

The future of the PC(USA) is pastor-less, and that's OK.

A church can be viable without a pastor, writes Catherine Neelly Burton. Once we embrace this, churches can go about their work of being Christ's body.

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A church doesn't need to have a pastor to be a church. A church without a pastor is a viable church. This state of affairs is not a step down from being a "real church," whatever that means. Once we embrace this idea instead of trying hard to fix it, churches can go about their work of being Christ's body.

In Kansas, where I live, the present and future of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are churches that are led by church members. Many of our congregations in the Presbytery of Southern Kansas have no installed pastors and never will have them again. Ours is

not a reality to bemoan; it is one to recognize, adapt to and even celebrate. It's not that our churches do not like or want pastors. The fact is that pastors are not coming to these churches, so it's time to move on from that model.

This reality isn't personal. I like pastors. I am a pastor. My dad and two of my uncles are retired pastors. Lots of my friends are pastors. My presbytery has some incredible pastors. I'm for pastors.

Rather, my claim is grounded in incredible churches living as the body of Christ with church members leading the way.

In August 2023, *The Journal: A Civic Issues Magazine*, published by the Kansas Leadership Center, ran an article about rural attorney shortages. Titled "Rural Kansas Attorney Shortage Putting Access in Jeopardy," the article reports that of the almost 8,000 attorneys practicing in Kansas, 80% live in just 6 of the 105 counties of Kansas. That means 99 counties share 20% of the attorneys in the state. Populations are small in many counties, and phone and Zoom are viable forms of communication. But sometimes meeting in person is best, and driving to another town or county for legal services is cumbersome.

Such shortages affect more than the legal profession. Many small towns in Kansas are glad to have a town doctor, a physician's assistant or a nurse practitioner. City leaders intentionally recruit for these positions. States forgive medical school debt for those willing to serve in underserved areas.

If a town has trouble getting even one legal or medical professional to move there, then getting a PC(USA) pastor is low on its list of priorities. The good news is that a lot of our churches in southern Kansas want to live, so they have figured out how to do so without a pastor.

Case Study: Community Presbyterian Church in Chase, Kansas

In Chase, Kansas, the Community Presbyterian Church last had an installed pastor in the 1980s. Since then, leadership has been provided by a variety of part-time leaders, including a retired pastor couple, contract supply leaders, and retired and student pastors. Instead, in the 40 intervening years, the key leaders providing continuity in the Chase congregation have always been church members themselves.

The people in Community Presbyterian Church long ago realized that they were capable and qualified to lead their church. They knew the gifts and needs of the community.

Like lots of churches, for example, theirs did not have many children. They wanted more children to come to Sunday School and worship, so they invited children in the community. Very few children came. So the church pivoted and decided to host an after-school church event every Wednesday. It serves food after school, tells Bible stories, leads crafts and plays games. Now, between 10 and 20 children come each week.

In addition to receiving regular financial gifts, the Chase church is fortunate to have income from land that was given to them years ago. The community used this money to put an elevator in their building. They also connect with the public school's social worker to buy shoes for any students who need them. The church provides Christmas gifts for children in the community.

Then the Chase community decided to do more. When the little house next door to the church went on the market a few years back, the church bought it, gutted it, renovated

it and turned it into a food pantry. In a single month, the congregation serves about 20% of the town's population through the food pantry.

In his 2021 book *Reclaiming Rural: Building Thriving Rural Congregations*, Allen Stanton writes that churches in rural communities are uniquely positioned to make an impact, in part because of the math.

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Wichita far surpasses this threshold, and the impact of the Catholic Church is strongly felt in Wichita. No other church, denomination or faith group comes close.

My new experimental role

For 13 years, I served a congregation in our presbytery, but this past summer, I began a new call. I am now the mission and ministry connector for the Presbytery of Southern Kansas, an experimental position created in recognition of our reality. We do not have the budget to fund this position; we are spending our savings.

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live, so they have figured out how to do so without a pastor.

My job is to connect with our congregations, connect them with one another and offer equipment and encouragement for how they can continue to be the church. A lot of churchgoers are confused by my job. They ask, “What do you mean, ‘be a church without a pastor’? You mean that you’re their pastor?” Other people ask, “Are you a circuit rider?” I am not a circuit rider. When I explain this, the next question is sometimes, “Are you looking for circuit riders? Do you train them?”

It’s funny to me how many Presbyterians ask these questions. Presbyterians were never big on circuit riding. Circuit riding has a long and noble history, but it is not a Presbyterian history. The Methodists made circuit riding famous. They are the ones who tell stories about Francis Asbury riding 6,000 miles a year on horseback to share the Good News. The United Methodist General Conference is where they sing Charles Wesley’s hymn “And Are We Yet Alive.” The hymn’s first verse reads, “And are we yet alive, and see each other’s face?” These words can be interpreted spiritually, but they are often sung mindful of the circuit riders, whose ministry was dangerous and exhausting. Those circuit riders gathered at the early United Methodist General Conferences and celebrated that they were yet alive. Modern-day delegates sing these words in thanksgiving.

Presbyterians do not sing that hymn. Circuit riding isn’t in our DNA the same way. However, a group of churches in western Kansas created their own kind of circuit with church members. Three congregations – Lakin, Leoti and Tribune – have no paid leadership, PC(USA) or otherwise. Members of their churches, plus members of nearby Garden City Presbyterian, are part of a pool of preachers who take turns giving sermons in these churches. The preaching pool resembles a circuit between Leoti, in

Central Standard Time, and Tribune, in Mountain Standard Time. A preacher visits Leoti at 9:30 a.m. CST, preaches and does fellowship, and then drives to Tribune in time for Bible study and worship at 11 a.m. Mountain.

Unlike the attorney shortage in Kansas, which jeopardizes access to legal services, access to the gospel of Jesus Christ is not in jeopardy here. And access to the PC(USA) version of Christianity doesn't have to be in jeopardy if we can just change our thinking.

A church without a pastor?

A church doesn't need to have a pastor to be a church. A church without a pastor is a viable church. This state of affairs is not a step down from being a "real church," whatever that means. Once we embrace this idea instead of trying hard to fix it, churches can go about their work of being Christ's body.

The PC(USA) *Book of Order* (section G-1.0304) states that faithful church members have a responsibility "to be involved responsibly in the ministry of Christ's Church" and lists ways we can do this. The list includes "proclaiming the Good News in word and deed," "demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church," "responding to God's activity in the world through service to others," and "participating in the governing responsibilities of the church." A church where the members carry out these activities is a church, whether it has a pastor or not.

Yes, church members cannot do some things. That is where the connectional nature of our church becomes important. Empowering church members to lead congregations is one part of this connection work. Another part is connecting our churches to one another and to pastors. Churches need to know whom to contact with questions and to arrange things like baptisms, ordinations and installations.

This connectional work requires those of us who are pastors to embrace this new model of being church. Pastors are some of the hardest people to convince that a church does not need a pastor. But if we embrace it, we can learn from it. I find it inspiring to see people lead the church — and to know that people in those churches that currently have pastors can pivot to this model if necessary, too. This model is not about putting pastors out of jobs; it's about empowering and equipping disciples.

I know pastors today are stretched thin. The idea of engaging with another congregation (one lacking its own pastor) may feel like too much. For some it is. But others find learning opportunities in this model, as well as opportunities to connect congregations.

The *Book of Order* (section G-1.0101) also says:

“The congregation is the church engaged in the mission of God in its particular context. The triune God gives to the congregation all the gifts of the gospel necessary to being the Church. The congregation is the basic form of the church, but it is not of itself a sufficient form of the church. Thus congregations are bound together in communion with one another, united in relationships of accountability and responsibility, contributing their strengths to the benefit of the whole, and are called, collectively, the church.”

We can accomplish this for churches of all sizes and locations, but we have to want this model of church more than we long for the old way of doing things. The good news is that many of our churches are already doing this — in Kansas and likely where you are too. It is time to pay attention to the small and vital places where God is at work. It's time to offer training and to learn.

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