



EQUIPPING FOR... **ELDERSHIP**

Study and Report – What and Why

Don Muir, Associate Secretary, General Assembly Office

Every year Presbyterian commissioners from across the nation come together for our General Assembly. We pray and sing, eat and sleep, laugh and weep, listen, think and talk. The underlying purpose is to discern together the mind of Christ for the church.

After the last amen is said and the final commissioner leaves for home, the General Assembly Office staff begins the follow-up work. One task is to organize the minutes, reports and statistical records into what is called the Acts and Proceedings. The office also prepares and distributes a number of letters. These letters carry Assembly news to the courts of the church and others affected by decisions of the Assembly.

Referral Letter:

One of those letters is sent to sessions. It is called the referral letter. A paper copy was mailed to the attention of your Clerk of Session at the church's mailing address.

You can find this referral letter online at presbyterian.ca/gao/2015referrals. At the top of that page you will see the title "Remits and Referrals". Remits are remitted only to presbyteries. Each remit proposes a change to the law or doctrine of our denomination. Presbyteries are invited to study the remit and express approval or disapproval. There is a little more information about remits on the next page of this article.

Scroll down that website page, past information for synods and presbyteries until you arrive at the session part of the page. Immediately below the session title is the referral letter designed specifically for sessions. The referral letter is organized into four parts.

1. Study and Report
2. Expressions of Appreciation
3. Information/Action
4. Legislation

The focus of this article is the study and report portion of the referral letter. As the title indicates, sessions are invited to study the various matters referred to them and to report by sending comments back to the body that is working on the subject. Reports are always sent to the General Assembly Office. The GAO staff ensure they get to the appropriate people for consideration.

In the 2015 referral letter you will see there are four items referred to the church for study and report.

1. Recommends a new way of establishing the membership of the Assembly Council.
2. Suggests a change to how a minister's stipend and allowances are calculated.
3. Proposes a rewrite of the part of the Book of Forms that deals with how we communicate through petitions and overtures.
4. Invites sessions to read the *Living in God's Mission Today* and comment on it.

Studying these proposals is not compulsory, but it does provide sessions from across Canada a voice in

the decisions and direction of the church. It is a way for a range of perspectives to be conveyed to those who write the various proposals. After listening to the church in this way, those responsible for preparing recommendations to the General Assembly are able to do so having been informed by the church at large.

An example: Election of Elders

Our denomination structures its government through the office of teaching elder (minister) and ruling elder. There were, for many years, four distinct methods of electing ruling elders. Virtually every year, the Clerks of Assembly received several phone calls from ministers and elders seeking clarification because the methods, outlined in the Book of Forms, were confusing.

Due to the frequency and degree of uncertainty about the vital steps required to discern which women and men will share with the minister in the leadership and pastoral care of the congregation, the Clerks of Assembly reviewed each process. They received permission from the Assembly to draft an election procedure designed to be clear and effective for all congregations.

In 2008, the Clerks proposed a step-by-step elder election process that was a complete revision of Book of Forms section 132. The proposal was received by the General Assembly and submitted to synods, presbyteries and sessions for study and report.

Forty-nine sessions and 11 presbyteries studied the proposed election process and reported to the General Assembly Office. Thirty-four sessions and presbyteries agreed with the legislation without comment, 22 offered suggestions and four disagreed with any change to the election process.

The suggestions received were used to modify and improve the legislation. The thoughts of

ministers and elders had a positive and helpful effect on how our churches select elders. Revised legislation was placed before the General Assembly.

In 2009, the Assembly agreed to remit the legislation to presbyteries for their approval or disapproval. As noted earlier in this article, this happens when certain referrals become remits.

As stated on page 583 of the 2010 Acts and Proceedings, 40 presbyteries approved the legislation, 4 disapproved and 4 other presbyteries did not respond.

In 2010, the legislation was adopted by the General Assembly and became the law of the church.

Study and report provides the church a voice in important matters. It ensures a wide spectrum of wisdom, experience and opinions from a variety of regions and congregations are received by those assigned to prepare reports. All comments are taken into consideration and we hope and pray these steps result in discerning God's will for The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Sessions are busy with many pressing matters in their own congregations. It is not always easy to make time for other business. Nevertheless, it is one way to help our church maintain faithful, relevant and effective ministries in today's world.

