



Speaking Up
May 11, 2022
Rachel Yates

In Ecclesiastes 3, we read about the changing times, including “a time to be silent and a time to speak.” From a young age, we are taught to be sensitive to timing before we speak and to use our “indoor voice.” My 3-year-old grandson is learning this lesson:

“Hi Gee-Maw,” he whispered from the doorway. “Hi Greyson,” I replied.

“Oh,” he said, “I thought you were on your phone call. You’re not. I can be loud.”

As adults, we continue to learn this lesson. One of the items coming for consideration at our May 24 Presbytery Gathering is a change to our Manual of Operation that will clarify who has authority to speak on behalf of the Presbytery and for what purposes. Sometimes in our communities, circumstances make it appropriate for the Presbytery to speak. We offer words of comfort or condolence; we point out injustice and call for correction as disciples of Christ. We weigh whether the situation calls for a time of silence or a time to speak. We try to gauge whether we need to use our indoor voices – speaking only to ourselves – or to speak loudly – a voice in the community and beyond.

Because we all belong to the Presbytery – minister members and congregations – it is typically the case that only the act of the Presbytery assembly at a duly called meeting speaks with authority on behalf of us as a whole. In that gathering of the people, we attempt to discern the mind of Christ as a group. Individually we speak our opinions, and collectively we discern and decide. From time to time, the Presbytery assembly will decide to delegate some of its decision making – to delegate its voice – to a commission or person.

Even in the collective process, we recognize individual freedom of conscience. One of the foundations of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Constitution is that God alone is Lord of the conscience and that the rights of private judgment are universal and unalienable. Book of Order F-3.0101. Though we try to reach consensus, we may find ourselves in disagreement – unable to discern God’s will with unanimity. As a result, we acknowledge that there are truths and forms with respect to which people of good character and principles may differ, and we commit to exercising mutual forbearance toward each other. Book of Order F-3.0105.

So, there will be moments when we speak as one, and other times when we speak alone. The proposed amendment to our Manual of Operation helps to clarify which is which.

As our denomination’s General Assembly is getting set to meet this June, it will work within these same principles. Our commissioners, Carol Wickersham and Angela Madison, will strive to discern Christ’s mind for the church in committees and in the plenary. Stated Clerk Christian Boyd and I will help the assembly do its work faithfully and within the bounds of good process. Together the assembly will decide whether it is time to speak on hundreds of overtures, or whether we should remain silent. We will as a body decide whether to offer words of comfort or challenge for the church, our government, and the world. Please pray for their work that it might be done fairly, faithfully, and hopefully. Amen!