

# FROM THE PASTOR'S PEN



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## WHEN YOU CALL ME, YOU CAN CALL ME TROY

This may be the most inconsequential newsletter article I have yet to pen, but I have a particular item on my mind – namely, the issue of a proper address. I have, admittedly, been ambiguous about it since I arrived, but that is because I was rightfully conflicted about it.

Now, you would think that such a discussion should be limited to Presidents and King and Queens. The individuals endowed or elected to such positions usually expect or demand that a proper address be given, “Mr. President,” “Your Highness,” “Your Excellency.” I fully understand that a title or a proper address demands a respect for the “office” so to speak, or acknowledges the “authority” that corresponds to the office, or the “prestige” that it accords.

Yet, even in many of the “professional” disciplines, titles and their corresponding authority are an issue of great concern. For them, a title demands and commands respect, authority, submission. Even in the course of my theological education, the address of “President Gillespie” or “Dr. Charry” was assumed practice of the academic ethos.

There were two exceptions though. One was the year I spent studying in Oxford, England – ironically the stuffiest academic place in all the world. Wycliffe Hall, at the time, was filled with remarkable scholars, yet they did not expect an address. For example, the principal was not Dr. McGrath, he was simply “Alister.” It was also “Graham,” not Dr. Tomlin. They were still teachers and scholars who earned our respect, nonetheless but they wanted to be treated as equals, colleagues in the ministry in which all believers were active. The second is that a friend of mine, a professor at a Presbyterian Seminary, requests that his students call him by his first name. Colleagues of his have a certain degree of consternation over his rejection of the “accepted” practice of this institution – but he really believes that he is an equal in ministry and does not need a title to daily pay homage to the degree that he earned.

Within the “pastoral” disciplines, there is wide-ranging debate on the address as well. Back in the day, the preferred

title was “The Very Reverend [Name],” only to be topped by “The Very Right Reverend,” and “The Most Reverend.” Today the title “Reverend” is still used in Presbyterian circles, the title “Father” is used by the Catholics, and “Pastor” is the predominant usage in most denominations. If a title is to be used, I prefer “Pastor.” But my preference for this address is that it be used in more formal settings.

In terms of actual duties, my ordination identifies me simply as an Elder, trained and educated to lead the church in Word and Sacrament – called to preach and serve communion and to baptize. That is really the only differentiating factor between me and any other ordained elder here [why I am required to go into educational exile for at least seven years is a topic for another day]. There are no Presbyterian Bishops – we are led, congregationally and institutionally by elders (elders ordained locally and elders trained to lead in Word and Sacrament). Yet, we don’t walk around calling people Elder Tom and Elder Bobbie.

So, as a general rule from my point of view, for the children, “Pastor Troy” is still quite appropriate, in that it is designating to them that I am fulfilling a particular function in the life of the church – just as an elementary teacher is called Mr. or Mrs. [Name]. However, as the kids move into high school and for all adults, to quote Paul Simon, “when you call me you can call me [Troy].” I am still the Pastor of the church, I will still sign our church stationary as Pastor of this church, I will still be introduced at various times and places as Pastor – however, I am merely Troy. “This is Troy Onsager, our Pastor” seems better to me. I am just a member of the team.

Though, if I request that you start calling me the “Very Reverend Onsager” you can rightfully assume I am displeased with you. Be forewarned ☺