A Representative Assembly

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Our Presbyterian system is characterized by representative structure. We choose ruling elders to govern the local church. Representatives of the local churches meet in presbytery sessions. Not all communicant members serve on the sessions. Not all ruling elders are to be seated in any given session of presbytery. It is therefore reasonable that in the highest deliberative body of the Church a local congregation should not expect to have the same ruling elder representation it has in presbytery and that there should be minister representatives rather than for all ministers to sit in the Assembly. In other words, if the principle of representation is valid, it should apply at all levels in the government of the Church, and most of all at the highest level.

It is also true that there should be somewhat equal representation for ministers and ruling elders. Our pattern of church government was not designed to leave the rule to the clergy, but in the General Assembly that is about what happens. Ruling elders who attend the Assemblies are relatively few in number. Should there be an issue arise and an answer be proposed which seemed wise to every ruling elder present, it would still be the ministers who would decide the question.

More Ruling Elders

Now ministers have much to contribute to the government of the Church. Their knowledge of doctrine and ecclesiastical history and many other matters of great importance is doubtless far superior to that of the average ruling elder. But ruling elders who attend conventions have greater business sagacity, know much about human nature, and understand the mind of the man in the pew. Many questions are to be dealt with primarily through the application of good common sense, and in this commodity ruling elders are not exactly lacking.

A representative Assembly would do more than anything else to bring together a more even number of ministers and ruling elders and so to make possible the balancing of the viewpoints of pulpit and pew in the decisions reached. Moreover, elders in attendance would ordinarily not be from the same churches as the ministers and so would probably think and act more independently.

A Baptist minister remarked recently that the Baptist national convention system was to be regretted in that actions taken at any given convention represented in large measure not the judgment of the denomination as a whole but that of the churches in the geographical area in which the convention was held. So it is, though to a lesser extent, with our present Assembly system. For example, if the Assembly is held in the far west, the west coast churches are well represented, but if in the east, few of their ministers and ruling elders are able to attend. This should not be. A representative Assembly would correct the system, providing for proportionate representation, and we would have more the type of balance observable in the legislative branch of our national government.

More Effective Handling of Assembly Business

If we are to be proper stewards of the financial resources God has given us, we should seek economy in the cost of operating the business of the Church. With the present system of Assembly attendance, it is costing the Church (whether organization or individuals) far more than is necessary for efficient handling of the business to be transacted. Last year the Assembly roll listed 68 ministers, 23 ruling elders and 13 alternates.

We submit that half that number of commissioners, proportionately representing the presbyteries and the local churches, could have done the work of the Assembly and done it well. In fact, they might have done it even more efficiently and in less time. There is always a tendency for the efficiency of a deliberative body to be in inverse ratio to the number of persons constituting it. A small committee is generally more effective in discharging business than a large one, and everyone knows that ecclesiastical assemblies can reach the point in size at which they become unwieldy. Moreover, with increasing size there is increasing tendency for the planning and power to fall into the hands of a few. And who does not remember the complaint from weary Assembly commissioners when debate has continued ad infinitum on a particular subject that the continuing discussion may be explained by the fact that "although everything has been said, not everyone has yet said it!"

More Economical

When one considers the cost under the suggested representative Assembly plan, he may get the impression that the expense of such an Assembly would be prohibitive, but that is due to the details of that particular plan. We ought to be concerned with the total cost of getting 90 to 100 commissioners to an Assembly as over against getting half that number there. Someone has to pay the travel and lodging and meal costs, and it stands to reason that the entire cost would be cut approximately in two if there were only half as many delegates.

Not only should we be judicious stewards in avoiding unnecessary waste, but we do well to consider how much we need all the resources available within the Orthodox Presbyterian Church that we might bolster our work of foreign and home missions, meet the needs of our most important work in the area of Christian Education, and further the programs in each of the local churches.

Flexibility of Location

For purposes of economy we tend to schedule Assemblies more often in that part of the country in which we have the largest concentration of

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REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON A REPRESENTATIVE ASSEMBLY

I. The committee recommends that Chapter XI, Article 2 of the Form of Government be amended to read as follows:

The General Assembly shall consist of commissioners elected by the several presbyteries. Each presbytery shall elect one teaching elder and one ruling elder for each five hundred communicant members or major fraction thereof in the churches of the presbytery, as listed in the last published minutes of the General Assembly, and one teaching elder and one ruling elder for each ten teaching elders or major fraction thereof on the roll of the presbytery. It is to be understood that no presbytery shall be represented by less than two commissioners, one teaching elder and one ruling elder. Alternate commissioners may be elected at the discretion of the presbytery. The election of commissioners shall take place at the meeting of the presbytery immediately preceding the meeting of the General Assembly, unless the interval between the convening of the General Assembly is less than one month. In such case the election shall take place at the next preceding meeting of the presbytery. The General Assembly shall be responsible for the payment of the expenses of the commissioners, the basis to be determined by a standing committee of the Assembly. No alternate shall receive compensation if the principal commissioner has been compensated. The General Assembly shall be responsible to provide funds to compensate commissioners who need such compensation to permit them to absent themselves from their customary labor in order to attend the Assembly.

II. The committee recommends that the Assembly take action to erect the standing committee required by the proposed amendment to the constitution.

Paragraph III (not here reproduced) has to do with additions to the Standing Rules of the Assembly to provide for travel compensation for the commissioners, as well as the moderator and stated clerk of the previous Assembly, the chairmen of the several committee, and a member elected by a minority to present its minority report. Such expenses "shall not be paid in excess of seven cents per mile for distance traveled and ten dollars a day for living and food." Provision would also be made that the following shall be corresponding members unless they are serving as elected commissioners to the Assembly: the moderator and stated clerk of the previous Assembly, the general secretary of each standing committee, the several committee chairmen, a member to present any minority report, and all foreign missionaries here on furlough during the time of an Assembly.

Sign of Maturity

There was a time when the Church was in its formative stages and it was argued that the wisdom of every minister was needed at the General Assembly for the strengthening of the foundations and for the plotting of the path along which the Church should advance. A representative Assembly at that time might well have cut off the attendance of some ministers who had rich backgrounds of experience, who were fountainheads of knowledge, and who were gifted with wisdom. But now the Church has come to some degree of maturity. The foundations have been laid. If we are ever to walk on our own, we should be able to do so now. We have not just a few competent men. We have not just a handful who can speak from experience, knowledge and judgment. Few churches our size are as well supplied with trained, able ministers. There is no question but that half the number of commissioners, or even a smaller percentage, could execute the functions of the Assembly and do so commendably. Even now, if all eligible commissioners were to attend a given Assembly, there would be between two and three hundred in attendance — and that indeed would be too large a body to dispatch the business efficiently. The time has come for us to provide for an Assembly which will be truly representative.

The important action to be taken by the Twenty-eighth General Assembly is not necessarily that of adopting the specific plan recommended by the Committee appointed by the last Assembly but that of deciding to have some type of representative Assembly. The reasons are compelling. The need has been established. It is up to the Church to act!