

A Guide for
Congregations
Considering
Membership within



The Presbyterian
Church in Canada

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Welcome to The Presbyterian Church in Canada!

Throughout its history, The Presbyterian Church in Canada has welcomed many groups of Christians into its membership. The church is richer for the wide diversity of Christians and congregations that proclaim the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit, together. Those who join are blessed by fellowship, support and a common ministry with thousands of others across Canada. This brochure will introduce you to the denomination and some of the policies that govern its congregations. A summary of some of the important documents and policies to be aware of when associating with The Presbyterian Church in Canada is included at the end.

Who We Are

Dependent on the power of the Holy Spirit, we proclaim the love and good news of Jesus Christ through our words and actions. As a reformed church, we rely on the truth and inspiration of the scriptures for God's guidance into the future that we approach knowing God is with us. We believe in the triune God, that is, God revealed in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We also believe the Bible is the written revelation of who God is.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada has about 900 congregations across Canada with members coming from many national and racial backgrounds.

Currently, Presbyterian congregations worship in Arabic, Cantonese, Cree, English, Efik, Filipino, French, Ga, Hindi, Hungarian, Ibo, Korean, Mandarin, Ojibwe, Portuguese, Punjabi, Spanish, Taiwanese, Twi and Urdu.

Governance

Book of Forms

The legislation that governs our church is contained in the Book of Forms. The Book of Forms has been written over many years and continues to be revised

whenever the church discerns legislation must be changed to reflect our understanding of the mind of Christ for our denomination. There are four levels of governance that are also called “courts”; session, presbytery, synod and General Assembly. The Book of Forms is available online at www.presbyterian.ca.

The Session (Book of Forms 105-138.1)

Presbyterians are one of the few denominations in the world known mainly by the way it governs itself. The word “Presbyterian” comes from the Greek “presbuteros” that means “elder.” We are a church governed by elders. In each congregation there is a “teaching elder,” commonly called the minister or pastor, as well as a number of “ruling elders,” men and women who share the leadership, pastoral care and oversight of the congregation with the minister. Together, they are called the session.

A person is called and admitted to the office of ruling elder by an election process (Book of Forms 132-133.3) to provide servant leadership. Being elected an elder recognizes the person's gifts to lead and serve in this way. It is not meant to be a position of prestige or privilege. As noted in 1 Peter 5, elders are not to “lord it over” those in their care, but to be “examples to the flock.” Elders take vows professing their faith, accepting the standards and governance of The Presbyterian Church in Canada and promising to build up the church in the grace of Jesus Christ.

Sessions function in one of two ways; life service and term service. Life service means that, once elected, an elder does not normally stop serving in the congregation except for reasons of health, a move to another congregation or resignation. Term service means elders are elected to serve for six years at a time and may stand for re-election at the end of each term. All elders are ordained for life.

The session normally meets privately; however, others may attend the meeting upon invitation for a specific reason. This privacy is to maintain confidentiality and session solidarity. Session solidarity means once a

session has made a decision, even if some elders disagree with it, the session stands as one with the decision and members of session will not publicly or privately contradict them. A session discerns with many voices but speaks with one voice.

The session designates one elder to be the “representative elder” to attend presbytery meetings (the next higher “court”) with the minister.

The Board of Managers (Book of Forms 158-173)

The board of managers is another congregational body. It is elected at the annual congregational meeting and cares for such things as the church buildings and finances, and drafts an annual budget, normally in consultation with the session. The board is under the supervision of the session. In some congregations the work of the board is provided by a finance and maintenance committee of the session (Book of Forms 113.6.5).

The Deacons’ Court (Book of Forms 135-138.1)

Some congregations elect a deacons’ court instead of a board of managers. They may also be called upon to care for the poor.

The Presbytery (Book of Forms 176-258.6)

The presbytery is a meeting of the ministers and an equal number of ruling elders from the congregations within the presbytery. The presbytery’s primary purpose is to care for and oversee the congregations and ministers within its bounds. The ministers and elders are placed on the constituent roll of the presbytery. There may also be retired ministers or ministers without a congregation on the appendix to the roll who are permitted to speak at the meetings but may not vote. Meetings are held as needed, usually on a monthly or bimonthly basis.

Most presbyteries are organized on a geographical basis. There are non-geographic presbyteries. The presbyteries of Western Han-Ca (from Vancouver Island to Winnipeg) and Eastern Han-Ca (from Winnipeg to Newfoundland) are formed on the basis of Korean language and culture.

The moderator (chair) of the presbytery is chosen each year from among those on the constituent roll. The moderator’s primary role is to ensure good order is kept at meetings. The presbytery appoints the clerk of presbytery, an administrative officer, records meeting minutes, and the like. Every member of the presbytery is treated equally.

Congregations and ministers are accountable to the presbytery. They are expected to support the presbytery and submit to its authority.

The “courts” of The Presbyterian Church in Canada serve a legislative function to deal with church legal matters and regulations and also provide pastoral oversight to the congregations.

The Synod (Book of Forms 259-276)

Synods within The Presbyterian Church in Canada roughly follow provincial boundaries, except in Ontario and the Atlantic provinces. The synod can oversee the work of presbyteries and congregations within its bounds that often includes youth and camping ministries and regional church workers. Synods provide an opportunity for clergy and elders to reconnect with each other.

The General Assembly (Book of Forms 277-312)

The General Assembly is the highest court of the church. It consists of 1/6th of ministers and an equal number of representative elders. Those who attend Assembly are called “commissioners” in that presbyteries commission them to attend the Assembly in order to discern and vote on matters according to their conscience and in the light of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Every day of Assembly begins with worship.

The General Assembly meets annually and its work is carried forward by the various agencies of the church, such as the Assembly Council and the Life and Mission Agency, during the year.

Congregational Membership (Book of Forms 139-157.1)

With the approval of the congregation’s session, any person who confesses that “Jesus is Lord” and seeks to follow Christ is welcome to become a member of a Presbyterian congregation. If the person is not baptized, he or she needs to be baptized. The baptism of an adult involves a profession of faith and makes the person a professing member of the congregation. Members promise to place themselves under the authority of the session and seek the peace and welfare of the church (Book of Forms 139-148).

When infants or children are baptized, they are considered “covenant members.” As they grow up, they are encouraged to profess for themselves the vows made on their behalf by their parents or guardians, in this way become professing members themselves.

Professing members have the right to call ministers, be elected as elders, deacons or trustees, elect elders or deacons, vote on the selling of church property, and have right of appeal to the higher courts of the church. Covenant members do not have such rights but may, upon the age of maturity, vote at congregational meetings on financial matters if they themselves are financial contributors.

Another category of those attending Presbyterian churches are those who may or may not be baptized, are not professing members, but have adhered (attached) themselves to the congregation by way of regular worship and participation in congregational events. They are not eligible to be elected as elders or call ministers. If they are supporters, they have the right to vote on financial matters affecting the congregation. They are called adherents.

Congregations Joining

The Presbyterian Church in Canada

When a group of Christians desire to become a congregation of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, they need to apply to the clerk of the local presbytery. The presbytery will speak with the leadership and members of the congregation about The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Instructional sessions should be arranged so that the group has full knowledge about the privileges and responsibilities of becoming a member congregation of the presbytery and of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

If the presbytery decides to welcome the group as a new congregation, it will establish it at a special service of worship. The presbytery will also appoint “assessor elders” who, for a time, will help lead the congregation as it becomes accustomed to the ways of The Presbyterian Church in Canada and is able to elect elders from its membership.

The congregation is assessed a financial amount in order to support the ministries of the presbytery and synod. These assessments are mandatory. The congregation is also urged to financially support *Presbyterians Sharing*, the national budget of the denomination that maintains the work of the church nationally and internationally, including important mission endeavours, through an allocation set by presbytery and approved by the congregation. Without such support, the work of our denomination would, in many crucial respects, cease to function.

Congregational Relationship with the Presbytery

As indicated above, the presbytery oversees ministers and congregations. The genius of Presbyterian governance is that we are governed not by individuals but by councils or “courts.” We believe good decision-making is best achieved through consultation, co-operation and group discernment and should never be subject to the will of one person.

The presbytery establishes new congregations and approves all places of worship. Even existing congregations are considered new congregations of The Presbyterian Church in Canada when they apply to join this denomination. Once a congregation becomes a part of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, it may not leave. The minister and individual members may choose to leave, but the congregation, once established, is under the authority of the presbytery and can only be dissolved by the presbytery.

Church Property

The property of a congregation is owned by that congregation and held by trustees appointed by the congregation. If a congregation decides to expand its facilities or build a new building and in the process incur a debt, prior approval of the presbytery must be obtained (Book of Forms 151). The design of significant renovations or new buildings must be submitted to the Committee on Church Architecture and be approved both by that committee and the presbytery.

What happens to the property if a congregation is dissolved? Once that decision is made by the presbytery, all assets (church building and contents, manse, bank accounts and investments), vest with The Trustee Board of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

A Few Other Policies

(See online versions at www.presbyterian.ca)

The church has a number of policies that are designed to encourage us to live together “decently and in order” as the apostle Paul advised. One very important policy is the “Policy on Sexual Abuse and/or Sexual Harassment.” This policy is a means whereby individuals who allege they have been sexually abused or harassed within the church can lay a complaint before the church.

Another important policy is called “Leading with Care” and seeks to make the church a truly safe place for both young and old.

In recent years the church also adopted a Policy on Racial Harassment. This policy is similar in process to the one on Sexual Abuse and/or Sexual Harassment.

Ministers Joining

The Presbyterian Church in Canada

The Presbyterian Church in Canada has a long history of welcoming ordained ministers in good standing in other branches of the Christian Church. For such ministers, entry into the ministry of Word and Sacraments of The Presbyterian Church in Canada is a two-step process. In overview, it involves the following:

The minister applies for eligibility for reception as a minister of The Presbyterian Church in Canada through the Committee on Education and Reception. If the minister’s application is approved, the minister is declared eligible for reception, with or without conditions. Once the minister has fulfilled all conditions, the minister is permitted to move to the second step.

The minister seeks a call to a ministry of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. When a congregation extends a call to the minister with the approval of the congregation’s presbytery and the minister accepts the call, then the minister is inducted and the minister’s name is placed on the constituent roll of the presbytery.

As a first step, the minister writes to the presbytery of The Presbyterian Church in Canada within whose bounds he or she is living, and asks the presbytery to endorse his or her application for eligibility for reception. Ministers who live outside Canada apply directly to the Committee on Education and Reception, without the involvement of one of the denomination’s presbyteries.

Ministers of an ethnic congregation that wish to become part of The Presbyterian Church in Canada follow this same process, beginning with endorsement of their application for eligibility for reception by the presbytery they are seeking to join.

A minister’s work is overseen by the presbytery and the minister is accountable, not to the congregation, but to the presbytery, for carrying out his or her duties. Any complaints about the work of the minister that are not resolved face-to-face with the minister may be submitted in writing to the session. The session forwards the complaints to the presbytery. Because ministers are accountable to their presbytery, sessions are not authorized to decide the outcome of complaints against their minister.

The stipend of the minister is guaranteed by the congregation to be at least the minimum set by the General Assembly, or the higher minimum level set by some presbyteries. A minister may be called by the congregation to part-time ministry (but not less than half time) and thus the stipend and benefits would be pro-rated. The congregation is also required to pay the health and dental insurance and pension premiums that form part of the call. The minister will be required to pay a certain percentage of the stipend toward the pension plan of the church. Some congregations voluntarily pay provincial medical premiums wherever they exist.

Calling a Minister

When a congregation seeks to call a minister, the presbytery appoints a minister to serve the congregation as an interim moderator to help in the process of calling one. During this process, the interim moderator is, in effect, the minister of the congregation. When the congregation is ready to call a minister, the interim moderator will help establish a search committee from the session, board of managers and other groups in the congregation, who will work with the session to produce a “congregational profile.” This profile is a kind of snapshot of how the congregation sees itself and its needs. Once the need for a minister is advertised, applications will be received and it will be up to the session’s search committee to make decisions about who appears best suited to lead the congregation. It is customary for a search committee to select only one person to recommend to the session.

The minister selected to “preach for the call” will normally meet with various groups in the congregation and preach at a worship service. Usually, a meeting is called after worship on that day and a decision made by all professing members attending on whether or not to extend a call to the individual

recommended by the committee. If the call is extended, it is forwarded to the presbytery. If the presbytery approves the call, it forwards it to the candidate's presbytery. That second presbytery also needs to consider the call. If it also approves the call, a date can be set for the induction of the minister in the congregation. If the person is not yet ordained, an ordination service will be held which may incorporate the induction service.

Finally...

What you have read is introductory information only. We recommend that you take opportunities to learn

about this denomination by accessing the website as well as any courses given by presbyteries on church governance. The Elders' Institute is a valuable resource as is "For Elders" produced by the Clerks of Assembly. There are resources, including the Book of Forms, available from The Book Room at the national office as well as online.

We are delighted you are interested in being part of this denomination and pray this document will prove to be helpful to you.

Important Documents and Policies

(All are available at www.presbyterian.ca and further information is available through your presbytery or from the Clerks of Assembly 1-800-619-7301)

Standards of faith	Scriptures of Old and New Testaments, Living Faith (available in Korean), Westminster Confession of Faith, Other standards are noted in Book of Forms 'Historical and Confessional Basis'
Governance	Book of Forms available at www.presbyterian.ca
Sexual abuse policy	Policy on Sexual Abuse and/or Sexual Harassment describes the denomination's zero tolerance policy and procedures for dealing with allegations of abuse
Safe church policy	<i>Leading with Care, A Policy for Ensuring a Climate of Safety for Children, Youth and Vulnerable Adults in The Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC)</i>
Church property act	Federal and Provincial Act to incorporate Trustee Board of the PCC, which stipulates that all church property vests with the Trustee Board if a congregation ceases to exist. (Once established, congregations may not leave the PCC with their property)
Stipend policy	Each congregation must provide to its minister at least the minimum stipend set by the General Assembly each year, or the higher minimum level set by the presbytery, if any (prorated for part-time service).

Church pensions	Every minister must be a member of the PCC pension plan. Every congregation must submit to the PCC the employer portion of pension, and must collect and submit the minister's portion.
Health and dental policy	Every minister (and optionally, other church staff members) receives health and dental benefits that are paid for by obligatory congregational payments.
Congregational financial obligations	Presbytery and synod may levy congregations in order to support their budgets.
<i>Presbyterians Sharing</i> mission fund	Congregations are expected to contribute to the national church budget. Recommended congregational allocations are provided from the national office through the presbytery.
Calling a minister	Calls must be arranged and approved by the presbytery. A resource entitled "Calling a Minister" is available.
Payment when presbytery dissolves pastoral tie with minister	The Policy on the Dissolution of the Pastoral Tie provides the basis for stipend continuance payments that are the obligation of the congregation in the event a ministry comes to an end for lack of funds or because the presbytery has discerned that the pastoral relationship is no longer viable.

Contact Information

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1-800-619-7301 or 416-441-1111
Clerks of Assembly, ext. 226
Financial and Support Services, ext. 320
Pension and Benefits, ext. 287
Ministry and Church Vocations, ext. 264

Website: www.presbyterian.ca

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