- Am I committed to collegiality, helping every believer to discover and use his or her gifts for ministry?
- Do I exercise my ministry in hope? – Hope in God’s power, despite my weakness . . . Hope in the gospel, despite the world’s resistance to it . . . Hope in the church, despite its failures.
- Do I demonstrate that I stand beneath the gospel? Do I show others that I have been convicted by the gospel, that my life is being reformed in accordance with it, and that I trust God’s power to establish the good news in my life and in the world?

My personal behavior:

The way in which we speak and act in public also makes a witness to what is good and pleasing to God. Your manner of life and the impression it makes on others is more than a private matter. In every area of life, pastors are to demonstrate moral and loving relationships, trust within the community of faith, and care for God’s creation. You may ask:

- Do I demonstrate integrity in all of my relationships?
- Am I sexually moral?
- Do I strive to understand and care for those with whom I disagree?
- Am I honest?
- Do I support the weak, the poor, the disenfranchised, and the ignored?

- Am I financially responsible?
- Do I seek peace, unity, and purity in my own life?
- Am I aware of how I present myself to others, and of how they perceive me?

Mutual Encouragement and Accountability

*If anyone is detected in a transgression,
you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. . . .
Bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:1-2a)*

*Whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death
and will cover a multitude of sins (Jam. 5:20)*

Pastoral concern to understand the dynamics of the congregations and societies in which we minister does not mean falsely accommodating or compromising the gospel. We are to recognize the scandal of the gospel as we live out our ministry. Proclamation of God's new Way in the world always elicits counter-pressure from the world, from the church, and even from ourselves. Expect conflict within yourself as you seek to be true to the gospel, for as Christ summons all to a new way of life, pastors may also resist new life, seeking comfort in the way things are.

The way of life shaped by this pastoral rule is too hard for any of us to sustain on our own. When we are honest with ourselves, we acknowledge that we need people who can encourage us and hold us accountable, just as they need us. But neither our society nor our church has taught us how to live in covenant relationships of mutual encouragement and accountability. On the contrary, we have learned to be suspicious of such relationships.

Power can be misused, and church leaders, seminary professors, and members of covenant groups have sometimes acted unfairly or even abusively toward those for whom they were responsible. But the absence of structures of encouragement and accountability is also disastrous, leaving pastors lonely and isolated.

Like all Christians, pastors are accountable to the Lord by virtue of our baptism. In addition, however, we have taken ordination vows that hold us accountable to Christ through the Scriptures, to the church's confessions, and to the church's polity. Yet these commitments remain abstract and mechanical unless they are embodied in structured relationships within the church.

Both Scripture and the Christian tradition teach us that it is a blessing for us to have brothers and sisters who care enough about us to offer us guidance and warning. It would be a blessing if the larger church asked us to submit to its wisdom. It would be a blessing to have leaders who would call us back when we are going astray and encourage us when we walk in paths of righteousness.

Where can pastors find such blessings today? The *Book of Order* and the church's councils may hold us accountable for grievous behavior, but are pastors ever blessed with ordinary, everyday discipline? Where do we find leaders who care enough to ask, "Have you been saying your prayers?" Who will inquire if we are reading Scripture not only to prepare sermons or teach Bible study classes, but also to place ourselves beneath God's Word of grace and judgment? Will anyone ask about the state of our theology or the condition of our soul?

Pastors are constantly pressed for time, so personal disciplines of faith easily slip away in spite of our best intentions. Congregations are constantly tempted to judge pastoral performance primarily in terms of programmatic, managerial, and entrepreneurial success. Short of illegal behavior, issues of personal conduct in ministry are too often ignored or excused.

Who, then, will encourage us and hold us accountable to the holy life, both for the sake of our own soul and the credibility of the gospel? Many presbyteries are ill-equipped to deal with matters of ordinary, everyday discipline, and even where executive presbyters understand themselves as pastors to the presbytery, they frequently stand under the same time constraints and managerial demands as pastors in congregations.

The difficulty that the church faces in creating adequate structures for mutual affirmation and admonition reflects our ambiguity about accountability; we resist it even though we know we need it. We want to be free agents, even though we know that our faith calls us to life together. At our best, we may be open to counsel and advice from like-minded brothers and sisters, but we cannot imagine a church that would ask us to obey it both for the sake of the gospel and our own wellbeing.

It is time for us to rediscover the evangelical truth that accountability to the gospel sets us free. It is time for us to submit to each other so that Christ may liberate us for faithful ministry. While some Christian traditions have abbots or bishops to exercise pastoral oversight, our Reformed tradition embodies a theology of *covenant-making*. We are responsible to each other, called to join together freely and joyfully in patterns of mutual encouragement and accountability.

I will seek out people who will covenant with me to encourage me in ministry, to hold me accountable to my practice of personal disciplines, and to help me maintain personal integrity in the conduct of my ministry.

- You may ask your spouse to be your covenant partner.
- You may covenant with a group of pastors to meet regularly and check up on each other's spiritual condition.
- You may find a trusted colleague in ministry to guide you.
- You may participate in the denomination's Company of Pastors, which encourages daily prayer, Scripture reading, theological study, and pastoral gatherings for reflection on ministry.
- You may meet regularly with a spiritual director.

The church's councils could also be of help.

- A presbytery could appoint one of its wise pastors to meet once a year with every other pastor to ask how he or she is doing with personal disciplines of faith and personal conduct in ministry.
- A presbytery could ask its pastors to commit themselves to a covenant group that meets for prayer, biblical and theological reflection, and discussion of issues relating to each member's personal disciplines of faith and personal conduct in ministry.
- An executive presbyter could meet regularly with pastors, one on one or in small groups, to discuss their spiritual wellbeing.

- A presbytery committee on ministry could expand its responsibility for caring for pastors by regularly meeting with them to discuss their ministry and call.
- A seminary could ask its students to begin these patterns of mutual encouragement and accountability as part of their theological training.

Thy Kingdom Come

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts . . .

Teach and admonish one another in all wisdom . . .

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col. 3:15-17)

Jesus sent disciples to proclaim that the kingdom of God is at hand. Jesus continues to send disciples today. Will we be worthy servants? Will we preach with power and authority? Will we call the world (and the church and ourselves) to repentance? Will we offer the world (and the church and ourselves) signs of the new life in Jesus Christ?

As members of the Office of Theology and Worship's Re-Forming Ministry Initiative, we believe that Jesus is calling the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its ministers to renew their commitment to personal disciplines of faith, holy conduct in pastoral ministry, and covenants of mutual encouragement and accountability. If our work speaks to you, and if you see the life-giving value of *A Pastoral Rule*, we ask you to join us in living it out.

But before you commit yourself you must know that *A Pastoral Rule* cannot be layered on top of all that you do now. Perhaps you are persuaded of the value of the Rule's practices, and wish to begin them in your life. If so, you must stop before you start.

Stop your usual routine for a day, or better, for a weekend or week. Be alone for some of the time, confessing your inattention to the invitation of God, and seeking God's mercy. Ask for God's grace to help you keep new promises. Spend some time with your spouse or with theological friends to pray, plan your practices of the Rule, and commit all your hopes and plans to God.

Stop specific time and energy consuming practices that will compete with your new covenant. Know that changed patterns of ministry will not be welcomed by all. There is a cost to be paid for the renewal of your life.

Stop listening to all the voices that clamor for your attention. Listen instead to God's voice in Scripture, to your voice in prayerful reply, to the voices of those who have lived and died the Faith before you, and to the voices of those with whom you hope to covenant. You are not alone.

Jesus encouraged his disciples and held them accountable. The risen Christ continues to offer us encouragement and accountability. Here we find blessing. Here we find our true pastoral vocation.

Jesus proclaimed the good news of God, saying,

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near.

Come, follow me."