

## Answers to GC Board Questions

Peter Buss Jr.

Dear GC Board Members,

Thank you for engaging in your important work of seconding the nomination from the Council of the Clergy for the position of Executive Bishop. It is useful to receive these questions as a part of that process. In answering them, I note something that you may have realized already—that there is overlap between your questions and what I (and presumably others) have shared in my “Approach to the Office of Executive Bishop.” I encourage you to read that statement if you haven’t already done so, as I do not see this set of answers as a stand-alone representation of my thinking. In certain places I will refer to sections in my clergy statement so as not to repeat myself.

### **1. What do you consider the greatest opportunities of the General Church organization today?**

My training in organizational theory and leadership leads me to view our church in terms of its core competencies, or what it does best, and to look at opportunities through that lens. The General Church has always been a group of people striving to rally around what they believe to be the revelation of the Lord’s Second Coming. I therefore see two vital resources within our care: the Word, and our people. Our greatest calling is to bring the teachings of the Word to the attention of as many people as possible, to the greatest depth possible. Our people are the means by which we deliver the message, or further the mission of the GC: *“To help people live a heavenly life through the teachings of the Lord God Jesus Christ in His Second Coming.”*

At a high level, then, our people are an “opportunity.” Speaking of pastors, teachers and other employees, investing in their success, giving them the tools and training they need, feeding them with ideas and energies of the broader membership, supporting their insights and creative ways of serving—all within the mission of the General Church—is where we should be placing the bulk of our energies. That extends to our volunteers too, who we know can have great impact in terms of serving and connecting with others around the central messages of the church.

There are some other opportunities visible to us. We are hard at work in Africa and Asia, and my sense is that we will see growth there, especially if we nurture it and work closely with leaders in those parts of the world. Another opportunity exists with technology. While this arena can be hyped too much, and we have yet to see significant transition from exposure to engagement via some newer online platforms, there is no question that technology affords an increasing array of channels to access the message of the New Church. We are wise to continue to explore these channels.

Beyond these two, I draw your attention to one comment I made in my clergy statement (on p.9), that leadership in part is about remaining open to opportunities yet unknown, ready to recognize them as such and embrace them when they come. None of us can predict the future, but with

clarity on why we exist and what we do well, we can make real-time determinations concerning what we should enthusiastically embrace.

## **2. What do you consider the greatest challenges to the General Church organization today?**

Contentiousness and culture come to mind.

Regarding contentiousness, I have come to believe that we have a propensity to “live in the fight” within the General Church. Most often that is around entrenched differences on the ordination debate. But it is not just that debate; we argue about the nature and appropriate use of the Heavenly Doctrines, what kind of growth is good growth, elements of the Holy Supper, and so on. Does that align to some degree with deep differences in worldview between “right” and “left” in the US and European countries? Perhaps, but I have not found it productive to explore down that pathway. Rather I believe that we are wise to consistently resist the urge to argue, looking instead for ways to work together. While there will always be useful reasons to stand up strongly for certain things, it is not healthy, in my view, for an organization to be in conflict as a consistent pattern. I find energy in striving to articulate the good things that we can rally around, or proclaiming the useful ways in which the General Church is helping people. If we could deal with our problems within that affirmative context or outlook, I believe we would have less contentiousness and more of a sense of collective pride in our organization.

Culture is a sensitive challenge to bring up. On the one hand, most people readily agree that the world we live in is increasingly distant from the vision of marriage presented in the Word. Gay marriage, living together outside of wedlock, gender identity, gender roles, and other such things are easy to identify. It is also true, at least in the US and Europe, that churches are not as central and accepted as they once were. I gave a presentation several years ago called “The Lord’s Vision and Our Reality: Problems Caused by the Gap.” In it I shared doctrinal and anecdotal evidence that the gap appears to be widening in many of the areas where the church is striving to serve. For myself, it feels harder than it did even twenty years ago to work with the truths of the Word without major cultural pushback. It may be easy to point to younger generations who appear less open, generally, to the messages of the Word than many of us would hope. I believe, however, that the issue of culture and doctrine is multi-generational, causing many people to doubt certain parts of the message of the New Church, or to question their personal adherence to the revelation that is our foundation.

Having said that, I have been challenged by those who say that culture isn’t always our enemy. It informs us about things that may need to change in our church. I accept that. I think, though, that we are wise to acknowledge that culture inherently isn’t coming from the Word, and therefore remain skeptical about what culture demands of the church—especially when it appears to go against clear teachings. I am an optimist, and I believe that there are people looking for more than what culture alone can deliver. The church, therefore, should continue to strive for a higher standard than even the best cultures. If we can dare to be counter-cultural where the Word demands it, then we have something powerful to offer that can lead people to more fulfillment than would otherwise be available to them.

**a. How would you prioritize them? b. How would you address each of them?**

In addition to what I have already said, one thing I believe could help is an effort to put forth a vision for the General Church that people can rally around. I do not see this as a charismatic, coalescing magical statement that solves everything. Rather it is intentional messaging around what the General Church stands for, and how we could bring that to life in the next few years. I see value in coordinated messaging around the essentials of the New Church faith. We could rally around the concept of *a useful life*, for example, in ways that invite people to opt in. Some could argue that that message is already out there, and I would agree. But not perhaps in the intentional way it could be.

Other than that, I stand behind some of the important strands of the current GC strategic plan—aiming for consistent energy into communication and engagement.

**3. What additional leadership roles do you envision for women, how would you implement this vision and in what timeframe?**

I believe I have answered this question in my clergy statement, beginning on the bottom of page 5. To that I would add two conceptual considerations.

The first is that the church has a feminine representation in the Word. It is the “bride adorned for her husband” (Revelation 21:2, *Apocalypse Revealed* 813, 881). Jerusalem many times is referred to in the feminine (Isaiah 40:2, 62:1; Ezekiel 5:5, Matthew 23:37, *Arcana Caelestia* 4434:6). The west window of the Bryn Athyn Cathedral has five figures representing the five churches that have existed over the course of history. The symbol for the New Church is a woman.

From a doctrinal and an experiential perspective, this makes sense to me. When I was serving as a pastor, we used to talk about the congregation as a spiritual home. We wanted people to feel a sense of belonging. We articulated one of our core values as “Building a sense of community within which people are welcomed, cared for, and supported on their spiritual journey” (Glenview New Church). To me this stated goal aligns beautifully with passages we have about women’s God-given strengths being in the realm of love (CL 66, 223), perception/people sensitivity (CL 168, 48), marriage (CL 209, 222-224), family (CL 393), and warmth (CL 88). As articulated in my clergy statement, I yearn for us to draw more effectively on these strengths in the church, and to honor more intentionally the ways we already do. As always, there is a shared responsibility with men of creating a welcoming community. I am drawing attention here to the gifts that women have been given in this regard and asking the question of how we might welcome their influence more fully.

A second conceptual consideration I would offer is that of equality. In my many conversations with people around the topic of gender within the church, most people acknowledge that the Word presents a beautiful vision of equality between men and women (even though some argue that our organization does not). One of our challenges in today’s world, however, is the range of meaning attached to that word. Equality can mean equal-in-value yet complementary,

and it can mean sameness—each sex can do anything the other sex can. To my ears it sometimes even changes depending on the point being argued.

What I believe is important for our church is to articulate a New Church version of equality, infused holistically with what the Word says. I don't pretend that this is an easy task. Being an optimist, though, I believe that it's one of the many precious gifts that the New Church has to offer the world, or the Lord does through His new revelation.

#### **4. There continues to be a great deal of division over the women in the clergy issue - how would you help the church move forward?**

First let me say that I am well aware of the issue—and I don't have all the answers. I acknowledge the pain and frustration that many feel, even as I continue to remind people that it is felt as much by people troubled by the push for a change in this policy, as it is by those wishing for that change.

My answer to this question is more of an approach rather than a specific game-plan. It has three parts.

Clarity where possible. Drawing on my training again, leaders can serve their organizations by clarifying what will and what will not happen, especially when facing challenging circumstances. In this case, I believe it important for the church to hear that the ordination policy is not likely to change. While not wanting to bind the future, I believe that the church could use a time of non-focus, or non-argumentation, on this issue. I am content to articulate the doctrinal reasons for the current policy, even as I remain in tune with the ongoing debate about those doctrinal reasons within the church. But my emphasis would be on what we can do. To my mind, it is important to continue to engage courageously around the subject of women's roles within the church. We can and should continue to focus energy on understanding the teachings we are blessed to have. We should be reaching for ways to demonstrate that we need and welcome feminine energy and insight into the life of the church, and that we honor the ways that it is already happening.

A collective effort toward less contentiousness. I spoke to our propensity to "live in the fight" in answer to an earlier question. I see the ordination issue as having significant gravitational pull, meaning we tend to end up there, even though we are aware of our entrenched differences on the matter. The trouble with the fight is that it tends not to change people's minds and leaves them frustrated with each other—and the church. So what's the answer? I believe it is to continue the exploration of women's roles in the church in non-ordination directions. I recognize that this itself is contentious, but to me it is much better than continuing to fight about ordination. I won't repeat what those directions are but would again refer you to the portion of my clergy statement where I address women's roles.

Women's Participation Task Force. I raise this because I am writing to the Board, and this was a Board-supported initiative. As mentioned in my March report to the Board, I have come to see that process as a useful step in the broader conversation of women's roles, but not "the

answer.” I am not calling for wholehearted adoption of the suggestions and recommendations within the report of that task force, but I do believe there is much to be learned from the perspectives that came out of that process. I hasten to add that I include in that the responses, even push-back, to the report. As mentioned elsewhere, I believe that the next administration would be wise to consider the findings coming out of that report, and the feedback received since it was published.

In all of this, the approach that I am trying to articulate is one in which we acknowledge where we are on the divisive issue of ordination and seek energetically for ways forward that do not center on that fight.

### **5. How would you support and help small congregations that have not been self-sustaining and probably will not be in the near future?**

This question is more focused than the subject of congregational health that I addressed in my clergy statement (mostly in the Outreach section starting on p. 4). I encourage you to read that section. Here I will add some of the things that currently come into play regarding small congregations.

We currently work with several small congregations who cannot independently raise all the funding for their worship activities. Sometimes we are seeing an aging congregation that may be facing a change in its scope and frequency of activities. While always painful to see, there is nothing significantly new about this. When this is the case, we have conversations about GC grants, about sharing their resident pastor’s time with other uses in the church (e.g. some travel work), about redoubling on planning, and so on.

I am aware of, and in support of, ongoing considerations about how to provide more significant strategic help to all our congregations. Growth is elusive, worship patterns continue to evolve, and business as usual may not always be the answer. I believe, with time and creative thought, that technological solutions may also help, and that job descriptions for pastors may evolve to better fit today’s challenges. Ongoing pastoral training, or commitment to professional development, is needed for these reasons.

Add to that the consideration of placement. I often say that we are a small church that is worldwide. That means there is a lot of geography between our church centers. Given the challenge and cost of starting new congregations, I am of a mind that we should exert significant effort in the direction of keeping our existing congregations going. I enjoy the challenges of working with dedicated pastors and lay people to that end.

### **6. Should the General Church be looking to grow and, if so, how can we improve our efforts in that direction?**

There is a directness to this question that I would like to explore further with the Board. On the one hand, the answer seems obvious: of course we should be seeking to grow. We believe in

the Great Commission as much as anyone (see Matthew 28:18-20), and we have an added imperative to share the good news of the Heavenly Doctrines with those who could benefit from its life-changing truths.

Without additional context for the question, I assume that the Board wishes to hear an approach to growth or outreach from each of the candidates. Assuming that is true, I draw your attention to two things. One is what I wrote in the Outreach section of my clergy statement (p. 4). The other is a sense of the organizational discipline that must come into play if we are to see growth.

My perception is that certain principles apply across the board: Do people have the resources to share the message of the New Church and invite people to worship and other activities that add value to their lives? Are the messages sent authentic and perceived as valuable? Are we delivering on the promises we put out there? Are we holding ourselves accountable to consistent improvement, removing barriers to growth and becoming increasingly healthy as a church? Are our people appropriately encouraged and expected to participate in the church's efforts to serve more people?

In many ways, good people are working hard to address these things. Our collective success will depend in part on our will to apply these principles with even greater discipline and rigor. The Lord will surely do His part of causing the church to grow when we do our absolute best to do our part.

## **7. What efforts can the General Church make as an organization to forge bridges between young adults (recent high school and college graduates) and adult membership in the General Church?**

As with so many other things, engaging with the next generation is not something we have entirely figured out. Being an optimist, I can support many good things that are happening. I applaud the efforts going on at our Academy schools to engage younger minds, working through the cultural reflexes that often lead those minds to challenge what they are hearing. I am in support of the alumni efforts currently underway and believe there to be an especially fruitful avenue in terms of career networking. Some of our pastors are connecting well with young people in their areas.

I am an advocate for efforts to keep in touch with young people as they branch into adult life. In terms of an invitation to join, some may, and others will not be ready. I suspect that many will keep the church at arm's length while they get themselves established. What I hope is that our efforts to keep in touch send the message that "we're here," and that we have guidance to offer from the Word on the tough life issues that are bound to come their way.

That said, I suspect that we will continue to discover, as other generations have, that our best opportunities to engage young people in the life of the church will come when they start getting married and raising a family. That is one of the reasons I believe we would do well to expand our support for parents (see under Education in my clergy statement).

On a personal note, I have kids who fall into this category. I am grateful for the ways that they are turning to the church and the church is welcoming them. I can say the same for some friends who are in the same phase of parenting young adults. No doubt all of us are aware of the questions and struggles that come up. I am a firm believer in patience, keeping the welcome mat out, and steadfastly sharing with this next generation what the Word has to say about the path to true happiness. Those inclined to do so will join when they are ready.

**8. Please give us your views on New Church Education as it relates to opportunities, challenges and priorities.**

On this question I wrote a lot in my clergy statement, beginning on p. 3. I am happy to explore this subject with the Board to any depth it wishes. This is a true love of mine, and an area of use that I have appreciated throughout my career. I am tremendously grateful for the opportunity to work in this field that my current job affords.

One thing I will underscore here is how we view “New Church education.” In an article published in New Church Life titled, “What Is New Church Education, and Why Should We Care?” (January/February 2015 issue), I articulated it this way:

*When you hear the phrase “New Church education” I wonder what comes to mind. I believe many people think of a system of schools, from preschool through college. Others might think of Sunday School settings, videos, and other child-related programs sponsored by the General Church. Still others may think of a church-sponsored commitment to education as a core use.*

*For the purposes of this article, I ask you to set aside all those manifestations...to focus on the use itself. (p. 34)*

The use itself to me is assisting parents in the spiritual dimension or raising their children. It is precious work at any age level, and I am committed to championing it.

**9. Do you see any disconnect between the clergy and the laity? How would you strengthen the interaction between the clergy and the laity?**

Back in the last round of bishop selection, I wrote the following in response to this question:

In my experience as a General Church priest, I perceive a clergy conversation that is different in some ways to the conversations happening within the Church at large. Of course there are significant overlaps, but also some themes that are unique to each conversation.

This is perhaps to be expected. The clergy is charged with the professional study of the Word and has the responsibility to teach the Lord’s vision in an increasingly secular world. I believe the clergy will tend to come across as more conservative than the general population of the church as a result...

I tend to view these perceived disconnects as dynamics to be managed, rather than either/or poles. The fact is, the clergy and the laity make up “the church,” and there is no question that we seek to serve together.

To that I would add a comment and a commitment. The comment is that I do not perceive much of a disconnect at a congregational level. When visiting congregations, even to perform development reviews, most of the feedback is supportive, and demonstrates a healthy working relationship with their pastor. I believe most pastors are in tune with the attitudes and issues active within their congregations, and work in countless ways to partner with their congregants in the work of the church.

Where we tend to see the most dissonance is on church-wide leadership decisions. This is to be expected, as there is not the close working relationship that exists at a congregational level. The commitment, therefore, is to continue existing communication channels between the clergy and the church as a whole, and to seek for more communicative and consultative ways for clergy and lay to work together in the church. The bottom line is: we are on the same team. To the extent that we embrace this reality, I believe we will be able to keep things healthy and respectful.

**10. How would you define the relationship between the General Church in North America and the global General Church? How do we reconcile differences between the geographic sources of financial support and the allocation of resources?**

Once again, I would point to the section of my clergy statement where I address this dimension of the General Church (see p. 6). There you will see a message about assisting countries with less organizational maturity, in terms of resources and infrastructure.

I also draw your attention to the important work underway through the International Committee, which has included an interim report in the March board packet. Three of us candidates are privileged to work on that committee and would stand behind its initial strategic directions. I certainly do.

I also rest heavily on my current daily work with many of the church leaders in countries around the world, and the privilege I have of traveling to these countries. We are indeed an increasingly global church. We do have needs and hopes beyond what we can currently fund, yet we are supporting many uses. It is exciting and frustrating all at once.

What I will say is that the exciting parts far outweigh the frustrating parts. For me personally, I love traveling to the places outside of North America where we are seeking to serve. It is grounding in powerful ways. The level of openness and thirst for the message of the New Church is often refreshing. While I admit to enjoying the process of coming home too, I do so with increasing memories and perspectives of the work at hand, and a renewed commitment to help as best we can with the resources entrusted to us.



**11. Do you believe the General Church should takes steps to foster a closer relationship with Church organizations such as Convention and The Lord’s New Church?**

I am not particularly oriented in this direction, even though I tend toward healthy relationships wherever possible.

In some places it makes sense to coordinate efforts. Australia is an example. England is another. I am also aware of some congregations within which it makes sense to team up, given the proximity of New Church people. I am supportive of current efforts to collaborate with the Swedenborg Foundation, in terms of our mutual effort to produce content that gets the message of the Heavenly Doctrines out there in inspiring ways. The recent “Swedenborg and the Arts” seminar hosted by Bryn Athyn College of the New Church is another example of a useful joint effort.

In general, though, I believe there are significant differences in mission and organizational culture that come into play. There are variances in how the Heavenly Doctrines themselves are viewed and used. There are choices made in other branches of the New Church that are not in line with prevailing General Church understanding of the Word. In short, there are reasons that we are not in the same organization. One way to acknowledge that is to let those organizations do their thing while we do ours, coordinating thoughtfully where it makes sense.

Thank you for reading my answers to these questions. Should the time come, I would welcome your thoughts and feedback. But that is in the Lord’s hands.

Respectfully submitted,

Peter Buss Jr.