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Dear Brookhaven Presbyterian Church,

Over the course of the past year, we have endeavored to keep you informed about changes to our denomination’s polity last summer concerning the role of deacons. These changes put some of our practices in conflict with the denomination. We engaged in a series of meetings to answer questions and hear feedback in [September](#) (go to the 1hr 17min mark) and [March](#) and released a [statement](#) articulating many of our thoughts on women in leadership. We mentioned at that time that our intention was to engage our Presbytery with our suggestions for our internal organization that could provide a compromise between our practices and those of our denomination.

Our practices that we desired to ask for advice on were the following:

- With respect to our deacons, we have historically installed (not ordained or commissioned) both men and women deacons. We have done this out of both conviction that Scripture endorses women deacons and deference to our denomination which does not allow ordination of women to office.
- Though our practice with respect to our Elders and Women’s Council was not immediately affected by the denomination’s actions last year, we also submitted those practices to the committee for feedback. The practices of our Elders and Women’s Council have evolved over the twelve-year history of BPC, but we have always ordained our elders and installed our Women’s Council as a standing advisory committee of the Elders. In practice, since most decisions are made by consensus, and because our Elders long ago expressed its desire to have the Women’s Council in the room for all deliberations, this has meant that everyone’s (Elders and Women’s Councilors) voice has been heard (and unanimous) on all matters.

In a recent vote, it became apparent (in a healthy not hostile way) that we need a mechanism in place to address when the men as a bloc and the women as a bloc are voting differently. We also realized that while authority seems largely vested in a vote in our denomination’s polity, this is not the essence of authority in Scripture; rather, the identification of a vote with authority is more a result of Robert’s Rules of Order, the excellent 19th century parliamentary handbook that stipulates procedure in operations. Our Book of Church Order recognizes as such, as it withholds 1st Timothy 2 “authority” from women but allows female members votes at congregational meetings.

With this in mind, and realizing that our Women’s Council, while possessing significant influence in the deliberations of Brookhaven Pres, does not have standing to vote as officers in the PCA; but that our elders desired their express input both individually and as a voting bloc; our suggestion to the Presbytery committee was as follows: our Elders (men) would only take up matters for vote that had been approved by its standing advisory Women’s Committee. In this way, a difference of opinion between the men and the women as blocs would have a mechanism for coming to attention and conversation could continue for the men and women to seek to persuade the other group to take a matter up or vote it down should they not receive the desired outcome.

An alternate but related suggestion was that our Elders would, either once for all or once per year, make a motion that it would limit itself in decisions by the mutual consent of the men and the women; that is, that in their power the Elders declared that it would not pass any matter that did not have a majority vote of both bodies: a majority of the men and a majority of the women.

- We also indicated that we could potentially change our practices to include commissioning of women to their orders (Women’s Council and Diaconess). Historically Brookhaven Pres has utilized the category of commissioning as a complementary role to ordination to indicate God’s calling to women. This is why Beth Goss was commissioned as a Gospel Worker at BPC some years ago. Something like this seemed to us to be what was recommended by the 2017 Ad Interim Report on Women in Ministry Recommendation 7.
- It should be noted that while all of these suggestions may seem to some to be egalitarian practices, we think and are seeking them to be more robustly and fully complementarian practices.

Our intent was to receive from the committee one of three responses: the committee’s endorsement of our practices; the committee’s rejection of our practices; some other suggestion from the committee.

At the January stated meeting of Metro Atlanta Presbytery, a BCO 41-1 reference committee was created for the purpose of advising Brookhaven Presbyterian Church in this matter. The committee was comprised of Teaching Elder (TE) Aaron Messner (chair); Ruling Elder (RE) Jim Wert; TE Guy Richard; RE Matt Brittingham; and TE George Hamm. This represented a highly accomplished and ideologically diverse spectrum in our Presbytery. In accordance with PCA polity, this committee had no official authority; rather, it was/is advisory and offers pious advice. The committee does not speak for the Presbytery or the denomination; however, the advice of such a committee does carry significant weight.

Zach met with chairman Aaron Messner following the committee’s deliberations. He expressed that the committee’s recommendations were unanimous, and that they were as follows:

1. The purpose of the committee was to make suggestions on our practices, not to engage in theological discussion. Consequently, it was not their duty to respond to our church’s statement on women in ministry.
2. With respect to deacons, the committee recommended one of two options
 - Option 1: BCO 9.3 states that “if a church cannot find deacons *for any reason* it can... (emphasis added). The committee believed that this “*for any reason*” clause has a wide berth. It does not necessarily mean that the only reason a church might not have deacons is because of small size or lack of acceptable candidates. It could be the case that a church has a compulsion of conscience or an ecclesial circumstance that renders it wise not to have deacons (such as in our case). In this case, we could continue our practice of installing a diaconal board, but we would have to refrain from calling anyone by the official term “deacon.”
 - Option 2: Ordain male deacons and commission female deaconesses in accord with how we may structure our Elders and Women’s Council (see Number 4 below).
3. With respect to our Women’s Council, the committee affirmed the existence of a Women’s Council in principle.
4. With regard to our proposed practices, the committee had a critique and a suggestion:
 - Critique: The committee discourages either of the two structures we suggested based on the idea that the Elders (ordained officers of standing in the PCA) must have both final say and original jurisdiction. That is, they suggest it unwise at best and more likely procedurally impossible for the Elders to limit themselves by disenabling itself from superseding a subcommittee, i.e. requiring a subcommittee’s approval before it is able to take up business.
 - Suggestion: The committee’s recommendation for BPC is that, in order to maintain the mutualistic dialogue among the Elders and Women’s Council, we utilize the principle of BCO 20-5. BCO 20-5 is a section of our polity that provides guidance for how the moderator of a body treats a close vote. In a church where the highest goal is love and not coercion, and the rule of faith given by Christ is to lay down one’s life for the other, it is generally unwise to take action by virtue of a narrow majority due to the possibility of unnecessarily alienating the minority. In the case of BCO 20-5, this principle is treated with respect to the calling of a senior pastor of a church, and it reads as follows:

***20-5:** On the election of a pastor, if it appears that a large minority of the voters are averse to a candidate who has received a majority of votes, and cannot be induced to concur in the call, the moderator shall endeavor to dissuade the majority from prosecuting it further; but if the electors be nearly or quite unanimous, or if the majority shall insist upon their right to call a pastor, the moderator shall proceed to draw a call in due form, and to have it subscribed by them, certifying at the same time in writing the number of those who do not concur in the call, and any facts of importance, all of which proceedings shall be laid before the Presbytery, together with the call.*

The committee’s suggestion is that we insert similar language from BCO 20-5 into the bylaws of Brookhaven Presbyterian, to the effect that when it becomes apparent that the Women’s Council as a bloc is in opposition to the Elders, then the moderator (the Senior Pastor) shall endeavor to persuade the elders from prosecuting the matter further. The effect of such language would be to encourage greater consensus on a particular matter

5. Thus, the committee communicated that it wanted to: 1) affirm the voice of the Women’s Council; 2) affirm the vote of the Women’s Council; 3) preserve the PCA’s principle of male headship; 4) affirm and create space for BPC in our Presbytery.

We (the Elders and Women’s Council) feel cautiously optimistic at this potential path forward. On one hand, the Committee cautioned that there is never certainty as to any future changes in the denomination, and this Presbytery committee does not speak for the opinions or future actions of the entire Presbytery or the PCA. On the other hand, the high level of benevolence and goodwill from the committee toward BPC is quite evident. Thus, we have received this interaction with the committee with a high level of encouragement.

We will be working to carry out their suggestions. The specific changes to our bylaws require some work; we hope to have more details to share with you in the near future. **We are planning to have a Congregational Meeting on July 27 to answer any questions that you may have.**

Thank you to our entire congregation for your love, your discernment, your graciousness for one another, and most importantly for your prayer. It is not an easy thing to dwell in unity and community with others who have differences of opinion, but it is certainly a good and pleasant thing when it happens (Psalm 133). We pray for you as well, and that God would be glorified in us and our church, for BPC, Metro Atlanta Presbytery, and the PCA.

Please contact any of us with any questions you may have. We love to be with you.

With deep love and care,
Zach Bradley, Beth Goss, Evan Lowell; Caroline Antonio, Jonathan Baggett, Courtney Covert, Anne Marie Dine, Steve McGuire, Ken Webb, Yane Yoo