

# Summer 2006 Pastoral Letter

August 2006

Dear Trinity Presbyterian Church family,

Grace and peace to you all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ! We are long overdue for another pastoral letter. There are a number of things to cover in this communication, including the expansion of our diaconate, the introduction of our new constitution, our formal and full membership in the CREC, and the establishment of our local and global mercy and mission committees. Many of these things you have already heard about in bits and pieces, but this is a chance to be more comprehensive. I know this is a long letter – but bear with me, as we have some important matters to discuss.

## The Expansion of the Diaconate

God has already blessed us with many well qualified and diligent officers. But as we continue to grow in both size and vision, the need for more officers arises. Thus, as was recently announced, the session has nominated Jed Park and Ryan Nash for the office of deacon. We feel very good about the prospect of adding them to our diaconate. As you will see below, it is our desire to radically upgrade our community involvement and commitment to service as a church body; adding these two men will help us towards that end.

Jed has been a servant among us since his family first started attending TPC. As a commercial real estate agent, Jed has also been a tremendous help with our church's property issues. He has already been ordained as a deacon in a PCA church so he has experience in this role. He is well equipped to serve in TPC's diaconate. The same can be said of Ryan. As a palliative care physician, Ryan's entire vocation is based on extending compassion to those in need. He is very aware of mercy needs and opportunities in the Birmingham area. Like Jed, he is a gifted and dedicated servant in our church body. Both of these men are deeply respected in our church family and the wider community, their households are in good order, and they are exemplary in their hospitality. If you have questions about them or for them, please talk to these men or to the elders.

Ryan and Jed are scheduled to be interviewed/examined by the session on September 9. They are scheduled to be on the ballot for election in a congregational meeting on October 1. Please pray for the entire process.

## The Ratification of Our New Constitution

As part of officially joining the CREC in mid-October, we need to ratify a new Constitution. The elders plan to have a draft of the Constitution

finalized for presentation and distribution to the congregation by September 10. We are scheduled to vote on it in our October 1 congregational meeting. That should give us ample time to deal with any questions you all may have about the document and how we will implement it.

For the most part, the new Constitution will continue with our current procedures. But there are a handful of changes you need to be aware of. Let me explain some of them here.

First, we will be adopting a Book of Confessions. The Westminster Standards (Confession of Faith and catechisms) will still be our primary doctrinal standard and the “system” our officers subscribe to when they take their ordination vows. But the Book of Confessions gives us a way of acknowledging the church’s wider tradition in a greater way. It gives us a larger and more diverse body of truth to draw from in teaching, preaching, and catechesis. We will include the ecumenical creeds of the early church (such as the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed – all of which are used in our worship), several Reformed confessions and catechisms (to connect us with other branches of the Protestant Reformation), and a few modern documents. We hope this collection of confessions will help us build unity with other Christians and other churches, as we strive to overcome the arbitrary walls that inevitably accompany our current denominational system. It is a way of breaking through Reformed sectarianism and honoring our fathers in the faith. It is a demonstration of what we mean by “Reformed catholicity,” which is one of the major planks in TPC’s vision.

Second, membership and voting requirements remain essentially the same. We will continue using the same procedures for joining the church and the same membership vows. Electors (those who may vote in congregational meetings) will be communing members age 16 and above, as before. It will now take a two-thirds vote to pass any motion (as opposed to a bare majority). Releases and transfers of membership remain basically unchanged. We were already operating under the credocommunion/paedocommunion cooperative agreement that the session adopted last summer (<http://www.trinity-pres.net/communion-agreement.php>); the Constitution simply incorporates the essence of that document. Thus, parents, under the authority and oversight of the session, determine when their children come to the table, whether they have paedocommunion or credocommunion convictions. We also have a provision for associate membership, for college students and others who are in Birmingham on a short term basis and want to be a part of TPC, but desire to maintain full membership in their home church.

Third, the polity of the new Constitution is more faithful to classic Presbyterianism. Following John Calvin, John Knox, and the early Puritans, we acknowledge three types of Ministers of Word and Sacrament: Pastors, Teachers, and Evangelists. Of course, we will also continue to have ruling elders and deacons. The Constitution spells out election procedures and vows, which all remain much as they were before. Rather than having set times for nominations, candidates for office may be nominated at any time, from the congregation or the session. The various responsibilities for these offices as outlined in the Constitution are largely derived from the Westminster “Form of Government” which was produced to accompany the Westminster Confession and catechisms

(see <http://www.apuritansmind.com/WCF/FormPresbyterianChurchGov.htm> ). You can also consult my paper on the office of church teacher: <http://horns.org/justmark/archives/teaching%20office.pdf>.

One slight change in polity regards the institution of the office of deaconess. I say “slight” because under the PCA Book of Church Order, we had something very close. In 9-7 of the PCA BCO, provision is made for the session to appoint women who will assist the deacons in their work – basically, an auxiliary female diaconate. Our Constitution makes provision for deaconesses based on biblical and historical grounds. Biblically, we find that women were set aside to assist the priests and worshippers at the tabernacle (e.g., Ex. 38:8; Jdg. 11:34-40). These women were not priestesses, but helpers and servants to the community. In the New Testament, we find women called to a position that is roughly the feminine counter-part to the diaconate in texts like Romans 16:1 and 1 Timothy 3:11. The passage in 1 Timothy is important, since a reference to “the women” is thrown into the middle of a list of qualifications for deacons. Some have suggested this is a reference to deacons’ wives, but that is quite unlikely given that no other offices include qualifications for wives. It seems, rather, that Paul has in view a female auxiliary to the male diaconate. Because of the nature of their ministry, these women need to meet certain qualifications.

Our Constitution will be very explicit about the role of women in the church. Men and women are equally made in the image of God, equally fallen in Adam, and equally redeemed in Christ. But men and women are different, and are called and equipped to serve in the family, church, and world in different ways. There were no priestesses or women elders in old covenant Israel, and the coming of new covenant did nothing to overturn the basic pattern of male headship in the home and male leadership in the church. Hence, we do not have women pastors or rulers in the church. But we do

find that women are put into designated positions of service that do not involve public proclamation of the Word and administration of the sacraments in a liturgical assembly. This position of service has historically been called “deaconess” in the church. Indeed, Phoebe, a woman, is identified as a “deacon” of her church in Romans 16:1. In several other places, Paul and the gospel writers acknowledge the importance feminine ministries in the church. We want to follow that example.

In the early church, in both its Eastern and Western branches, there was an order of women called “deaconesses.” These women primarily carried out a ministry to other women in need. At the time of the Reformation, Calvin and some of the other Reformers were open to various sorts of female deacons (especially widows, per 1 Timothy 5:3-16). Several of the more prominent Westminster divines (the authors of the Westminster standards) favored the creation of a female diaconate in the church. Later Reformed theologians such as B. B. Warfield were proponents of an office of deaconess. Several conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches today make use of a female diaconate as well.

Of course, there are also practical, prudential reasons for the office of deaconess. I would go so far as to say that every healthy church *de facto* has deaconesses, whether acknowledged or not. Who makes meals, more often than not, for the sick or needy? Who does the most work caring for the children of the church? Who helps most effectively in crisis pregnancy situations? Who can best care for orphans? Who best trains younger women as wives and mothers? Women, of course. Indeed, many forms of ministry to women can *only* be carried out by other women. Thus, deaconesses are a practical necessity. It is good and fitting for the church to recognize specially called and gifted women in this way. (Our dear “Aunt” Betty Douglas would have been the perfect candidate for this office were she still with us on earth.)

Since the office of deaconess is relatively unknown today in Southern Reformed and Presbyterian circles as our own, this aspect of the Constitution may lead to a lot of questions. As always, we can discuss them in the usual venues, such as the “Forums” page on the [www.trinityconnection.net](http://www.trinityconnection.net) website, as well as by phone, email, and in person. We may also devote some teaching time to this topic soon, either by way of sermons or Sunday school lessons. For those of you who would like to do some research on your own, I would recommend a few resources. The Anglican Mission in America (a conservative Anglican group, under the oversight of orthodox African bishops) has produced the

best study report on this topic. It is available

here: <http://www.theamia.org/files/WOMEN'SORDINATIONSTUDY.pdf>.

This report denies that women should be ordained to pastoral offices, but demonstrates the propriety of female deacons. PCA Pastor Phil Ryken gives some helpful thoughts

here: [http://www.tenth.org/fileadmin/files\\_for\\_download/Pdf\\_articles/Qualifications\\_of\\_Deacons.pdf](http://www.tenth.org/fileadmin/files_for_download/Pdf_articles/Qualifications_of_Deacons.pdf) . You can also consult my paper, "Women,

Ministry, and Liturgy," available here: [http://www.trinity-](http://www.trinity-pres.net/essays/women-ministry-liturgy.pdf)

[pres.net/essays/women-ministry-liturgy.pdf](http://www.trinity-pres.net/essays/women-ministry-liturgy.pdf). (Pages 16, 41-2, 78 are

especially relevant to the topic of deaconesses.) I think if you look at this

issue carefully, you'll see that we are striving for a biblical balance. We

desire to do justice to the gifts and calling of women to service in the

church. But there is no slippery slope here into feminism or egalitarianism.

All the necessary safeguards are in place to continue recognizing the

distinctive roles of men and women.

One more note on this topic. This provision for deaconesses in our

Constitution does *not* mean that we will immediately begin having

deaconesses. The Constitution does nothing more than give us the option

to fill the office if and when a willing candidate is nominated, called, and

elected. My hope is that in the future God will give us more "Aunt Betty"

types who will be perfect for this office in the congregation! But the

Constitution does not *require* us to fill this office; we can do that as God's

calling becomes evident. (The same is true of other specialized offices

included in the new Constitution, such as teacher and evangelist.)

Fourth, the Constitution seeks to be eminently pastoral in tone. You will see

this especially in the sections dealing with charges brought against officers

and procedures for church discipline. From my studies of church history

and my own experiences working in the church, I would suggest that

having technically correct judicial procedures are no guarantee that

pastoral and disciplinary matters will be handled with appropriate love and

gentleness. Of course, writing those virtues into a Constitution does not

ensure that they will be practiced either! But at the very least our

Constitution will serve as a constant reminder to both TPC's members and

officers that we are obligated by the grace of the gospel to be gracious

towards one another in every facet of church life. I hope our Constitution

will be an aid in our desire to develop a community of mercy and charity. I

hope we will also put the demands of relationships above any desire to do

things in a "technically correct" procedure – though I certainly recognize

there need not be a dichotomy there. Our Constitution emphasizes the

centrality and primacy of the "law of love" in every aspect of our church's

community, especially in the way we deal with one another's sins and shortcomings.

Fifth, while the session still wants to discuss the issue, the proposed Constitution includes provision for male officers who are not Ministers of Word and Sacrament (that is, ruling elders and deacons) to administer the Lord's Supper in the absence of the pastor. This is a bit more flexible than the PCA BCO, which makes no such allowance. This would allow TPC to still celebrate the Lord's Supper when I am out of town, even if a Minister of Word and Sacrament is not brought in as my substitute.

As stated above, the session should have a "final" draft of the Constitution ready to present to the congregation on September 10. We will devote at least one or two Sunday School classes to going over its content so that you will be able to get your questions answered and cast an educated vote on October 1. *Please* do not be shy about asking questions.

### Formal CREC Membership

Ratifying the Constitution is one of the last steps in the process of our becoming a full member of the CREC. In mid-October I will go with one other elder to Lancaster, PA. At that presbytery meeting, we hope to be received as a member church.

Our church had been sponsored by Ancient Hope Church in Los Angeles, CA. Due to a variety of unfortunate circumstances, Ancient Hope had to disband this summer

([http://bbonecutter.typepad.com/the\\_boneman/2006/07/the\\_end\\_of\\_a\\_ch.html#comments](http://bbonecutter.typepad.com/the_boneman/2006/07/the_end_of_a_ch.html#comments)). However, that opened the door for the nearest CREC church to become our sponsor – Christ Church in Branchville, pastored by Joe Thacker. While we regret not getting to work with Ancient Hope, we are excited about deepening our relationship with Christ Church. We will be in good hands with Joe and his elders overseeing our candidacy.

Please pray this entire process proceeds smoothly.

### Two New Mercy and Mission Committees

As I have noted before in my preaching, the pattern of the kingdom of God includes both word and deed ministry (Mt. 11:1-6). It is not enough to announce and proclaim the kingdom of God; we must enact and embody it in the way we live towards one another and the wider world. To that end, the session is forming two new committees, a "Local Mercy and Mission Committee" (LMMC) and a "Global Mercy and Mission Committee" (GMMC). Before entering into the specifics of the work of each of these committees, let me explain how the session desires them both to function.

These committees arise out of our desire to be a church that manifests the mercy of God. Our exercise of mercy towards others is founded upon God's mercy towards us. Having been shown mercy through the incarnation and cross of Christ, we long to "incarnate" the mercy of the cross to those in need around us. A lot of mercy ministry is organic – it arises as we seek to meet the needs of friends, family, and fellow church members who we come into contact with on a regular basis. This happens through already existing relationships, with no formal programs or structures needed. But we also must be intentional about seeking out those who are in need, even as Christ sought out the lost in order to rescue them. In our cloistered, comfortable lifestyles, many of us could easily avoid others in need almost completely. That is not acceptable. The church is called to minister the grace of Christ, especially to "the least of these" – even if we have to go out of our way to find them.

We are not discouraging or discounting the organic mercy ministry that has already been taking place in and through our congregation. Nor are we suggesting that programmatic forms of ministry that wear the "TPC" badge are more important. We want you to continue ministering in all the ways you have been – even when those forms of ministry are linked with other churches or para-church agencies outside of TPC. But these committees will serve as a way to pool our resources and coordinate our interests so that we can (Lord willing) be more effective. Those who serve are more blessed than those who receive service, so we need to pursue avenues of sacrificial giving for our own good as much as anything else. As we minister the mercy of Christ, we grow towards maturity in him.

We fully recognize that people pass through different stages and seasons of life, and service will take different shapes accordingly. Thus, we are not trying to shoehorn everyone in the congregation into one particular way of serving. Further, mercy ministries should never detract from our callings in the world and family. Indeed, it is our hope that our efforts at organizing mercy ministries more formally will actually strengthen families as they learn to serve together as much as is feasible. Ministry should be a "family affair" whenever possible.

These committees will have "free form" membership – that is to say, you can participate as much as you would like in the work of these committees. There is no appointed, standing membership. Rather, the committees will be constituted organically by those within the TPC body who choose to be a part of them. Everyone is invited. This is primarily because we want people to join in the work of these committees as they desire and are led by the Spirit, not as they are hounded by the elders into a guilt trip. If you'd like

to be involved, you can simply email the committee leader(s), and you'll be added to an email list that will keep you updated on meetings, events, and opportunities, as well as providing an avenue for brainstorming and discussion.

These committees do *not* exist to create a layer of bureaucracy or red tape -- just the opposite, in fact! These committees exist solely for the purpose of encouraging and stimulating the involvement of our members in mercy and mission work. You've heard my philosophy of ministry motto on several occasions: "It's easier to ask forgiveness than permission." You can engage in mercy and mission work *without* going through these committees. You never need a note from your elders or the approval of a committee to do good deeds! But these committees are a way for people to team up with one another, to find out who might have the same interests in mercy and mission projects, to uncover connections and relationships that would allow us to make inroads into the community or across the globe with the gospel, to organize willing volunteers, and so forth. So, for example, suppose God lays on your heart a desire to minister to the elderly. You could begin to make visits to a local nursing home on your own to talk and pray with the folks there. That would be wonderful. But, working through the committee, you might be able to get enough people together to do an evening vespers service with singing and fellowship on a monthly basis. Or suppose you'd like to go on a short term mission trip. The committee could help with planning, fund raising, gathering supplies, prayer support, etc., so that you don't have to do it all alone. Our goal is to help, not hinder, the work of the church.

We envision these committees having occasional meetings for dialogue, encouragement, and prayer. Perhaps books and articles will be shared and discussed. The committees will also facilitate discussion via email and possibly use the forums on the [www.trinityconnection.net](http://www.trinityconnection.net) page. *Ultimately, the point is to organize and implement ministries of mercy through our body.* Much of the initiative rests with you all. Essentially, these committees will become what you, the members of TPC, make them to be. The purpose of church officers is not to do the work of the church exclusively, but to equip you all for ministry as well (Eph. 4:11-12). Our officers will strive to set a good example for the whole body, but their job is not to do all work. That, in a nutshell, is what these committees are about – making a way for more people to get involved and work together. It is axiomatic that in the kingdom of God, it is more blessed to give than to receive – Lord willing, these committees will help us to excel in giving ourselves away for the sake of the gospel.



We recognize that by contemporary standards, we are a relatively small church without an overabundance of financial resources. But that should not hinder us from ministering with joy and zeal to the world around us. Working together, with a division of labor and mutual encouragement, we can accomplish a great deal. We also hope these committees will open avenues to working with other faithful congregations, and thus build up the unity of the body of Christ even as we seek to reach the needy. If we are able to partner with other congregations, pooling gifts and resources, we will multiply our effectiveness many times over.

The heads of the committees will regularly report the work of their committees to the diaconate and session. This will enable us to more effectively work together and pray for the fruitfulness of our labors.

Where should you look if you want to study the theological and practical aspects of mercy ministry further? PCA pastor Tim Keller has written a helpful book entitled *The Call of the Jericho Road* that can serve as a helpful introduction. Also, I have written a paper entitled “Aiming at Shalom” that is available on the web:

[http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich\\_lusk/aiming\\_at\\_shalom.htm](http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/aiming_at_shalom.htm).

The Local Mercy and Mission Committee

The LMMC is headed up by Jerry Hampton (681-0063; jrh7864 @ yahoo.com) and Ryan Nash (335-1096; ryannash @ charter.net). Please contact them if you would like to join this group. This committee is focused on ways in which our church body can minister in word and deed to those who live in our geographic region, especially in the city of Birmingham and its surrounding suburbs. Ministries of benevolence can take a variety of forms, but the Bible seems to identify five basic categories of need that should fall within the scope of local mercy ministry:

1. The Fatherless (Ps. 82:3-4) – This would include work in crisis pregnancy centers, orphanages, foster child care, helping single parent families, “big brother and big sister” programs, tutoring kids at public and private schools (e.g., Restoration Academy), etc. Just as God has adopted us and made himself our Father through the promises of the gospel, so we should seek to represent God’s loving and faithful Fatherhood to the deprived and vulnerable. Our fatherless culture needs to see what true Fatherhood looks like. Our city is filled with single moms and their children who are very open to ministry from families who are more stable and whole.

2. The Poor (Lev. 25:35) – This area includes ministries such as hospitality, work in homeless shelters, soup kitchens (e.g., The Old Firehouse Shelter), faith-based assistance agencies and rehabilitation organizations, health

and dental care services, job and skill training, etc. Ministry to the poor in sacrificial love is an essential component of living out the gospel message. Jesus became poor in order to bestow his riches upon us (2 Cor. 8-9); by analogy, to the extent God has materially enriched us, we should be willing to share with those who have less (Jas. 1:27-2:17; 1 Jn 3:16-19). Our first priority is always to care for those within the household of faith (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37; 6:1-4; Gal. 6:10), but we must also show tangible forms of mercy to those outside the church, in conjunction with proclaiming the gospel to them. Acts of kindness to the needy are like a “theological polygraph” – they either confirm or subvert our professions of faith by their presence or absence (Mt. 25:31-46). If we are truly the people of God, we should be willing to live generously and sacrificially, for the sake of relieving suffering in the name of Christ (Dt. 15:7-8; Rom. 12:8).

3. Widows (Ps. 68:4-6) – This includes care for the elderly, such as nursing home ministries, yard work for invalids, hospital and hospice visitation (e.g., the Balm of Gilead – talk to Ryan Nash about this), meal deliveries, and so forth. With an expanding elderly population, many of whom have no loved ones who regularly visit them or care for them, this is a huge area of ministry. The Bible, in contrast to our culture, calls upon us to honor the aged in attitude as well as in more tangible ways (Mt. 15:1-9). While we acknowledge that families have a primary responsibility to care for their own members, including their elderly (1 Tim. 5:1-4, 8, 16), we know that this does not always happen, and many elderly in our area are left in need of love and encouragement as their lives draw to a close.

4. Strangers (Lev. 19:33-34) – This category focuses especially on ministries to immigrants, including hosting international students, helping teach English, fighting oppressive laws and social systems (Lev. 23:9), and others ways of extending mercy to cultural outsiders. It can also include ministering to those who have just relocated to the Birmingham area, helping them move in and get settled, showing them hospitality, and so forth. In this area of ministry we should take note of the expansive Asian population at UAB as well as the burgeoning Hispanic population in various parts of the city. God reminds us that we were once strangers and aliens until he brought us into his family (Dt. 10:12-22); thus, we should seek to connect Birmingham’s strangers and aliens with the love of God and the grace of the gospel. Many of the neediest and most disenfranchised people we will encounter are immigrants. They are also often the most open to turning to Christ in faith and repentance.

5. Prisoners (Mt. 25:34-36) – This includes prison Bible studies, helping those newly released from prison get back on their feet, and other similar

forms of ministry. The Bible emphasizes reaching out to saints in prison (Heb. 13:3). This is an obvious need when our brothers and sisters are incarcerated for their faith as a form of persecution. Thankfully, that is not what we face right now. But the call to take the gospel to prisoners has further applicability. Many men and women who are imprisoned for crime repent and turn to the Lord Jesus Christ for hope in the midst of their suffering and guilt. Many others in prison are broken people and have become open to hearing the good news of the cross. This is a field ripe for harvest – but the laborers are few.

Our goal is to develop or plug into fully functioning ministries in each of these areas, as the Lord's grace enables us.

The Global Mercy and Mission Committee

The GMMC is headed by David Smolin (871-6812; DAVDES @bellsouth.net). As a church, we want to be involved in the work God is doing in other parts of the globe. This desire arises out a belief that Jesus died for the world, and multitudes from every nation will stream into his kingdom as the gospel goes forth. Thus, we are compelled to play our part in the fulfillment of the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 – to baptize the nations and make them Christ's disciples, teaching them to obey all of his commandments. We believe the mission of the church is rooted in the mission of God himself – and through our labors, that divines mission is pushed our further and further. We are especially interested in the "New Christendom" trend – that is, the explosion of Christianity in the global South and throughout the so-called "third world." While the influence of the gospel is waning in the West at the moment, it is dramatically increasing in other parts of the earth.

The GMMC will serve at least two functions. First, this committee will act as a liaison with missionaries and mission agencies that we can partner with around the world. These relationships could blossom into full partnerships, including financial support, prayer updates, and other forms of cooperation. Second, this committee will work with our own members who desire to get involved in the spread of the gospel through short and long term mission projects.

If you want to get involved in the GMMC, please contact David.

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I realize this is a long letter – though it is still shorter than some other pastoral letters of note (such as Romans!). Let me bring these thoughts to a close with a word of thanks.

My family has now been in Birmingham about twenty-one months. It's hard to believe – it seems like we just got here yesterday! And yet we have

already seen so many manifestations of God's grace – believers struggling but winning in the battle with sin, families strengthened, hospitality extended and received, prayers offered and answered, healings granted, new babies born healthy and brought for baptism, adults coming for baptism and becoming part of the life of the church, an expanding ministry to college students, improved singing, glorious fellowship meals together, engagements and weddings, and countless other blessings. We have much to be grateful for, as all of these things are God's doing, not our own. We are hopeful he will continue to expand our vision and give us the grace to fulfill it.

Of course, we have had some setbacks as well from time to time. But even our trials are graces, as God uses them to further build us up into the image of his Son. How can we lose when even our sufferings are working for us an eternal weight of glory? Our God is good; he is continuing to build his kingdom in our midst, right before our very eyes. If and when trials come in the future, let us receive them with joy and faithfulness.

I am blessed to serve as your pastor. God has given us a godly and able group of officers (with more on the way, Lord willing) who are nothing but a delight to work with. God has blessed us by making us a happy and holy congregation – truly, a Spiritual family. We are a diverse community in many ways, and yet God has united us in the truth of the gospel. There is comfort and strength in such unity. Let us continue to labor together in the grace of the gospel in order that we might present one another mature in Christ Jesus (Col. 1:28).

Blessings,  
*Pastor Rich Lusk*