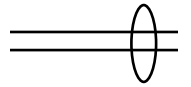


Term Service For Elders



We asked, “How is it working?” We received a positive response

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Background



In 1997, after some 45 years of overtures and prayerful debate, the General Assembly approved changes to the polity of The Presbyterian Church in Canada that opened the way for congregations to adopt the practice of term service for elders. In the 1994 Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly (see pages 276-277), the Clerks of Assembly aided the discussion by reminding commissioners of arguments for and against term service that were originally introduced in 1981 and 1988.

Using some of these arguments as a basis for a survey, I invited term service sessions to answer it as a way of attempting to judge how many of the hopes and fears expressed in the 1980's have become reality. Twenty sessions scattered across Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, and British Columbia replied. Three of them have an average Sunday worship attendance of less than 75, nine reported an average between 75 and 150, while five see more than 150 in the pews on Sundays. The surveys were answered by ministers in some cases, by clerks of session in others, and by session consensus in still others. The result is a collection of opinions from various perspectives that provide a glimpse into how this relatively new session model is working in our denomination.

I am grateful to all those who took the time to participate in this exercise.

Survey Response Summaries

The following are the eight “true or false” statements of the survey coupled with a summary of replies.

- 1. Term service has encouraged some, who were not prepared to make a life service commitment, to let their names stand for election to the session.**

Periodically congregations seek to call and elect new elders. Some candidates are prepared to accept such a call for an indefinite period while others are not. Every responding session indicated it has elders who are serving because term service was an option. Not prepared to make a life commitment, they are willing to serve for a defined period of time. It follows that their spiritual gifts may not have been available to these sessions if life service was the only possibility.

2. Term service has provided a way for elders, who no longer wish to serve, to retire gracefully from the session.

Occasionally an elder no longer feels s/he has the time or energy to serve the church as an elder but can't find a gracious way to step down. Some may feel guilty about "abandoning" colleagues to carry on session responsibilities without them. Others don't want to create the impression that they are angry and leaving under a cloud of controversy. The survey indicates that all the responding sessions who have gone through a complete term service cycle agree that it provides an opportunity for elders to bow out gracefully. One respondent indicated that the end of a term "... created a natural reflection point allowing them to evaluate the appropriateness of continuing".

3. Term service keeps elders in closer contact with the congregation, and therefore more able to bring fresh ideas to the session.

Only nine of the respondents indicated the above statement is true in their church and 4 others were unsure that term service had any affect on bringing session and congregation closer together. A few concluded that term service does nothing to keep elders in closer contact with the congregation. One stated that the situation was "not any different from previously elected elders". There seems to be no clear consensus on this statement.

4. Term service has undermined the stability of our congregation because of the frequent changes in leadership.

One of the original fears of term service is that it would have a detrimental effect on the life of the congregation because of its frequent changes in leadership. According to the survey, this fear has proven to be unfounded. While the regularly changing leadership provides some challenges such as time spent in elder training and bringing new elders up to speed on the work of the session, overall there is sufficient continuity that the leadership remains strong and stable.

5. Term service has changed the way elders make decisions because they know they will need to be re-elected to stay on the session.

This statement has political overtones. It suggests that elders who enjoy serving on the session and hope to be reelected may make decisions based on what will curry the favour of the congregation and not on what the Word of God teaches or as the Holy Spirit guides. This statement was received with a resounding "False".

6. Term service for elders has encouraged “special interest groups” in the congregation to vote “their people” onto the session.

This statement also bears political overtones, implying that cliques within the congregation might take advantage of the regular elections of term service to elect like-minded elders to become their voice on the session. Although one congregation indicated that they found this to be true and another admitted such a thing could happen, the rest of the respondents clearly indicated that this had not been part of their experience.

7. Introducing term service produced divisive anger and resistance in some of our elders.

Three respondents indicated that introducing term service caused anger and resistance among the previously existing session. One of these stated, “A very small percentage of our session of forty was unhappy with the change and resigned at the first opportunity. The new blood and fresh ideas and enthusiasm far outweigh any problems with the two-year election process.” The rest of the responses give the impression such a change was happily welcomed. Someone wrote, “One of the elders who supported and promoted term service is well respected by the other elders in the congregation. He introduced the idea gradually with clear explanations, so it was readily received by all.”



8. Term service has caused the session to spend an unfortunate amount time and energy on elder training and development.

The general consensus is that while it does take time to train new elders every two years, it is time well spent. A respondent wrote, "The process no doubt demands time. Elder training is more or less continual. We consider this a plus rather than unfortunate." Another wrote, "We see training and development as an important ongoing activity." It was also noted that congregations become increasingly educated on the calling and role of the elder when they participate in elections every two years.

Other Comments

Those who received the survey were invited to contribute any other thoughts, positive or negative, about term service. Many did. What follows is an honest assessment of term service. The comments come from different churches. I have taken the liberty of editing some of the comments so that I could include as many as possible. My apologies to the authors.

Comment 1: After doing some visioning we have realized that we are at a place that calls upon the too few to do too much too often. Term service forces us to look beyond the too few and helps us to see beyond them to those others who also have gifts but have not been asked.

Comment 2: I would say that our experience has been very successful - we have been able to elect several younger elders who would not have considered life service. This has made for a more healthy balance on session. There is time given to elections which takes away from other time, but it also puts a focus on the session that otherwise isn't there. More than the time for elections is the establishment of a new dynamic of trust where new elders feel free to speak and older elders feel less threatened. With new elders has come new energy, ideas and dynamism.

Comment 3: Term service has been a positive experience for my two small congregations... We have found the regular influx of "new" elders a wonderful excuse for ongoing eldership training. One of the unforeseen benefits we have experienced is that the sessions now more closely reflect the church backgrounds of the congregations. Few of our session members were raised in the Presbyterian Church. We are from a variety of denominations - Lutheran, Baptist, Roman Catholic, Anglican, United. As the moderator, that has kept me on my toes because I can't assume a certain background. I would not willingly go back to the "time before" term service. And I don't think very many of my people would either. I know one of the comments

made about term service is that it would be a problem for congregations with a smaller "gene pool" but we haven't found it to be much of an issue. I think our smaller numbers are offset by the greater awareness in small congregations that everyone has to pitch in if this church family is going to survive. We were amazed (although we probably shouldn't have been) at how moving and affirming it was for session members to be re-elected by the congregation. The first time it happened, we had several people in tears. Pretty powerful stuff.

Comment 4: The value of term service for our church has outweighed the problems.

Comment 5: There is some anxiety expressed by the session as they near the time for the next election. The session will need five more elders. What if they can't get any? There appears to be only a handful of people not currently on the session who have the spiritual gifts and are willing to serve the church in this way. In the last two elections the session was looking for a set number of new elders. In both cases, we fell short. Term service has forced the session to look at the gifts of people. Some have gifts to serve as elders but don't want to do so.



Comment 6: We instituted term service eldership in 1999, but this year decided to discontinue the practice and have reverted back to lifetime service. It (term service) did allow older elders to retire gracefully and several did. However, we did not find that it encouraged new people to sign up. In fact, what people told us is that six years sounds like a long time (ironically it sounds longer to people than open-ended service). In 1999 when we instituted term service we had 36 elders on session. In 2005 when we discontinued the practice we had 24 and were in desperate need of additional elders. We just had an election and are now up to 29 and hope that we will come back up to our complement next year. The five people who stood for election this time are younger members of the congregation and did not see open-ended service as a deterrent.

Comment 7: Term service has over-all been a positive thing for our church. It has resulted in more people becoming aware of the workings of the church, and has the benefit of "new blood" and new ideas. If there has been a drawback, I can only think of one: It results in people being almost eager to leave after their term, when they might well stay longer if they had come on "for life". Still, in my experience, term service has regularized elections. They were being held sporadically and sometimes yearly with people resigning. Now it is more regular and workable. People sign on for six years and make those six years work. New and inexperienced elders have been a blessing rather than a problem. The interesting challenge has been in developing a session that is enjoyable to meet with, so that the meetings don't seem simply dry and boring. New elders have assisted in doing just that, bringing new life to discussions and new directions to our work.

Comment 8: Over the years we have had many queries about how this is working for us and each time we are more than happy to be able to heartily endorse the concept.

Comment 9: Transition to term service occurred immediately following the induction of the new minister, so there was greater openness to the change. It still involved much discussion around the strengths and concerns of term versus life - but session showed a real desire to understand and accept the change.

Comment 10: Term service has been a good thing for our congregation. It means if we make a mistake and bring someone on the session that does not have the gifts, the maturity in Christ, we have a graceful way for them to leave the session. Other elders who are not finished their term, but for health or personal

reasons would like to leave session before their term is up, have felt freer to go off and take some time of not serving. The leadership base is broader and there is a greater sharing of the leadership of the church, because more people have served for some time. I have been fortunate to have many strong spiritual leaders with gifts to serve. Aging elders have been willing to come on for a term or part of a term, and share their gifts. The church has been glad we've had term service. I'd encourage other smaller churches to consider this route.

Comment 11: Moving to term service was not a contentious issue for our congregation. We agreed as elders that we would take one year to study the issue with no hidden agendas. At the end of the year elders would vote and that would be the direction we would go in. Over that year we studied the purpose of the session, the pros and cons of our present session and what benefits term service might bring. After session voted in favour of term service we let the congregation know of the decision and asked any who were against it to write to the session and if persuaded by the arguments we would reconsider or have a congregational meeting to discuss it. We received one letter. It is possible to say that more time is spent on developing new elders but the reverse of that is that every time elders go off of session you now have 6-8 very knowledgeable people back in the life of the congregation. Often these people keep serving in various areas without adding the role of elder to their work. New people bring new ideas and a changing leadership can convey the sense that people become leaders because they have the gift of leadership, not because they have been in the congregation for 40 years so it's their turn. In life-long service people serve until they die which is a strange way to transfer leadership.

Comment 12: If this transition (from life service to term service) was being done again it probably should have been done over a period of time rather than all at once. To go from eighteen elders down to nine was probably too much, too quick. This change left us with five experienced elders plus four new elders. It also presented some of the outgoing elders with an opportunity to second guess and question some of the decisions of the new session.

Comment 13: The elders know they only have a short time (six years) to serve so are willing to "give it all they've got" in that time - not expecting to be re-elected because of their age.

A Few Conclusions

When I sent out this survey, I had no idea what sort of response I would get. After reading the replies, my impression is that almost all the responding sessions are glad they adopted term service and believe it has strengthened their Christian ministry.

In some cases term service seems to do what its advocates hoped it would do; encourage those who are not prepared for life service to offer God-given gifts, fresh enthusiasm and new ideas to sessions for a defined period of time. It takes time to hold biennial elections and train new elders, but both session and congregation can benefit from this regular reminder of what it means to be called by God to serve in this ministry. The fairly frequent need for new elders does not seem to upset the stability of the congregation's ministry and can cause sessions to look beyond the existing session for those who have gifts for eldership but were never before asked to serve in this way. Term service provides a graceful exit for elders who feel they need a break or are no longer able to contribute to this level of ministry. These "retired" elders can be a blessing to their congregations. As elders leave the session, they are able to apply the experience, knowledge and skills gained to other ministries of the church. Term service can regularize the elder election process. When term service is in place it can fit into, and become an important part of, the life cycle of a congregation.

Sessions have discovered that some eldership candidates consider a six-year commitment daunting rather than inviting and are more willing to accept the life term. It may be that the life term is considered a term from which they may more easily resign at any time. The survey notes that gifted elders leave the session as soon as their term expires. The point made is that in the life service model, they might have led the church for a longer time. Of course it is permissible for elders to stand for reelection as soon as their term ends. Obviously the introduction of term service risks a degree of stress and disruption within sessions when some embrace the model while others resist it. Sessions contemplating adopting term service are cautioned to move slowly, to weigh the pro and cons carefully, to talk about it often before a final decision is made. Generally, those who persevere feel the benefits of term service outweigh the growing pains.

According to this survey most of the hopes of term service, as predicted nearly 25 years ago, seem to have come to fruition while most of the fears have not. The survey shows that term service can work in both large and small congregations, but it is not necessarily suitable for all. Since only the sessions that adopted term service replied to this survey, it is conceivable that other sessions contemplating this change abandoned the attempt when they met with resistance or decided it would not work in their particular situation.

Book of Forms - references to term service

108. Elders once lawfully called to the office, and having gifts of God meet to exercise the same, are ordained for life. They may serve in the office for life unless deposed or suspended in process of discipline. They may, however, at the call of a congregation in which the session has instituted term service for elders, fulfill the duties of the eldership on the session for periods of six years, but may stand for reelection at the end of each six year term.

108.1 Any session desiring to opt for term service for elders should consult with the congregation and must notify the presbytery of its intention and receive that court's permission.

108.2 In congregations that have instituted term service for elders, one third of the session shall be elected every two years.

108.3 Elders may resign the active exercise of the office at any time during their term of service. (Declaratory Act 1985, p. 261-62 [was section 108.1])