

Clergy Resources for Session Meetings and Retreats



The
Presbyterian
Church
in Canada

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About This Resource

“Our session meets next week. Where can I find some good resources to open the meeting? I want something both devotional and educational in nature – something that applies to the work of elders in our congregation.”

“We have a few new elders on our session. We would like to hold a retreat with the entire session to look at the ministry of elders and also just to get to know each other better. Are any resources available to help us do this in the context of our Presbyterian polity and theology?”

“Our session would like to go through a visioning process. We want to make sure that our congregational ministries are well balanced, meeting the needs of the congregation as well as the needs of our community. We want to prepare for a healthy future. Where might we find some excellent resources to help us through this process?”

Clergy Resources for Session Meetings and Retreats is a compilation of session starters and workshops designed with the above questions in mind. These resources have been selected from the *For Elders* and *Equipping for Elders* publications that have been produced quarterly since 1997.

The writers of these resources are Dorothy Henderson, Don Muir and Barbara McLean, except for three of the workshops that were written by Keith Boyer.

Clergy are invited to use these resources for session meetings and for workshops and retreats, and to adapt them for their purposes.

Background Information

The vision and direction for *For Elders* (and later, *Equipping for Elders*) came from Dorothy Henderson, associate secretary of Education in Faith, Ministry with Children and Youth (1996–2007); and Barbara McLean, deputy clerk of the General Assembly (1992–2003); and later, Don Muir (2003–present), who took over as deputy clerk of the General Assembly after Barbara. Gratitude is expressed to them for their diligence and expertise in providing the church with these resources.

Many of the articles from these resources have been collected into *Equipping Elders*, which is available online at presbyterian.ca/elders. *Equipping Elders* is designed to inform elders – and perhaps even those who are considering eldership – about the ministry to which they have been called. It includes a wealth of information: who we are in The Presbyterian Church in Canada; practical aids for specific ministries of elders, such as pastoral visiting; gifts for ministry and ordination to eldership; opportunities for elder training and elder care; the work of the session within the congregation and how it works with other courts of the church.

Equipping Elders makes a good gift for elders at all stages of their ministry – from those who are anticipating eldership to those who have been elders for some time.

Section 1

Session Starters



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Session Starters are intended for the opening of session meetings. They are devotional and instructional in nature, and are designed to require little local preparation. They are approximately 20 minutes in length.

The Session Starters are not designed to replace session retreats, where themes can be explored in depth without the pressure of a business meeting looming. Choose the ones that are helpful to you...and adapt, adapt, adapt. There are many good resources that can deepen them if you wish to delve deeper.

It is hoped that these Session Starters will help to strengthen elders in their ministry.

Appreciation is expressed to Dorothy Henderson, Don Muir and Barbara McLean, the writers of the Session Starters.

Session Starters

Gifts for Ministry

The church needs administrators

1. Read Genesis 39:4, 41:29–40
2. Discussion and prayer (parts may be done in small groups):
 - a. Identify Joseph’s administrative gifts.
 - b. How did Joseph’s gifts build up the kingdom of God?
 - c. Discuss administrative gifts that are needed in your congregation.
 - d. Pray for people in your congregation who have administrative gifts.

The church needs servers

1. Read Luke 10:38–42; John 11:17–44, 12:1–3
2. Discussion and prayer (parts may be done in small groups):
 - a. List all the server characteristics you discovered in these passages.
 - b. How did these serving gifts build the kingdom of God?
 - c. What serving gifts do people have to offer in your congregation?
How can they be encouraged?
 - d. Pray silently, remembering servers in your congregation.

The church needs encouragers

1. Read Acts 4:36; 11:22–26
2. Discussion and prayer (parts may be done in small groups):
 - a. Write a poem or list some words that describe Barnabas as an encourager.
 - b. What effect do you think Barnabas’s gift may have had on others?
 - c. Why and where is the gift of encouragement needed today?
 - d. Pray for members of your congregation who are wonderfully encouraging.

The church needs teachers

1. Read Acts 18:24–28; 1 Corinthians 3:5–9
2. Discussion and prayer (parts may be done in small groups):
 - a. List the qualities of a fine teacher that can be found in these passages.
 - b. How was Apollos’s gift used in building the kingdom of God?
 - c. Tell stories of a Sunday school teacher who made a difference in your life.
 - d. Pray for the teachers in your congregation.

The church needs people of vision

1. Read Luke 3:2b–20, 7:18–29
2. Discussion and prayer (parts may be done in small groups):
 - a. List characteristics of John the Baptist that made him a person of vision.
 - b. What are some of the problems associated with people who have a strong vision?
 - c. What are the benefits of having someone with a strong vision?
 - d. Pray for people of vision.

The church needs generous givers

1. Read Genesis 13:1–12
2. Discussion and prayer (parts may be done in small groups):
 - a. What makes a person generous?
 - b. How does your congregation celebrate generous giving?
 - c. Are there ways that “strings are attached” to your giving?
 - d. Pray silently about your pattern of giving.

The church needs people of compassion

1. Read Luke 10:30–35
2. Discussion and prayer (parts may be done in small groups):
 - a. Discuss the specific ways in which the Good Samaritan showed compassion.
 - b. Tell stories of times when someone showed compassion to you.
 - c. What situations most need compassion in your community?
 - d. Pray for others and for yourself, that you may become more caring people.

For devotional readings between session meetings, read these additional scriptures:

Administrators:	Judges 4 – 5 1 Kings 1 – 2 Acts 4:1–22; 15:13–20; 21:18–19	1 Samuel 16 – 31 Nehemiah 1 – 7	2 Samuel Mark 5:22–43; 6:1–4 Galatians 2:9–10
Servers:	Exodus 3:1–12 Acts 8:5–40 Philemon	Matthew 8:14–15 Romans 16:1–2	John 6:1–14 Colossians 4:7–18
Encouragers:	Acts 2:14–21; 3:1 – 4:31; 15:22–40; 17:1–4 2 Corinthians 2:13; 7:2 – 8:15; 12:18 2 Timothy 4:9–11	Titus	Galatians 2:1–10 1 Peter 5:12
Teachers:	John 20:24–28 1 Corinthians 16:19	Acts 18:24–28 1 and 2 Timothy	Romans 16:3–5
Vision:	Isaiah Jonah Mark 6:1–6 John 2:1–5	Jeremiah Matthew 1:18 – 3:18 Luke 1:26–56; 2:36–38 Acts 1:14; 9:10–19	Hosea
Givers:	2 Chronicles 1 – 9 Acts 9:36–42; 10:1–33; 16:14–40 Romans 1:1–15	Luke 19:1–10 Colossians 1:7; 4:12	Philemon
Compassion:	Genesis 22:1–19 Jeremiah 31:15 John 4:1–42, 46–52; 5:1–18; 11:28–44	Ruth 1:6 – 4:12 Matthew 1:16–25; 2:13	

Session Starters

Theology¹

1 Believing in God

As people gather

Ask elders to choose a picture (from a selection you have previously gathered) that makes us think of God. (Provide nature scenes, families, friends, various pictures of Jesus, people gathering at church. Your Sunday school is a good source for some of these.)

Presentation

Ask: *Why is it that, when asked on a survey, almost every person in Canada says that they believe in God? People answer this even though, statisticians tell us, only two or three out of ten people attend worship each Sunday. Why is it that people still believe in God?* (Leave time for ideas or quiet reflection.)

If a young person asked you to “prove” God’s existence, what would you say? (Allow time for sharing ideas or quiet reflection.) Throughout the ages, philosophers and theologians have suggested many ways to “prove” God’s existence.

*Christians believe that we get our understanding in God from two kinds of revelation – general and special. **General revelation** means that God is revealed in nature, history, and the whole of human life. We see order and design in the universe and people’s consciences, and we call that God. **Special revelation** is God being revealed through the Bible, through the life of Christ, and in the church. It places the emphasis on God seeking us, rather than on our seeking God.*

Ask people to look at the picture they chose. Ask: *Is this an example of general or special revelation?*

Read together from *Living Faith* 2.1.1 to 2.1.4.

Close this study/worship time by repeating the Apostles’ Creed.

¹ Dorothy Henderson, the writer of this set of Session Starters, is deeply indebted to Sara Covin Juengst and her wonderful book, *Equipping the Saints*, who in turn relies heavily on Shirley Guthrie’s book, *Christian Doctrine*. Both are Westminster John Knox publications, 1999 and 1994, respectively.

2 God as Trinity: One God or Three?

As people gather

Post three sheets of newsprint labeled *Father, Son, Holy Spirit*. Ask people to jot down characteristics they associate with the three persons of God.

Presentation

Say: *If a young person asked you to explain the Trinity, what would you say? (Allow time for ideas or thought.)* Draw on chart paper an analogy that may be helpful: a three-leafed clover; water, ice, steam; the sun, the sun's rays, the heat generated by the sun.

Ask someone in the group to read Deuteronomy 6:4. Say: *This is a foundational verse to both Judaism and Christianity. How can this verse be reconciled with the three persons of God? (Allow time for ideas.)*

Shirley Guthrie, in his book Christian Doctrine, says that the Trinity is "a mystery to be confessed, not a mathematical problem to be solved." The mystery is that three Persons in the Trinity have existed from the beginning. God has always been Father, always Son, always Spirit. There is unity in God, but each of the Persons is also distinct from the others. We can also describe the work of the Trinity this way: Creator, Saviour, and Life-Renewer or Comforter.

Read together from *Living Faith* 1.1 to 1.6.

Close this study/worship time with the Trinitarian benediction from 2 Corinthians 13:13.

3 God, the Creator

As people gather

Prior to the session meeting, prepare a sheet for each elder with the heading, "I believe that God creates..." As elders gather, invite them to work individually, completing this creed in a way that makes sense to them.

Presentation

Ask people to share some of their ideas of how God created and is still creating. Ask some questions, allowing time for quiet reflection or sharing of ideas. *What does it mean to say that all that God created is good, including human beings? How do you see yourself co-creating with God? What does it mean to have "dominion" over the environment? How do difficult issues like stem cell research or genetically modified food fit with the idea of God as creator?*

Read together from *Living Faith* 2.1.1 to 2.2.1.

Close this study/worship time by reading Genesis 1:31.

4 Evil in the World; God's Care

As people gather

Prior to the session meeting, prepare a wall chart with the title, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" As elders enter, give them several Post-it notes and a pen. Invite them to write individual responses to this question and post them on the chart.

Presentation

Say: *Christianity faces the painful reality of evil head on. We see it in the story of Adam and Eve. We see it in the crucifixion. The psalmists and Job both struggled with evil. (Invite an elder to read Psalm 13:1–4). Christians do not try to deny the existence of evil or minimize its power.*

The question of where evil comes from is an old one. How would you respond if a young person asked you why bad things happen to good people? Perhaps your answer might reflect some of these ideas. (Read the Post-it notes from the wall chart.)

It is important to distinguish between natural evil and moral evil. Natural evil is the devastation caused by floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, drought, disease and accidents. These things do not happen because God wills them. Instead, the world operates according to natural and manmade laws. This orderly structure is sometimes beneficial and sometimes harmful. When the "dark side" happens, God is with us and comforts us in our suffering. We call this God's providence or care.

Moral evil, on the other hand, is the kind of evil we inflict on each other. God is not the author of this evil.

Where does this moral evil come from? Scripture tells us that evil comes from Satan. Christians differ on whether Satan is a personal devil who literally exists or is a symbolic interpretation of evil. Even though the forces of evil are real, we do not believe "in" them. Rather, we stand "against" them. We believe in God's care and God's power to overcome evil with good.

Read together from *Living Faith* 2.5.1 to 2.5.8.

Close this study/worship time with one or more of the following scriptures: Romans 7:14–25; Romans 8:37–39; 1 Corinthians 15:21–28; 2 Corinthians 4:3–4; Colossians 1:11–14; 1 John 2:12–14.

5 People – Made in the Image of God

As people gather

Prior to the session meeting, purchase at a dollar store a small mirror for each elder. On chart paper, draw a picture of a large mirror and at the top of the chart paper add the title, "Made in the Image of God." Ask each person to sign the chart.

Presentation

Say: *What does it mean to be made in the image of God? As I read out some of these descriptions, please look at yourself in the mirror and know that these things are true of you:*

- *I am a rational creature; I can think and reason.*
- *I have a spiritual nature or soul.*
- *I have the ability to make moral judgments.*
- *I have dominion and power over other creatures, and I must use this power with care.*
- *I can be like Christ.*
- *I can live in total dependence on God, recognizing that everything I have comes from God.*
- *I can accept my role as God's partner, recognizing that I have gifts that allow me to participate in God's work.*
- *I live in community. I know we need and depend on others for support and care.*

Read together from *Living Faith* 2.2.1 to 2.2.2.

Close this study/worship time with a prayer of confession and thanksgiving based on these phrases:

- God, even though you have made us in your image, we confess that...
- God, because you have made us in your image, we praise you...



6 Jesus Christ – God with Us

As people gather

Prior to the session meeting, post around the room an assortment of pictures of Jesus. (Your Sunday school files are a good source.) As elders enter, ask them to wander around the room, study the pictures and decide which one speaks to them most clearly of the person of Jesus.

Presentation

Invite elders to state which picture they chose and why. Tell elders that you have prepared a set of challenging questions about Jesus.² (Prior to the meeting, type these questions, cut them apart and put them into a bowl.) Invite elders to pull out a question and discuss it. If they consider it too difficult, give them permission to pull out another one. (If your session is small, do this as a group. If your session is large, divide into groups of four.)

- Docetism is a form of heretical theology that denies Jesus' real humanity. Where do we see docetism practiced in churches today?
- Jesus was a Jew. What is significant about this fact? Which of the displayed pictures show his Jewishness, and which do not?
- Jesus experienced every human need and limitation. Do you think Jesus could have thought the earth was flat?
- Like every human, Jesus was tempted to sin. Nikos Kazantzakis's book *The Last Temptation of Christ* suggests that Jesus was troubled by sexual temptations. Does this bother you? Do you agree with it?
- Unlike other humans, Jesus was without sin. In what sense was he sinless? Shirley Guthrie (in his book *Christian Doctrine*) says, "He was sinless because he was the friend of sinners." What do you think he means?
- Shirley Guthrie (in his book *Christian Doctrine*) says that Jesus was offensive socially, politically, morally and religiously. Do you agree?

When elders have had ten minutes or so to wrestle with some of these questions, invite them to share a new awareness they have of Jesus.

Read together from *Living Faith* 3.2.1 to 3.3.1.

Close this study/worship time with a hymn – # 516 (A little child the Saviour came) or #371 (Love divine, all loves excelling).

2 These questions come from the section "A Real Human Being" by Shirley Guthrie, in *Christian Doctrine* (Westminster John Know Press, 2004), p. 237.

7 Jesus Christ – Making Us One With God (Atonement)

As people gather

Prior to the meeting, write these three statements on chart paper:

- Statement A: Jesus did battle with the powers of sin and evil and defeated them.
- Statement B: Jesus took our place on the cross, substituting himself for us and taking the punishment that is rightfully deserved by all of us as sinners.
- Statement C: What Jesus did on the cross is a powerful expression of God's love for humanity. It leads us to repent and be reconciled to others.

As elders enter, ask them to look at the three statements and choose one or more that they believe are true.

Presentation

Say: *In their book Being Presbyterian in the Bible Belt,³ authors Foote and Thornburg say: When Presbyterians talk about the difference that Jesus Christ makes, they often use two terms: the "person" and the "work" of Jesus Christ. The "person of Jesus Christ refers to the belief that Jesus Christ makes a difference particularly because of "who" he is – his identity. Jesus was connected to God in a way that is unique. Historically, the church has argued over and wrestled with how to describe this uniqueness, saying such things as Jesus Christ was an equal person in the Trinity or that he was fully human while at the same time fully divine.*

The "work" of Jesus Christ refers to "what he did," or the accomplishment that theologically is called "atonement." Atonement means the "making as one again" what had become broken, alienated, and estranged. Presbyterians join with other Christians in saying that God did not abandon sinful humanity, staying aloof in heaven, but that in Jesus, God became personally involved in repairing broken human beings. In Jesus Christ, the holy God became "God is with us" (Matthew 1:23c, quoting Isaiah 7:14; 8:8, 10).

But how did God do this? How did Jesus Christ accomplish the "work" of atonement? Over the years, at least three general interpretations of atonement have been described and argued. Presbyterians have found meaning and value in all three.

Refer elders to the statements listed on the wall chart. Statement A is often referred to as the "Christ the Victor" atonement theory. Statement B is often referred to as the "substitution" theory. Statement C can be referred to as the "moral influence" theory of atonement. All three theories are based in scripture.

Regardless of the atonement theory to which one subscribes, they all point to one extraordinary fact – Jesus Christ was no ordinary man. Because of who he was and what he did, Jesus repaired the broken relationship between humanity and God and continues to do so today.

Read together from *Living Faith* 3.4.1 to 3.4.3.

Close this study/worship time by reading Ephesians 2:4–10.

³ Geneva Press, 2000, pp. 30–31.

8 The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

As people gather

As elders are gathering, play a recording of the “Hallelujah Chorus” from Handel’s *Messiah*.

Presentation

Say: *In his book Christian Doctrine, Shirley Guthrie makes this statement:*

If it could be said that the whole of the Christian faith stands or falls with any one claim, the claim that God raised the crucified Jesus from the dead is that claim. Without faith in a risen and living Christ there would be no Christianity.⁴

Divide your session members into two groups. Invite one group to list reasons why the resurrection is important and meaningful to them. Invite the other group to list reasons why the “modern mind” or your unchurched neighbour might have difficulty with resurrection. When both groups have completed their task, ask the “modern mind” group to read a statement. Then ask the first group to read a statement of why resurrection is important and meaningful to them.

When you have finished reading all statements alternately, allow some time for quiet reflection. Invite people to make observations and comments.

Read together from *Living Faith* 3.5.1 to 3.5.5.

Close this study/worship time by singing a hymn – #340 (At the name of Jesus) or #523 (Christ has died; Christ is risen).



4 Westminster John Knox Press, 1994, p. 171.

9 The Holy Spirit

As people gather

Prior to the meeting, post these three statements on chart paper:

- The Spirit is at work in God's creation and preservation of the world and human life.
- The Spirit of God is the source of human culture, art, creativity and wisdom.
- The Spirit of God is on the side of all who are helpless, poor, wretched and oppressed.

Also prior to the session meeting, write on separate index cards the following passages: Genesis 1:2; Genesis 2:7; Psalm 104:30; Exodus 31:1–6; Job 32:8; Isaiah 11:1–5; Isaiah 61:1–4. Provide Bibles and ask elders to look up one of the passages and mark the Bible with their index card.

Presentation

Invite individual elders to read their scripture passage aloud. As a group, decide which of the three posted statements the scripture best describes. Tape that card near that statement.

Say: The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the triune God, with us before time began. The Bible passages we read were all from the Old Testament. Listen now to a description of the gifts of the Spirit found in the New Testament. (Read 1 Corinthians 12.)

Read together from Living Faith 4.1.1 to 4.3.5.

Close this study/worship time by giving elders a "gift" – a handwritten note describing the gifts you see in them. Express gratitude that God has led them to share these gifts with Christ's church.

10 Justification by Faith

As people gather

Provide sheets for people to write a cinquain (pronounced sin-cane) on faith.

A cinquain poem has five lines with the following form:

Line 1: Title (a noun, one word)

Line 2: Describes the title (two words)

Line 3: Action words or phrase about title (three words)

Line 4: Describes a feeling about title (four words)

Line 5: Refers to title (one word)

You may provide an example using "Jesus" instead of "faith."

Jesus
Most understanding
Taught by example
Good news to all
Love

Presentation

Say: *An important belief for Presbyterians is that we are justified by faith alone. This was a basic theme of the Protestant Reformation. The Collins English Dictionary describes the Protestant view of justification as accounting or declaring people righteous by attributing Christ's merits to the sinner. The thinking around justification by faith goes like this:*

- *We do not have to save ourselves by being good.*
- *God's love is a free gift; we cannot buy it.*
- *God already loves us and accepts us, even though we are sinners.*
- *God's love justifies us, making things right between us and God.*
- *Neither our good works nor our faith justifies us.*
- *God alone justifies us, by grace in Christ.*
- *Faith does not save us; it is our way of acknowledging that we are saved.*

Invite elders who wish to do so to read their cinquain poems on faith.

Read together from *Living Faith* 6.1.1 to 6.2.3.

Close this study/worship time with a prayer of thanksgiving for God's free grace.

11 Sanctification (To Make Holy)

As people gather

Provide a graffiti sheet and, as people gather, ask them to write words or phrases that, to them, describe the word "holy."

Presentation

Say: *The verb "to sanctify" means "to make holy." The root meaning of the word "holy" is "separate" or "different." As children of God, we are called to live "holy" lives, although many of us feel uncomfortable with that term. From the life of Jesus and in the biblical witness, we learn that a life of holiness involves self-denial and bearing a cross. As God's "holy people" we are different, and often that means confrontation with the world. Jesus describes that "differentness" in the Sermon on the Mount.⁵*

Distribute paper and a pen to each elder. As you slowly read the Sermon on the Mount, ask elders to write sentences or words that describe how they want to live out some of the commands made by Jesus. Explain that it is like a letter to Jesus. Remind the elders that Jesus spoke to particular people in particular situations. It is up to us to figure out how the teachings from the Sermon on the Mount apply to us today.

You may read all of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 – 7) or part of it.

Read together from *Living Faith* 8.1.1 to 8.1.6.

Close this study/worship time with the Lord's Prayer.

⁵ Sara Covin Juengst, *Equipping the Saints* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p. 74.

12 The Church

As people gather

Prior to the session meeting, gather art paper and markers, crayons or pastels. As people gather, invite them to “draw a picture of church.” Do not be more explicit in your instructions than that. Reassure them that artistic talent is not necessary.

Presentation

Invite people to share their pictures. Say: *What is the church? Where is the church? There is no mention of church buildings in the New Testament. Early Christians met in private homes. Only twice is the term “church” used in the four gospels (Matthew 16:18; 18:17), but several times Jesus said to the group of disciples, “You are...,” using a word image rather than an abstract definition of what the members of his church are called to be. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, he said, “You are the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13) and “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14). Similarly, Paul and other New Testament writers used images rather than definitions to suggest who the church is and what its members are commissioned to do.*⁶

Amazingly, there are at least 96 images for the church in the New Testament.

Give people, on index cards, a scripture passage that describes one of these images. Invite each elder to draw another picture of the church according to the biblical passage. When all have finished, invite them to share what they have drawn this time.

Biblical passages:

Matthew 5:13	2 Corinthians 3:3
Matthew 5:14	2 Corinthians 3:18
John 10	2 Corinthians 5:20
John 15	Ephesians 2:19
1 Corinthians 3:9	Ephesians 5:25–32
1 Corinthians 3:16	2 Timothy 2:5
1 Corinthians 12:27	1 Peter 2:9

Read together from *Living Faith* 7.1.1 to 7.1.6.

Close this study/worship time with a sentence prayer beginning with “The church exists for...”

⁶ Sara Covin Juengst, *Equipping the Saints* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p. 75.

13 Life Everlasting

As people gather

Ask elders to complete the following true/false quiz based on information in chapter 19 of *Christian Doctrine*,⁷ by Shirley Guthrie.

- a. The Christian hope for individuals is hope for our own resurrection.
- b. The Christian hope for the world is that God will create a new heaven and a new earth.
- c. The justice, freedom and peace of the kingdom of God will be brought about as a result of human efforts.
- d. When we look around at the massive suffering and injustice we experience in our own lives and in the world around us, we realize it is hopeless to try to alleviate that suffering.
- e. What happens at death is that our bodies die but we ourselves live on and return to the spiritual realm from which we came and to which we really belong.
- f. The Bible says that death is not so bad after all, because we do not actually die.
- g. In the Old Testament, everyone who dies goes to the same place, Sheol, where the dead have a shadowy kind of existence.
- h. The Bible's description of hell as a place of fire is to be taken literally.
- i. The last judgment will come as good news for everyone.
- j. We look forward to a future in which we, the bodily creaturely persons we are now, will live in communion with God and other people.

Answers: (The correct answers from in the book are in parentheses.)

a. True; **b.** True; **c.** False (Correct answer: The kingdom of God will come at the end of history as the result of what only God can and will do. See *Christian Doctrine*, p. 375); **d.** False (Correct answer: For Christians to fall into such hopelessness is sin, a lack of faith and hope in the triune God they confess. See *Christian Doctrine*, p. 376); **e.** False (Correct answer: This is unacceptable from a biblical point of view, which holds that the soul is not the divine part of us but simply the breath of life. It is as mortal as our bodies. See *Christian Doctrine*, p. 379); **f.** False (Correct answer: This is unacceptable from a biblical point of view, which holds that the soul is not the divine part of us but simply the breath of life. It is as mortal as our bodies. See *Christian Doctrine*, p. 379); **g.** True; **h.** False (Correct answer: Biblical language about the future is metaphorical or symbolic. For the people of Jesus' time, fire was a symbol of the destruction of everything displeasing to God. See *Christian Doctrine*, p. 383); **i.** True (See *Christian Doctrine*, pp. 387–388); **j.** True

Presentation

Review the statements with the session and give the correct answers. Allow time for questions and discussion.

Read together from *Living Faith* 10.1 to 10.7.

Close this study/worship time with the reading of 1 Corinthians 15:35–50 or 1 John 3:2.

⁷ Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

Session Starters

The Ministry of Elders

1 Pastoral Care and the Sanctuary

Prayer

God of light and truth, by your gracious mercy, you have called us to lead and serve the church as ruling and teaching elders. By your Spirit, you empower us to take our place in the body of Christ and to care for our congregation. As we meet together, grant us clarity of mind, quietness of spirit and integrity of purpose so that all we do may be according to your will. We pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Introduction

Chapter 3 of the *Book of Forms* deals with matters relating directly to the ministry of sessions within The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Within chapter 3, section 110 states, in part, “The session is responsible for...the pastoral care of all persons within the fellowship of the congregation.”

Pastoral care is an essential element within the body of Christ and is one of the most powerful ways that we can demonstrate the love of God to one another. Pastoral care can't be left to the minister alone. It is something everyone within the congregation must strive to share. As spiritual leaders within the congregation, however, elders have a special responsibility to see that members and adherents receive the care they need.

Scripture

(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)

Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it – not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. (1 Peter 5:1–4)

A brief commentary

(Invite another elder to read the following commentary.)

From the earliest years of Christianity, elders were appointed to be shepherds of the church of God (Acts 14:23, 20:28). As a fellow elder, Peter notes some of the possible perils and ponderous privileges that come with the eldership. He warns elders to resist the temptation to abuse the power that may accompany the role, and encourages them to serve willingly and humbly, like a shepherd caring for sheep. All this is done for the sake of the Chief Shepherd.

Reflection

There are a vast number of ways in which elders can apply pastoral care within a congregation, but this devotional ponders how pastoral care can be expressed in the sanctuaries of the church.

Within the context of our faith, the word “sanctuary” suggests a sacred place where worship takes place. It is a place of prayer, song and blessing. It is a place where we are particularly aware of God’s holy presence as we listen for his word. If we take the definition a step further, sanctuary can also mean a place of refuge and peace.

As you may remember, in Victor Hugo’s classic *Notre Dame de Paris*, the beautiful Esmeralda is accused of witchcraft and murder by her jilted admirer, and she is sentenced to death. While she stands on the gallows before an angry mob, the noose already encircling her neck, Quasimodo suddenly swoops down on a rope, releases Esmeralda and carries her into Notre Dame cathedral crying, “Sanctuary! Sanctuary!”

For the most part, the sanctuaries of our churches are places of sanctuary: sacred spaces of refuge and peace. There are times, however, when they are anything but. The editor of a community newspaper almost stopped going to worship because the sanctuary was, for him, becoming a place of abuse. In the time before and after worship, members of the congregation, including elders, would frequently assail him with complaints about the latest edition and suggestions for the next. He welcomed “letters to the editor,” but in appropriate ways and at appropriate times. He had come to church to be blessed; instead he was blasted. It was only after he began to let others know how he felt that sanctuary was restored.

Discussion

1. When is our sanctuary not a place of sanctuary?
2. How can we as elders ensure that sanctuary is found in the sanctuary?
3. How does the worship service provide pastoral care?
4. What new ways of providing pastoral care could be added to our worship time?
5. How could our sanctuary be open more often for people to spend time in prayer and reflection?



2 Pastoral Care and the Feeding of Sheep

Prayer

Almighty God, we have set aside this time to meet together as a session. We have come to pray, to seek your will, and to serve the church of Jesus Christ. Lead us, guide us, and bless us so that we may have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. Enable us to reach out to each other, our congregation, and the world beyond with hope, peace, love, joy and faith. We pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Introduction

Chapter 3 of the *Book of Forms* deals with matters relating directly to the ministry of sessions within The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Within chapter 3, section 110 states, in part, "The session is responsible for...the pastoral care of all persons within the fellowship of the congregation."

This is the second Session Starter to focus on the role of the elder and the responsibility of pastoral care. As noted in the first devotional, pastoral care is an essential element within the body of Christ and is one of the most powerful ways we can demonstrate the love of God to one another. It must not be left to the minister alone. It is something everyone within the congregation must strive to share. As spiritual leaders within the congregation, however, elders have a special responsibility to see that members and adherents receive the care they need. In this devotional, we ponder the connection between pastoral care and the feeding of sheep.

Scripture

(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time he said to him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep." (John 21:15–18)

A brief commentary

(Invite another elder to read the following commentary.)

The risen Jesus appeared to his disciples on the coast of the Sea of Tiberias. After a breakfast of bread and fish roasted over a small cooking fire, Jesus spoke with Peter. Peter the fisherman, still dripping wet after wading ashore from his boat, was to become Peter the shepherd. A man who had dipped nets into the sea all his life was about to be asked to take care of lambs.

Three times Jesus questioned the depth and extent of Peter's love. Three times Peter replied with faith and devotion. Three times Jesus responded to the profession of faith by saying, "Feed my sheep." This seaside moment brings to mind another time and place – the night Jesus was arrested. As Peter lurked in the shadows of the high priest's courtyard, three times he was

asked, "Aren't you one of his disciples?" Three times Peter answered emphatically, "I am not!" Moments later, he wept bitter tears of shame.

As waves lapped at his feet and birds cried in the air, the threefold denial was pardoned through a threefold profession of faith. Restored, Peter was given a nurturing ministry.

Reflection

How many of us, when we look inside ourselves, discover Peter gazing back at us? Though we generally long to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, we also find ourselves, from time to time, denying his existence. We deny him with our words and actions. The good news of God's grace is that, like Peter, we are forgiven and given nurturing ministries to fulfill. We show our love for Jesus through pastoral care – by feeding the flock of God's kingdom.

The word "pastor" is derived from the word for shepherd. When elders provide pastoral care, they care for others the way a shepherd cares for sheep. Part of that care involves seeing that the sheep are led to lush pastures and are well nourished. We provide pastoral care when we ensure God's sheep are well fed. In *Searching for Shalom*,⁸ one of her moving books of poetry, Ann Weems points to the vital nature of pastoral care.

Feeding Sheep

He said, "Feed my sheep."

There were no conditions:

Least of all, Feed my sheep if they deserve it.

Feed my sheep if you feel like it.

Feed my sheep if you have leftovers.

Feed my sheep if the mood strikes you.

if the economy's OK...if you're not too busy...

No conditions...just, "Feed my sheep."

Could it be that God's Kingdom will come
when each lamb is fed?

We who have agreed to keep covenant are called to feed sheep
even when it means the grazing will be done on our own front lawns.

Discussion

1. How many ways can we, as elders, provide pastoral care by feeding sheep?
2. How can we ensure that the young, middle aged and senior sheep of our congregation are being fed?
3. How can we feed hungry sheep in our community or other parts of the world?

8 Westminster John Knox Press, 1991.

3 Pastoral Care and the Elder's District

Prayer

Loving God, we give thanks for our congregation and the people you have placed under our care. Help us to lead them with humble faith and infectious joy. In times of discord, enable us to provide a patient, wise, forgiving and healing presence. In times of harmony, may we soar on wings like eagles. As we meet together as a court of your church, we pray that the meditations of our hearts, the words or our lips, and the actions of our hands will be pleasing in your sight. This we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Introduction

Chapter 3 of the *Book of Forms* deals with matters relating directly to the ministry of sessions within The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Section 109.4 states, "The session shall assign the names of all members and adherents to the elders who shall keep a list of the names and addresses of those assigned to them, and shall cultivate a personal relationship with those persons through visiting, counselling and encouraging them in the Christian life."

This is the third Session Starter in a series on pastoral care and the session. Today we reflect on elder districts. As stated in previous Session Starters, pastoral care should not be left solely to the minister. It is something everyone within the congregation must strive to share. As spiritual leaders, however, elders have a special responsibility to see that members and adherents receive the care they need. Clustering them into districts under the attention of elders is one way this care is provided. In Romans 12:9–16, we discover just one of many biblical descriptions of what it means to share Christian love within community.

Scripture

(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. (Romans 12:9–16)

A brief commentary

(Invite another elder to read the following commentary.)

Christian love possesses a power to transform every sort of human relationship. By the grace of God, it reaches beyond the restrictive limits we often set for our love and embraces an ever-widening circle of people and situations. In this snippet from Paul's letter, he recognizes affliction, privation, persecution and sorrow as part of the human condition, but urges Christians to love and care for each other in practical ways that push through the superficial and encourage individuals to genuinely rejoice and mourn together.

Reflection

The elder's district has been an essential element in the life of Presbyterian congregations for a long time. Why do we have them?

Louis Tamminga, a Christian Reformed Church pastor, described the importance of districts in his book, *Guiding God's People in a Changing World: A Handbook for Elders*.⁹

Having your own district enables you to develop a personal relationship with a limited number of parishioners... You accompany them on their pilgrimage. You get to know them, you share their sorrows and joys, and you witness their struggles toward growth... In order to be a spiritual blessing to your people, you must become acquainted with them... When they have particular problems and personal pain, they will appreciate your concern and empathy. In times of good fortune, they will appreciate your interest.

John R. Cameron, a Presbyterian minister, wrote a booklet entitled *Not by Constraint*¹⁰ at a time when the session of the church he was serving struggled with the question of pastoral responsibility. The booklet reflects considerable input from the elders. About districts, he wrote the following.

People in all aspects of their lives need to know by experience that the church cares about them and celebrates with them. In many cases the elder is the only instrument of care, and such caring serves as tangible evidence that God cares.

As an elder you are called to develop relationships of "friendship with a difference" within the church family. An elder is a friend who seeks to build caring relationships by supporting and encouraging those assigned to him or her.

Establishing and maintaining this kind of relationship requires time, patience, diligence, practice, tact, openness, and a willingness to listen. The relationship between you, the elder and the people is a two-way relationship. As you seek to know the people, they must learn to know you. This means sharing yourself, receiving and responding to their concern and interest in you.

In order to do this you will need to get to know each person in every household assigned, both members and adherents, children, youth and elderly. Learning to call each person by name whenever you meet, in the home, at church or on the street, is a simple way to indicate personal interest in them.

Subsequent Session Starters will explore ways of developing relationships with the people in your districts.

Discussion

1. How important are elder districts to this congregation?
2. How do elder districts stretch our understanding and application of Christian love?
3. How can elders rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn?

⁹ CRC Publications: Grand Rapids, 1998.

¹⁰ The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1989.

4 Pastoral Care and Ways of Visiting

Prayer

God of grace, we give thanks for this congregation of your people that has been entrusted to our care. By the power of your Holy Spirit, enable us to find effective ways to listen to their joy and sorrow, to offer words of comfort and guidance, and to reach out to them with compassion and friendship. Bless us, we humbly pray, as we meet together now, in the name and ministry of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Introduction

Chapter 3 of the *Book of Forms* deals with matters relating directly to the ministry of sessions within The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Section 109.4 states, "The session shall assign the names of all members and adherents to the elders who shall keep a list of the names and addresses of those assigned to them, and shall cultivate a personal relationship with those persons through visiting, counselling and encouraging them in the Christian life."

This section of the *Book of Forms* was also quoted in the previous Session Starter, in which the reflection focused on the importance of the elder's district. Today the focus will be on ways of connecting with the people in the elder's district.

Scripture

(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:28–31)

A brief commentary

(Invite another elder to read the following commentary.)

In this famous exchange, Jesus summarizes the law in the words of Deuteronomy 6:5 with Leviticus 19:18. Love for God and neighbour lies at the heart of what it means to be Christian. The second commandment helps define the first. We show our love for God when we love one another. This is a high calling and we often fall short of it. Thanks be to God for embracing grace that pardons our failures. Still, Jesus calls his followers to love neighbours by offering genuine respect, patience, kindness, support, encouragement, forgiveness and the like.

Reflection

One of the ways elders can demonstrate love for God and neighbour within the church is by cultivating personal relationships with members and adherents through visiting. There are at least three reasons, however, why this is not always a simple task.

First, while there are elders who love to call on the members and adherents of the congregation, there are others who shudder at the very thought of arranging a visit.

These elders tend not to contact their district and, therefore, do not get to know those entrusted to them.

Second, people seem to be busier and more active than ever. Even those elders who are pleased to make pastoral calls frequently find it difficult to arrange get-togethers. Trying to fit a visit between work and cottage, bridge club and Bible Study, hockey games and dance classes is a challenge, to say the least.



Photo © digitalkillee/stockphoto.com

Third, while some people are always glad to have company, others don't want to be visited. They might worship on Sundays and be involved in other activities in the church, but for reasons maybe known only to themselves, they refuse to let an elder past the doorstep.

There may be little choice but to accept the reality of the third scenario. However, elders need to recognize that it is important, whenever possible, to get to know and keep in touch with the people they are leading and serving. Consequently, it is necessary for sessions to find ways to overcome barriers to communication.

Most would agree there is no substitute for a face-to-face visit. Communication is as much a visual experience as it is an auditory one. The most effective way of building rapport is when a visit can be held in a person's home or at the local coffee shop or even on a park bench. Although likely less productive than a "private visit," elders can also connect with the people of their district in church or other places in the community where they happen to meet. Even one face-to-face meeting a year is better than none at all.

Telephone or email communication provides an alternate way to "visit." A quick call to convey news of an event at the church or simply to ask how things are going can be a helpful means of expressing interest. Many people use email regularly and might appreciate knowing they can exchange ideas and concerns with their elder this way. Some elders send out, or deliver, invitations to their members and adherents before communion services or other special events at the church. Adding a thoughtful note to the invitation will personalize it. Sending birthday and Christmas cards is another way of keeping in touch. Elders with the gift of hospitality have found inviting members from the district to their own home for a barbecue or coffee and dessert to be a wonderful experience. It serves a dual purpose of allowing the members to get to know one another as well as developing connections with the elder.

Discussion

1. What makes it difficult for elders in our church to visit the members and adherents in the congregation?
2. What visiting methods have worked well?
3. Why is it important for elders to cultivate relationships with the congregation?

5 Pastoral Care and the Value of Visiting

Prayer

God of love, for the opportunity to make friends of strangers, we praise you. For the humility to receive the support of others, we give you thanks. For the companionship that grows when children, women and men walk together in your Spirit, we are glad. For the unity of faith and purpose we share as a session, we are grateful. Bless us as we meet in your name to discern your will, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Introduction

Section 109.4 of the *Book of Forms* states, “The session shall assign the names of all members and adherents to the elders who shall keep a list of the names and addresses of those assigned to them, and shall cultivate a personal relationship with those persons through visiting, counselling and encouraging them in the Christian life.”

Scripture

(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)

Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. (Romans 12:10–16a)

A brief commentary

(Invite another elder to read the following commentary.)

This snippet from Paul’s letter to the Romans acknowledges the human realities of suffering, persecution, privation and grief. Paul also writes about affection, honour, passion, service, joy, hope, patience, perseverance, prayer, hospitality, blessings, harmony and care. These are gifts we receive from our gracious God to counter those realities. These are gifts we can share with those around us to help transform human hearts, churches and communities beyond the doors of our sanctuaries. What a wonderful difference it can make when elders serve as channels of God’s gifts as they provide pastoral care.

Reflection

Even though nearly everyone is pressed for time these days, elders graciously use a variety of ways to keep in touch with members and adherents. There is great value in “cultivating a personal relationship” with those in our care. Consider the following four statements.

1. Thirty minutes of intentional conversation can help us get to know the history, celebrations, needs, faith and expectations of those in our care more effectively than 30 weeks of greeting them at church.
2. We can build a degree of trust through regular, meaningful contact. That trust may enable us to genuinely “rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep” and allow those we care for to be more open with us.

3. The lonely and sick, especially those in institutions, generally welcome our friendship.
4. Knowing the people of the congregation more completely helps us to lead the congregation in ways that will be meaningful and a blessing to them.

Discussion

Invite the session to talk about the above four statements. Are they true or false in their experience? List other benefits of regular contact with the congregation and discuss how they make a difference in the way the congregation worships and serves God.

6 Theology and Polity – Law and Order

Prayer

God of order and light, we open our hearts and minds to you in prayer. As we pray, think and speak together, keep before us the needs of this congregation and your precious people throughout the world. Enable us, by the power of your Spirit, to become agents of order and light as we reach out in the love of Christ Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.

Introduction

The *Book of Forms* is described in its preface as “a summary of the approved practice of Presbyterian Churches, supplemented by specific regulations enjoined by The Presbyterian Church in Canada from time to time, and as a guide to the office-bearers of the church in all ordinary matters, and as setting forth the law and practice of the church.”

The *Book of Forms* does not provide rules for every eventuality that may arise as we go about being the church. It does, however, lay down basic principles of impartial fairness that enables us to govern ourselves in an orderly and just way. This Session Starter focuses on the need for law and order.

Scripture

(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. (Genesis 1:1–5)

A brief commentary

(Invite another elder to read the following commentary.)

The opening verses of Genesis remind us that God is a God who brings order out of chaos. A shadowy and formless void is transformed by the creative power of God. The darkness is measured and balanced by light as day and night follow each other. Beautiful and intricate life forms emerge. And it is good.

Reflection

Law & Order is a long-running television drama series appearing on NBC. Each week New York City crimes are investigated, suspects are apprehended and the accused are prosecuted. Whatever you think of the program, we all know that law is needed if any kind of order is to follow. Can you imagine what it would be like if there were no traffic laws? Imagine trying to get about in an automobile if there were no speed limits, no stop signs, no traffic lights, no driving lanes. The resulting chaos is almost unimaginable. In a similar way, the church needs laws to help us travel in an orderly, consistent, fair and compassionate manner.

Sometimes at a session meeting, in the midst of a debate, an elder might ask, "Well, what does the *Book of Forms* say about this?" Eyes may roll. Another elder might mutter, "Who cares?" These sentiments are expressed by those who believe the *Book of Forms* is designed to make church life miserable. In reality, it has been crafted over many years by devoted and thoughtful people and adopted by General Assemblies for the purpose of making Christian life in community possible. When sessions understand the legislation and the justice of the legislation, there may be a greater appreciation for the blessing of legislation.

Very often sessions and congregations find themselves mired in shadowing voids of chaos simply because they did not follow the direction of the *Book of Forms*. The laws of the church are designed to help us to carry out the ministry of Jesus Christ in a way that truly blesses the whole people of God.

Climbing down Mount Sinai with tablets of stone tucked under his arm, Moses reminds us that our God is a law-giving God (Exodus 20). The Apostle Paul, scratching out a letter to the Corinthians, reminds us that the church is called to carry out the ministry of Christ decently and in order, a favourite Presbyterian phrase (1 Corinthians 14:40). God's people are called to live together in ways that are pleasing to our creator. The *Book of Forms* helps us achieve this lofty goal. It is a guide for a denomination that seeks to be true to scripture in relation to the way we function as a church.

Whether your session is discussing the calling of a minister, the election of elders, the recording of session minutes, or any other matter, it is important to know the content of the *Book of Forms*. The *Book of Forms* has 451 sections in it and can be a bit daunting. Please feel free to contact the General Assembly Office if you ever need help sorting through our legislation.

Discussion

1. Describe a time when the session became mired in chaos by not following the *Book of Forms*?
2. Describe a time when the session found the *Book of Forms* to be particularly helpful?

7 Theology of Polity – Christocracy or Democracy?

Prayer

King of Kings and Lord of Lords, in humble service we bow before your awesome majesty. As your servants we have gathered at this time and in this place to make decisions that, we trust, will honour you and build up the church. Guide us, we pray, by the power of the Holy Spirit. In the name of Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

Introduction

Section 241 of the *Book of Forms* notes that upon the induction of a minister, the moderator of presbytery will extend the right hand of fellowship saying, “In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the only King and Head of the Church, and by the authority of the Presbytery..., I induct you to the pastoral charge of this congregation, and admit you to all the rights and privileges thereto pertaining.”

Every time we hear these words we are reminded that all who serve in the church do so under the kingship of Jesus Christ. He is our sovereign Lord. This is a basic principle underlying why we govern ourselves the way we do in the church. This Session Starter explores the idea that Presbyterian government is a Christocracy rather than a pure democracy.

Scripture

(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:20–23)

A brief commentary

(Invite another elder to read the following commentary.)

This passage contains one of those powerful ironies of our faith. The Christ who was beaten and humiliated on the cross by ordinary soldiers and a jeering mob is not only raised from death, but is placed above all “rule and authority and power and dominion” forever. God has elevated the scarred and broken Jesus and made him the supreme head over the universal church.

Reflection

It is a common misconception that The Presbyterian Church in Canada operates as a democracy. While it is true our polity provides for group debate and reaches decisions by majority votes and consensus, it is not purely a democratic system.

Stephen Hayes, in his booklet *The Presbyterian Church Upside-Down* (Presbyterian Publications, 1979, p. 34), writes,

The [Presbyterian] system by and large works very well and allows many people a participation in the decision-making process, an important factor in keeping people involved in the life of the Church. So similar is the system to

the concept of representative government that it is sometimes confused with democracy. When this confusion is made, it is to have the system upside-down. The basic nature of Presbyterian Church government is theocratic (from God) and not democratic (from the people).

In a similar vein, The Rev. Dr. Tony Plomp, long-time columnist for the *Presbyterian Record*, wrote the following in an essay about Presbyterian polity.

And so, a critical New Testament insight is that the Church is not ruled from *below* by its members. It is ruled from *above* by Christ. It is a "Christocracy," and not primarily a representative democracy. This is so important. Many of the questions I get for my column in the *Record* protest at actions of the church which appear not to be "democratic," which fly in the face of the popular notion that the will of the people is the will of God. But, as Karl Barth has said, "True church law arises from hearing the voice of Jesus Christ as attested in Holy Scripture."

A session is not primarily a gathering of women and men representing the will of their districts the way we expect politicians to represent their ridings. Of course elders ought to care about individuals in the congregation, but just because Mr. X and a few of his friends are vociferously opposed to moving worship from 11:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. does not necessarily mean the hour of worship should remain unchanged. Elders are elected and ordained to seek the will of Christ and to guide the church according to biblical precepts.

The session is not responsible to the congregation, but to God, and is under the authority of the presbytery, synod and General Assembly. Under the guidance of the session, there are times when congregational meetings are held and votes taken as a further way of discerning the will of God. Still, it is the session that leads, serves and governs the congregation in a posture of openness to the triune God.

Discussion

1. Talk about an occasion when the "will of the people" might have been different from the "will of God" as discerned by the session?
2. How do elders respond to the wishes of members of the church when they are contrary to the decisions of the session?



8 Theology of Polity – Tyranny and Sin

Prayer

God of love, we assemble in this place as people who have fallen short of your glory. We only dare to call on you in prayer because you have redeemed us by your grace and the atoning sacrifice of Christ Jesus. With this assurance, we seek wisdom to conduct the business of this court in a spirit of harmony, humility, and with compassion for your people in this congregation, this presbytery, this denomination, and around the world. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

Introduction

Section 4 of the *Book of Forms* is listed as one of the Basic Principles of the General Rules for Church Courts. The language of this section is somewhat dated. This should not be surprising since it comes from the Second Book of Discipline, a polity statement adopted by the 1578 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Nevertheless, these few words point to the theology that undergirds the Presbyterian way of making decisions through groups of people rather than by assigning too much power to individuals: “‘To take away all occasion of tyranny,’ our Lord wills that office-bearers in his Church ‘should rule with mutual consent of brethren [sic], and equality of power, every one according to his function.’ (Book of Discipline II, 4)”

Scripture

(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. (John 8:3–9)

A brief commentary

(Invite another elder to read the following commentary.)

The Pharisees hoped to ensnare Jesus. If Jesus allowed the woman to be executed, he would be guilty of contradicting his own doctrine of mercy and pardon. If he acquitted the woman, then he would be guilty of contradicting the law of Moses. For a time Jesus remained silent while writing some unrevealed message in the sand at his feet. When he finally spoke, he escaped the snare by neither commenting on the law nor pardoning the woman. In one instant, Jesus led the woman to repentance by showing her mercy and exposed the prosecutors to their own guilt. With fresh awareness of their own disobedience before God, one by one, they slipped away.

Reflection

Why is it that Presbyterians normally make decisions in groups? Why is it that we are so quick to form committees? Why is it that we govern our church through sessions, presbyteries, synods and General Assemblies?

The answer is twofold and theological. First, Presbyterians believe this method of government reflects a New Testament image of the early church. The second point, which is the focus of this Session Starter, is that we make decisions and govern ourselves in groups because we take sin seriously. Even though we believe we are set free from the bondage of sin by Christ's redemptive work on the cross, we know human beings are susceptible to temptation and regularly fall short of the glory of God. Selfishness and sin are so pervasive in this world that it is unavoidable. Even Christ's church is not immune. Any one of us can be lured by selfish interests to make decisions that are self-serving or even detrimental to the well-being of others. Like those ready to stone the adulteress to death, not one of us is without sin.

For this reason, we embrace a form of decision-making and church government that makes very sure that power is not vested in individuals acting alone. Though committee work can be cumbersome and frustrating, and though committees have been humorously defined as gatherings where the unwilling are led by the incapable to accomplish the unnecessary, we still believe that decisions made in groups are usually better than decisions made by individuals.

Working together in groups allows collective wisdom and experience to be applied to the project at hand rather than the more narrow perspective of an individual. Working in groups means there are others involved to hold us accountable for what we say and do, and therefore self-serving temptations can be minimized or eliminated. Working in groups can keep in check individuals who are power hungry, domineering, controlling or even threatening in the way they participate in a decision-making process. Working in groups is a serious attempt to rule with mutual consent and to take away all occasions of tyranny.

Discussion

1. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the "committee of one."
2. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of making decisions in groups.
3. Discuss examples of how God speaks to the church through the collective participation of session, presbytery, synod or General Assembly.
4. How could our session or committees be more efficient?



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9 Theology of Polity – Truth and Justice

Unison prayer

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust.

Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation.

Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;

According to your steadfast love, remember me for your goodness sake.

In the name of Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

Introduction

In section 395 of the *Book of Forms*, we find described the grounds upon which a prior judicial decision may be appealed. For example, such a decision may be appealed if it is believed prejudice or injustice played an unfair role in the decision-making process. Clearly, as a Christian church, we want to guard against prejudice and injustice creeping into anything we do. This is an important principle upon which our legislation is based.

In this Session Starter, we are reminded that our polity is designed to help us deal with the life of the church in ways that are intended to be impartial and fair to all.

Scripture

(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)

“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6–8)

A brief commentary

(Invite another elder to read the following commentary.)

Micah recognized that God’s people may have confused a form of worship with faithfulness to God. They had come to believe acts of sacrifice were sufficient to honour and serve their creator. In an exaggerated way, Micah caused his listeners to understand that God could not be bought by the sheer volume or the enormity of their offerings. Instead, Micah pointed to a more challenging path. God’s people are not to be identified by ritual, but by the nature of their daily living. God’s people are to be identified as those who act justly, who embrace mercy and kindness, and seek to walk the righteous paths of God.

Reflection

Fortunately, now that my daughters are young women who genuinely enjoy each other’s company, I rarely have to leap into their sibling rivalries to act as judge and jury. There was a time when I did – frequently. I might, for example, see Anna snatch the only good badminton racquet out of Lucy’s hands and drop the one with a couple

of broken strings at her feet as they make their way into the yard to whack the birdie about.

Lucy shouts, "Hey, that's not fair. You had the good racquet yesterday!"

Anna replies, "Who cares? You couldn't make a good shot if your life depended on it. I deserve the good one."

If the argument continued and seemed destined to dissolve into tears or possible violence (most likely pinching), I'd intervene by saying something like, "Anna, you need to take turns. Let Lucy use the good racquet today."

"You're always on Lucy's side!" Anna would undoubtedly moan.

Then, sounding vaguely like Superman, I would make my well-worn declaration. "I'm not on anybody's side. I'm on the side of truth and justice."

As this Session Starter continues with the theme of the theology of our polity, we are reminded that the *Book of Forms* is meant to provide the church with an impartial method of handling the broad variety of issues with which we are faced. In the purest sense, our polity ought to guard against favouritism or the temptation to sweep conflict under the carpet. Whether we are dealing with issues of church discipline, electing elders, calling a minister, or conducting a congregational meeting, the guidance of the polity should move us to the side of truth and justice. Since we are susceptible to self-serving sin, it is tempting sometimes to invent our own methods for handling church matters. When we do, however, the results are very often less than fair and objective.

Imagine, for example, a session has decided to elect elders. The minister might desperately want to hand-pick Ms. Bea Quick and Mr. I.M. Wise, partly because they would make good elders, but also because they are personal friends who would almost certainly support the minister's vision for the congregation. The minister might suggest bypassing the "rigmarole" of the prescribed elder election methods and simply have the two people declared elders by the session. In elder elections, the polity of our church provides the congregation with an opportunity to ponder what it means to be an elder, to pray about the decision, to think about the gifts God has planted in their midst, and to discern God's will for the congregation. All this is meant to serve as an unbiased method of calling women and men to serve the church in a vitally important role.

Though there are times when our polity can seem cumbersome, it has been carefully crafted, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit through General Assemblies, to serve individuals and the whole church by helping us to act justly, and to embrace mercy and kindness while walking God's paths of righteousness and truth.

Discussion

List examples of how our polity of decision-making (prayer, study, recommendation, debate, voting) can help us avoid tyranny, favouritism or prejudice and draw us onto paths of truth and justice.



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10 Who Are We to Make Decisions for the Congregation?

Unison prayer

Living God, by your grace we have gathered for this session meeting. We assemble with personal concerns and pastoral concerns for the congregation on our minds. Bless us with the patience to hear and understand one another as fully as possible. Bless us with wisdom to know your truth. Bless us with the courage to apply your truth to the decisions we need to make. Help us to be your faithful servants. Through Christ Jesus our Lord we pray. Amen.

Introduction

Within our church, the session possesses significant power and authority. Section 109 of the *Book of Forms* states that the session meets “for the purpose of establishing good order and providing for the pastoral care of the congregation. All who are members are subject to the authority and discipline of the session.” We ought not to treat this authority carelessly. As a session, we have been called by God to make wise and holy decisions on behalf of the members and adherents of our church.

Scripture

(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)

After they [Paul and Barnabas] had proclaimed the good news to that city [Derbe] and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, then on to Iconium and Antioch. There they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, “It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God.” And after they had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe. (Acts 14:21–23)

A brief commentary

(Invite another elder to read the following commentary.)

The first time Paul and Barnabas visited Lystra, the locals eagerly mistook them for the Greek gods Zeus and Hermes when Paul healed a lame man (see Acts 14:8–19). Paul quickly convinced them that he and Barnabas were mere mortals who had come to tell them about the living God. While some believed, others were persuaded to attack Paul with stones and leave him for dead. Paul survived and fled to Derbe. After a time there he risked returning to Lystra, where he encouraged the believers. Between this first and second visit, it had become clear who among the Lystra believers possessed gifts suitable for the office of elder. With prayer and fasting, Paul appointed them leaders to oversee and guide this community of faith.

Reflection

Two thousand years of history have slipped by since Paul and Barnabas appointed elders to provide leadership to the fledgling community of faith in Lystra. We continue to emulate this ancient model and appoint elders within our congregations through an election and discernment process. We do so in the faith that God calls women and men to this ministry through the fervent prayer and the careful thinking of

congregations. We are reminded, therefore, that elders must not be selected on the basis of popularity or as a reward for years of service. The choice must always be grounded in the understanding that God gives some gifts to provide a specific kind of ministry within congregations. As stated in *Living Faith* 7.2.4:

Through the office of ruling elder
men and women are ordained
to share with the minister
in the leadership, pastoral care,
and oversight of the congregation.

In order to provide leadership, pastoral care, and oversight within a congregation, the session must exercise a certain amount of authority. This authority makes some elders nervous, possibly because, in our society, authority is often abused by those who have it and mistrusted by those who do not.

A while ago, I was moderating a session meeting. As we drew near the point of voting on a recommendation that would have a significant impact on the congregation, one of the elders almost frantically asked, "Who are we to make decisions on behalf of the congregation?" To this elder it seemed dangerously presumptuous for the session to make decisions affecting the rest of the congregation.

Ironically, this is exactly what sessions are meant to do. Called by God, we are to use the gifts of God to lead and serve the people of God. The constitution of The Presbyterian Church in Canada entrusts sessions with significant power. Naturally, the authority bestowed upon elders is meant for the good of the church and should never be used for self-serving purposes.

There are times when surveys are helpful. A session that wanted to move worship from 11:00 a.m. to an earlier time sent a questionnaire to the congregation in order to find out what new time suited most of the people. While a questionnaire can discover what a congregation prefers, ultimately it is the session that must decide what time the congregation will meet for worship.

There are situations when congregational voting is necessary, such as during the call to a minister or when decisions are made at congregational meetings. Still, the responsibility for the life of the congregation rests with the session. A quick glance at the headings scattered through the Session portion of the *Book of Forms* makes this clear. The session is responsible for seeking out, preparing and admitting professing members, for providing Christian education, for all aspects of stewardship, for mission and outreach, and much more.

As elders, we should do all we can to ascertain the needs and expectations of the members and adherents of our congregation. We bring this knowledge to each session meeting. Then we must not shrink from our calling to make decisions, some of them difficult decisions, on behalf of the congregation in faithful obedience to scriptures and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Who are we to make decisions for the congregation? We are the session.

Discussion

1. What authority figures or institutions do you trust? Why?
2. What authority figures or institutions do you not trust? Why?
3. Discuss a time when the session's authority has been challenged or questioned? Why did that happen?
4. Discuss a time when the session used its authority to make an unpopular but necessary decision.

11 Why Do Presbyterians Hold Annual Congregational Meetings?

Unison prayer

Eternal God, the lamp for our feet, the light for our way;
let us hear of your steadfast love in the morning, for in you we put our trust.
Teach us the way we should go, for to you we lift up our souls.
Save us, O Lord, from our enemies; we have fled to you for refuge.
Teach us to do your will, for you are our God.
Let your good spirit lead us on a level path. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.
(Based on Psalm 143:8–10)

Introduction

Section 153 of the *Book of Forms* states, “Every congregation should hold an annual meeting for receiving the report of the board of managers or the deacons’ court, and transacting any other business regularly brought before it. It is recommended that the annual report be printed and circulated among the members of the congregation.”

For this reason, congregations all across Canada faithfully print annual reports, gather in church halls, discuss plans, and vote on a variety of recommendations. We guard against allowing such an assembly to become repetitive and mundane when we remember that this is one more way in which a congregation seeks to discern the will of God.

Scripture

(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)

[Following the death of Judas, it was agreed that someone should be chosen to take his place. Peter said,] “So one of the men who have accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us – one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles. (Acts 1:21–26)

A brief commentary

(Invite another elder to read the following commentary.)

The apostles were faced with a decision regarding their ongoing ministry. What discernment process did they follow?

First, they used their minds. The apostles identified a need. Their group required one more member. They further pondered the qualifications the new member ought to possess. The candidate should be someone who had been with them, at least on the periphery, from the baptism of Jesus through to his ascension. Two people possessed these credentials. Second, they prayed. The apostles opened their hearts and minds to the leading of God’s spirit. Third,

they made a decision. They “voted” by way of “casting lots.” Whether they tossed a dice or drew straws, a thoughtful, prayerful decision was made. God’s will was discerned. Mathias became an apostle.

Reflection

The words “annual meeting” probably conjure up a range of images, thoughts and emotions for everyone in this room. The event itself may be one people eagerly anticipate, anxiously dread, or treat with bored indifference.

Regardless of how we approach the annual meeting, it can be encouraging to remember that the meeting is a significant part of our congregation’s journey of faith. We gather to decide on how we will be the body of Christ. Together, we seek consensus on how we will spend the time, talents and treasures God has entrusted to our care.

Of course, adopting a budget for the new year is generally a major focus of the meeting. It might be useful for us to think of the budget not as just another column of numbers but as a promise of how our congregation will glorify and enjoy God over the next year. The budget tells a story about how much we intend to invest in children, young people, families and individuals within the congregation, the municipality and the world. It describes some of the ways we can demonstrate love for God and neighbour (Matthew 22:37–39), make disciples (Matthew 28:19), rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, and persevere in prayer (Romans 12:12).

Above all, the annual meeting is an opportunity for our congregation to seek God’s will, to listen for God’s guiding voice, then to walk humbly with our God.

In the pursuit of this high calling, we can look to the disciples as role models. Like the disciples, we ought to use the minds God has given us to think clearly about how to be a Christian community. Like the disciples, we must come together in prayer, to open ourselves to God’s spirit and leading. Like the disciples, we need to make decisions and move on in faithful service. Like the disciples, we must try to discern the will of God and be directed by it.

Teach us the way we should go, for to you we lift up our souls.

Teach us to do your will, for you are our God.

(Psalm 143)

Discussion

1. What do the words “annual meeting” mean to you?
2. Talk about a negative experience at an annual meeting. What lesson can be learned from that experience?
3. Talk about a positive experience at an annual meeting. What made it positive?
4. Someone once said, “I wish God would use email so I’d know what to do.” Figuring out God’s will is not simple. Talk about a time when you believe the congregation clearly discerned God’s will.

12 Keeping the Lines of Communication Open

Prayer

"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'" (Isaiah 52:7)

Almighty God, bless us with peace as we consider the amazing celebrations and challenging concerns of this congregation and your church in the world. Grant us new courage and energizing imagination as we consider novel ways of announcing your good news on brilliant mountaintops and dark valleys. May the sure and certain hope of salvation renew our commitment as leaders within this congregation as we meet together in your holy name, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Introduction

Section 109.1 of the *Book of Forms* states, "The session is responsible for the supervision and oversight of all associations of members and adherents connected with the congregation." In part this means the session needs to maintain strong communication links with individuals, groups and the congregation as a whole.

Scripture

(Invite an elder to read John 13:1–16.)

A brief commentary

(Invite another elder to read the following commentary.)

Foot washing was something slaves did for their masters or children for their parents. A rabbi did not wash the feet of disciples! Jesus, however, even washed the feet that would soon run to betray him. Here we witness, once again, God's amazing grace reflected in the Son.

Reflection

We, as Christians and elders, are called to follow this example of our Lord. One of the ways we humbly serve others is by communicating well with the congregation in our care.

Sessions are sometimes accused of being "a secret society" that deliberately keeps those on the outside in the dark. Too often, sessions are "guilty as charged"; however, this behaviour is probably unintentional, more often than not. Elders, who are "in the know" regarding the current ministries and future plans of the church, must constantly remember to share with individuals, groups and the congregation as a whole, decisions made by the session whenever possible. While some matters must remain confidential, there is much that can and ought to be conveyed. This might result in a telephone call to an individual affected by session decisions, a regular column in the newsletter, or a report from the session after each meeting through the Sunday announcements.

We are leaders, but also servants. We serve well, and often foster a fruitful spirit of trust and tranquility, when we ensure there is clear and frequent communication between session and congregation.

Discussion

1. Has this session been criticized for being too secretive?
2. How can we communicate more clearly and frequently with the congregation?

13 Confidentiality and the Session

Prayer

God of truth and peace, we have gathered in this place and at this time to fulfill our calling as elders within this congregation. Help us to act justly, to love kindness and to walk humbly with you by the power of the Holy Spirit and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Introduction

Sections 120 and 120.1 of the *Book of Forms* deal with the confidentiality of the session. In part, they state, "Meetings of session are not open to the congregation; but the session may hold open meetings when deemed advisable. In dealing with matters affecting the good name of members of the congregation, the session, and all members thereof, must observe strict privacy."

Scripture

(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)

Jesus said, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets." (Matthew 7:12)

A brief commentary

(Invite another elder to read the following commentary.)

Jesus teaches his followers not only what to believe, but how to live. In this instance, Jesus helps his followers behave in a way that ought to be just, kind and humble, by impressing upon them the importance of treating others as they themselves would want to be treated.

Charles Spurgeon wrote, "This is the golden rule, a handy rule, a perpetually-applicable rule, useful in every condition, and it never makes a mistake."

Reflection

Christians share the essence of what we call "The Golden Rule" with several other major religions. For example:

Buddhism: Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.

Hinduism: This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you.

Islam: Not one of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.

Judaism: What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man. This is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary.

It seems to be universally accepted that we live well together when we treat each other with the kindness, fairness and honesty we expect from others.

One way the session can fulfill this principle is by maintaining the confidentiality of the session. While it is vitally important to communicate session decisions with the congregation, there are times when it is just as important to keep session discussions private. Confidentiality is most often essential when session discussions centre on sensitive issues involving people.

Just as we would want the session to guard our privacy, so we must guard the privacy of others.

Disclosing confidential session information not only undermines the credibility of the session, but can be potentially harmful to the very people we want to protect. May God grant us the strength and wisdom to keep private what needs to be kept private.

Discussion

1. By maintaining strict confidentiality of the session, how do we fulfill the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 7:12?
2. What sort of session discussions and decisions ought to be kept confidential?

14 Seeking, Preparing and Admitting Professing Members

Prayer

Welcoming God, who called Abraham and Sarah, disciples and outcasts, children and adults to walk with you, we give thanks that we have also heard your call and responded in faith. Help us to listen for your inviting voice again today as we gather in your holy name to fulfill the high calling of the session. In the name of Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

Introduction

Section 110 of the *Book of Forms* states, in part, "The session is responsible for seeking out, preparing and admitting persons as professing members..."

Scripture

(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)

As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." Immediately they left their nets and followed him. (Matthew 4:18–20)

A brief commentary

(Invite another elder to read the following commentary.)

In this brief passage, the curtains of time are drawn back, and we catch a glimpse of Jesus calling disciples to follow him. Using terms familiar to the brothers, he said, "Let's go fishing. But instead of drawing fish from the sea, we will draw children, women and men into a kingdom of love, peace, truth and salvation."

I wonder how well Peter and Andrew, who were skilled at the ways of the sea, understood what Jesus was talking about at that moment. Nevertheless, they set down their nets and took up a new vocation. Eventually they understood that Jesus was calling them to make disciples, to baptize, and to share with others the grace and wonder of God.

Reflection

As Christians following Jesus today, we, too, are called to go fishing. We are called to do what we can to draw children, women and men into an awareness of the presence of God and to help them be infused by the grace and wonder of God.

Though the *Book of Forms* does not use the same poetic metaphor of scripture, it echoes the words of Christ when it directs sessions to seek, prepare and admit persons into the community of faith as professing members.

In some congregations this responsibility is left solely to the minister. In other congregations the session shares in this ministry. In either case, we are to be proactive. It is not enough to sit patiently and wait for young people and newcomers to ask about membership. Sessions should take the initiative and warmly encourage those who are not yet members to consider entering into a deeper fellowship with God and others in the church.

Some congregations accomplish this by holding classes that explore the theology and practice of the church while helping people discover their God-given gifts that could be employed in the congregation and beyond. Sometimes elders participate in these gatherings by telling the stories of their own faith journeys or by talking about what it means to them to serve Christ Jesus in his church. In the end, participants are invited to offer vows of membership. Actively seeking, preparing and admitting members is an effective way to help people grow in faith.

Discussion

1. How might we more actively seek and prepare new members?
2. How could elders help the minister with this ministry?

15 *Presbyterians Sharing – Tax or Opportunity?*

Prayer

Generous God, you bless us with gifts beyond measure. We give thanks for these blessings, including the blessing of this congregation, which we have been called to lead and serve. Enable us to reach into the bounty of the treasure at our disposal and to share liberally and joyfully with those in need. And grant us wisdom so that the decisions we make this day will honour you. Through Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

Introduction

Section 113.6.1 of the *Book of Forms* states, “The session will ensure that the congregation is made aware of the allocation for the General Assembly budget (known as *Presbyterians Sharing*) submitted by the presbytery, and report to the presbytery the response of the congregation to that allocation.”

Scripture

(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. (Acts 2:44–45)

A brief commentary

(Invite another elder to read the following commentary.)

The Acts of the Apostles provides a window through which we peer into the life and times of the early church. The verses above provide a quick glimpse at the way believers pooled their resources so that those who had more than enough shared with those in need.

Reflection

Some people liken *Presbyterians Sharing* to a tax: money taken from the congregation only to disappear at the national office. Others see it as an opportunity to fulfill our calling to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to comfort those who mourn, to feed the hungry, and so on.

Presbyterians Sharing is the name of the fund that supports the national programs and ministries of our denomination. All the money generously donated to it by congregations and individuals is pooled and then distributed to a wide variety of ministries in Canada and around the world. This means Presbyterians share in overseas missions; inner city, native, refugee, urban and remote ministries; hospital, prison and military chaplaincies; new church development and support for congregations in faith education, worship, evangelism, stewardship and mission education; youth ministries; justice and ecumenical work; and in the training and support of ministers. It means that the denomination's national office is supported so programs and services can be developed and maintained. It means that our church continues to do God's marvelous work in this world.

As leaders within our church, it is our joyful responsibility to learn what *Presbyterians Sharing* is all about, and to encourage our congregation to support these ministries as a vital part of walking with Christ Jesus. It enables the church to be the church in the world.

For more information visit presbyterian.ca/sharing.

Discussion

1. What is the attitude toward *Presbyterians Sharing* in this congregation?
2. How might we find new ways to help our congregation know about the many lives we touch in positive and creative ways through *Presbyterians Sharing*?
3. How do our gifts to *Presbyterians Sharing* help us fulfill our calling as a Christian community?



16 Calvin and the Sacrament of Baptism

Prayer

God of yesterday, today and forever, we give thanks for the church across the ages. We are grateful for the countless blessings handed on to us by our ancestors in the faith. We are humbled that you call us to be the body of Christ in the world today. Enable us to continue making disciples as the church moves forward in the grace and peace of Christ. Bless us, we pray, with minds and hearts open to your guiding spirit as we make decisions affecting this community of faith and beyond. Amen.

Introduction

Section 110.4 of the *Book of Forms* states, “The session is responsible for provision for the Sacrament of Baptism.”

Scripture

(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18–20)

A brief commentary

(Invite another elder to read the following commentary.)

This passage captures the parting words of Jesus, according to Matthew. With a few brief but powerful sentences, Jesus commissions his followers to carry on his teaching, preaching and healing ministry. As part of this great commission, Jesus instructs the disciples to baptize new disciples in the sacred name of the Trinity.

Reflection

The year 2009 marked the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin. This Session Starter draws attention to a little of the theology of this massively influential Reformer whose thought and writing continues to influence the Christian faith today.

Calvin penned an amazing document called *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. It was first published in Latin in 1536, when Calvin was only 27 years of age. Calvin initially wrote this theological masterpiece “to furnish a kind of rudiments, by which those who feel some interest in religion might be trained to true godliness” (preface). Just to give you some idea of the scope of this work, one edition is contained in two volumes and is spread over 1200 pages. (For an online version of the “Institutes” see www.reformed.org/master/index.html?mainframe=/books/institutes)

Since many of us were introduced to the church with a few drops of sprinkled water, it seems fitting to touch on some of what Calvin wrote about baptism. Please excuse the non-inclusive language of the 16th century.

Calvin defines baptism as “the initiatory sign by which we are admitted to the fellowship of the Church, that being ingrafted into Christ we may be accounted children of God.” Calvin goes on to explain the threefold object of baptism: (1) to attest to the forgiveness of sins, (2) to teach that we receive new life in Christ, and (3) that we are united to Christ as partakers in all his blessings (Book IV, chapter 15, section 1).

Discussion

1. How does Calvin's view of baptism compare to ours?
2. How do we convey to the family receiving this sacrament, and to the congregation, the deep spiritual significance of baptism?
3. How does the session take responsibility for baptism?

17 Calvin and the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

Prayer

God of immeasurable bounty, you have blessed creation with the Bread of Life. Help us to be nourished by our walk with Christ. You have blessed creation with the True Vine. Help us to be sustained by the spirit of Christ flowing into our hearts and souls. In the name of our savior we pray. Amen.

Introduction

Section 111.1 of the *Book of Forms* states, "The session determines the appointed times and provides for the administration of the sacraments."

Scripture

(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)

The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:23b–26)

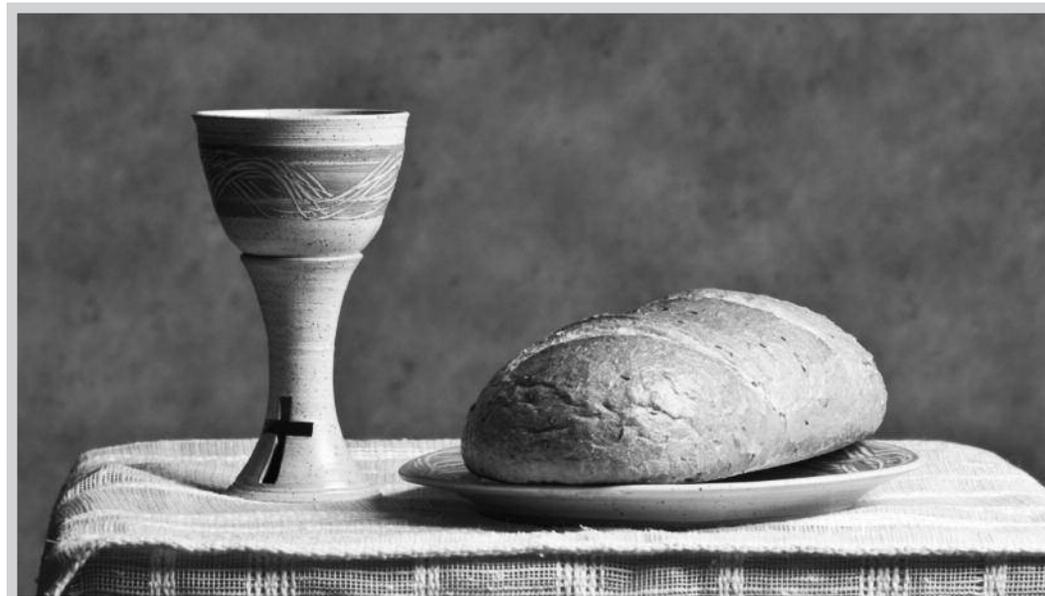


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A brief commentary

(Invite another elder to read the following commentary.)

In this portion of his letter to the Corinthians, Paul addresses the divisions that had fractured this Christian community, as well as the manner by which the Corinthians dishonoured the Lord's Supper. Paul reminds them that this holy and covenantal meal unites believers in Christ and in his ministry of reconciliation, justice and truth.

Reflection

The year 2009 marked the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin. In the last Session Starter, we noted some of Calvin's comments on baptism. This time we touch on just a bit of what Calvin had to say about the Lord's Supper in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, first published in 1536. (For an online version of the "Institutes" see www.reformed.org/master/index.html?mainframe=/books/institutes)

Calvin describes how the Lord's Supper fits into our faith journey. The journey begins with baptism and continues as we find ourselves adopted by God and serving as brothers and sisters with Christ in the church. We are continually and spiritually nourished through this sacrament.

"First, then, the signs are bread and wine, which represent the invisible food which we receive from the body and blood of Christ. For as God, regenerating us in baptism, ingrafts us into the fellowship of his Church, and makes us his by adoption, so we have said that he performs the office of a provident parent, in continually supplying the food by which he may sustain and preserve us in the life to which he has begotten us by his word" (Book IV, chapter 17, section 1).

Drawing upon the example of the scriptures, such as Acts 2:42, Calvin further maintains that Christians, at a minimum, ought to be nourished in this manner once a week rather than once a year, as was so often the custom in those days.

"Each week, at least, the table of the Lord ought to have been spread for the company of Christians, and the promises declared on which we might then spiritually feed" (Book IV, chapter 17, section 46).

Discussion

1. How does Calvin's view of the Lord's Supper compare to ours?
2. By what creative ways might we express more deeply the extraordinary spiritual truth and blessing behind the ordinary loaf of bread and the cup?

18 Calvin and Prayer

Prayer – Attributed to John Calvin

Grant, Almighty God, that since thou continue daily to restore us to thyself, both by scourges and by thy word, though we cease not to go astray after sinful desires, O grant, that by the direction of thy Spirit, we may at length so return to thee, that we may never afterwards fall away, but be preserved in pure and true obedience, and thus constantly continue in the pure worship of thy majesty and in true obedience, that after this life past, we may at last reach that blessed rest, which is reserved for us in heaven, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Introduction

Section 106.1 of the *Book of Forms* states, "An elder must be a professing member of the congregation and must be 'an example to the believers in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity' (1 Timothy 4:12)."

Scripture

(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial." (Luke 11:1–4)

A brief commentary

(Invite another elder to read the following commentary.)

The disciples, noting the deep devotion of Jesus and John the Baptist to prayer, wanted to learn how to commune with God in the same way. Jesus responded by providing a model of praise, confession and intercession that would be repeated across the ages and around the world.

Reflection

Prayer has always been an essential part of the life and practice of the followers of Jesus. As elders within a congregation, it is essential to be women and men of prayer, not only for our own spiritual benefit but also to provide a healthy example to the rest of the congregation.

The year 2009 marked the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin. In this Session Starter, we continue to reflect on Calvin's writings published in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, an introduction to the Protestant faith, first published in 1536. Here is a little of what Calvin wrote about prayer in Book III, chapter 20, section 3. (For an online version of the "Institutes" see www.reformed.org/master/index.html?mainframe=/books/institutes)

Calvin raises an interesting question about prayer that many continue to ponder today, namely, if God already knows our difficulties and our needs, is it not "superfluous to solicit him by our prayers, as if he were winking, or even sleeping, until aroused by the sound of our voice?" Calvin responds by pointing out that prayer is not so much for God's sake as it is for ours. He lists three benefits of prayer.

1. That our heart may always be inflamed with a serious and ardent desire of seeking, loving and serving him, while we accustom ourselves to have recourse to him as a sacred anchor in every necessity;
2. That no desires, no longing whatever, of which we are ashamed to make him the witness, may enter our minds, while we learn to place all our wishes in his sight, and thus pour out our heart before him;
3. That we may be prepared to receive all his benefits with true gratitude and thanksgiving, while our prayers remind us that they proceed from his hand.

Discussion

1. Write Calvin's reasons for prayer in your own words. Talk about them. Do you agree with Calvin?
2. How can elders be "an example to the believers" in terms of prayer?

Section 2

Retreats and Workshops



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Retreats and Workshops

Before the Workshop

Pre-Retreat Questionnaire for Elders

Information on this questionnaire will assist in planning and creating a helpful and specific retreat.

Name (optional) _____

1. How long have you been an elder? _____

2. How long have you belonged to this congregation? _____
Have you always been Presbyterian? If not, to which church did you previously belong? _____

3. What do you most appreciate about our church? _____

4. What aspects of eldership do you think you would like help in understanding (e.g., participation in session meetings, rules or procedures, areas of responsibility, spiritual growth)?

- _____
- _____
- _____

5. In addition to what you have noted above, which of the following areas would be helpful for you?

- Biblical or historical background on the office of eldership
- Relationship of the session to other groups in the congregation
- Responsibility of session for stewardship
- Relationship to other courts of The Presbyterian Church in Canada – presbytery, synod and General Assembly
- The pastoral care of the congregation
- Outreach programs
- Understanding the needs of various age groups
- Term eldership in the church and its relationship to being ordained an elder for life
- Voting and consensus in session meetings
- Children at the Lord's Table
- Conflict in churches
- Worship and music
- Christian education for all age groups
- Other:

Thanks to John Hibbs for providing the basis for this form.

Planning a Great Session Retreat

Rather than asking the staff or an outside resource person to plan the retreat, form a small planning group, which includes the minister.

Tasks for the Planning Group

Well in advance

- Pray. Ask God to guide you in making decisions that will be helpful and suitable for the entire group.
- Define location. Can you find a fresh setting for the retreat? In familiar surroundings it is easy to get caught up in past memories and decisions. A new location is nearly always better.
- Overcome obstacles to attendance. Think of all the reasons why people might not be able to come – childcare, work, transportation. How can each of these concerns be addressed and overcome?
- Define the purpose. Ask: Why are we doing this retreat? What outcome do we want? Choose a theme.
- Choose speakers, worship or music leaders.
- Choose date and length of retreat.
- Determine cost and whether people will be asked to contribute.
- Determine registration procedure.
- Communicate preliminary plans to the rest of the session. Solicit feedback to make sure your planning group is on the right track.

Six weeks in advance

- Begin promotion. Make a flyer with date, time, theme, what to bring, phone numbers and registration section. At your meeting, do a humorous skit – “Top Ten Reasons to Go on the Session Retreat.”

Four weeks in advance

- Check in with retreat leaders – speaker, facilitator, music/worship coordinator.
- Check registration numbers. If low, make phone calls to personally invite people.
- Send out maps to retreat centre, if needed.

Two weeks in advance

- Finalize retreat schedule. Send leaders a copy of the schedule.
- Find people to help at registration time and provide welcome. You may want to provide muffins, coffee, decorations, name tags.
- Create an evaluation form that participants can fill out prior to leaving the event.

One week in advance

- Gather needed materials – chart paper, markers, Bibles, equipment, evaluation forms.
- Ask someone to bring a camera to the retreat.

Day of the retreat

- Arrive early to set up registration table and coffee.

One week after the retreat

- Write thank-you notes to leaders.
- Meet with others on the planning group to evaluate the retreat. Ask: How will the concerns and learnings from this retreat be incorporated into the life of our church?

Retreats and Workshops

Elders as Leaders

An Outline for a Session Retreat

The following is an outline that has been used successfully in many congregations. Fill in the details to have a tailor-made retreat for your own congregation.

1. Ice-Breaker

Use an ice-breaker to help your group connect with each other, relax and have some fun together.

2. Our Tasks as Elders

On a sheet, create a checklist of some of the important functions of elders:

- Meet regularly for the purpose of establishing good order and providing pastoral care.
- Provide policy and procedures for church building and property use.
- Visit, counsel and encourage members and adherents.
- Maintain membership, baptism and adherent rolls.
- Be responsible for instruction and examination of candidates for membership.
- Be responsible for the provision of baptism.
- Regulate the hours and forms of public worship.
- Appoint an organist and other leaders of praise.
- Be responsible for the Christian education program for persons of all ages.
- Be responsible for all aspects of stewardship and mission.
- Support the minister in the performance of his or her duties.
- Be responsible for the carrying out of duties connected to presbytery, synod and the General Assembly.

Process: Divide elders into pairs. Give each pair a list of the tasks listed above. Through conversation, negotiation and consensus, rank each item from 1 to 12 (1 being most important for your congregation). When each pair has finished, create groups of four (two pairs). Compare lists and, again through conversation, negotiation and consensus, create a list that reflects the priorities of your entire session.

Ask: How are we doing as a session? Do the priorities we have listed reflect how we currently use our time? How can we increase support for areas that are receiving less attention? Highlight the priority areas on your chart. These will inform your work together in the next year.

3. Sharing Faith

Read sections about sharing faith from *Living Faith: A Statement of Christian Belief* (The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1984). Suitable sections are 8.1 and 9.1.

Invite elders to participate in an old Quaker activity called "The Four Questions." This exercise is a non-threatening way to move from well-known experiences to sharing of Christian faith. In groups of four, answer the following questions:

- Where did you live as a child and what were the winters like then?
- How was your home heated during that time?
- What was the centre of warmth in your life when you were a child?
(It could be a place in the house, a time of year, a person, etc.)
- When did God become a "warm" person to you...and how did it happen?

Here are additional sets of questions that may be chosen:

- What was the first prayer you ever learned?
- Who taught you this prayer? Tell about that person.
- Tell about a time when you prayed long and hard.
- Do you think that God answers all our prayers?

- What has been your favourite trip?
- What kinds of things do you like to do to get ready for a trip?
- Finish this sentence: The best thing about trips is...
- If life is like a trip, where do you think it will end?

- What is the smallest thing you know?
- What is the biggest thing you know?
- Who does God love more, someone with a small faith or someone with a big faith?
- If you could say something encouraging to someone who has a little faith, what would you say?

- What is your favourite animal?
- If you could choose any animal at all for a pet, what would you choose?
- Name an animal in the Bible.
- Why do you think the Bible says that we are like sheep without a shepherd?

- What is the best gift you have ever received?
- Have you ever been surprised by a gift? Tell about that.
- Why do people give each other gifts?
- Why do we say that God's Holy Spirit is like a gift to us?

4. Worship

Conclude your retreat with worship.

Retreats and Workshops

Elders as Leaders

Three Main Functions of Elders

A one-day workshop or three separate shorter workshops

This workshop focuses on three main functions of elders.

Part 1: Overseeing

Part 2: Encouragement and care of members and adherents

Part 3: Leadership

These three functions may be covered in a one-day workshop or in three separate shorter workshops.

Part 1: Overseeing (1.5 hours)

The task of the elder, along with the minister, is to see “the big picture,” to maintain a holistic overview of the whole life of the congregation and the congregation’s witness and work in the community and world.

Prepare a “big picture” chart

Prior to the meeting, on a large sheet of bristol board, create a “big picture” chart that has the mission of the church running around the edge of the chart. The mission unites and informs the entire life of the congregation. (If your congregation does not have a mission statement, this can be formulated prior to the workshop.) Divide the chart into squares. In the squares, write the names of all the programs, functioning committees and outreach endeavours of the congregation.

Using the chart

Explain the chart. Give each elder several small, round, coloured stickers. Ask elders to put a sticker on any program/committee/outreach endeavour with which they have personal contact in an overseeing capacity. For instance, one person may report that her granddaughter is in the junior choir but, other than driving her to choir practice,

she has no responsibility for oversight of what happens in that program – so no sticker is added. However, another elder may report that he chooses the music for the choir and, from time to time, fills in for the pianist. He, then, would add a sticker to that particular square in the chart, because he plays an active role in overseeing how the program operates.

When people have finished adding dots, ask these questions:

- What programs and foci receive a lot of overseeing in our congregation? Which do not receive much?
- Is it problematic that some programs do not receive much support?
- Is there a correlation between faithful and excellent functioning and the amount of overseeing that a program or committee receives?
- What do we intend to do about the things we have learned from using this chart? Make a checklist of what the group members would like to do as a result of making this chart.

Part 2: Encouragement and Care of Members and Adherents (about 1–1.5 hours)

A great deal of good pastoral care happens in conversation. Role plays are effective at honing listening skills. If participants are not accustomed to role play, demonstrate a role play with a willing partner. It is also helpful, if there is a good comfort level, to divide into groups of three. Two people can role-play while the third, at the end, provides observations and feedback – but not criticism.

Read aloud the rules for role-playing as written in the box on (p. 58). Then give each small group a slip of paper describing one of the scenarios.



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Role play situations for elder training

Rules for role playing

Each of the following role plays has two characters. Divide into pairs. Read the role play situation and agree upon who will play each part.

If you are the visitor, *avoid*:

- giving helpful suggestions (“Have you ever thought about...”)
- giving advice (“You should probably get a lawyer or...”)
- making a judgment (“What your husband did was just plain wrong...”)
- discounting (“I’m sure things will be better in the morning...”)

If you are the visitor, *do*:

- listen carefully, nodding thoughtfully, and use minimal encouragers such as “Oh, I see” or “Mmm” or “Yes.”
- ask clarifying questions (“How would you feel about that?” or “Is that the way you see things going?”)
- reflect back the feelings that seem to lie under the comments (“That must have made you incredibly sad,” or “How frustrating!”)
- rephrase or paraphrase what is said (“So you are thinking of going into the city for this test...” or “Let me see if I got that right...”)

Role play #1

Bob has been in your elder district for ten years. You have always enjoyed visiting Bob and his wife, Irene. Although retired, both were actively engaged in volunteer work and the life of your church. Six months ago, Irene died suddenly of a heart attack. Since then, Bob has “just not been able to get out to church.” His neighbours say that he stays for days inside his house and sometimes doesn’t even get dressed in the morning. Both you and your minister are quite concerned about Bob, so you decide to drop by on Wednesday evening for a visit.

Role play #2

Catherine is a widow. She and her husband raised their children in your church. Catherine is in your district and you see her about three times a year. On this particular visit, Catherine begins to confide her anxiety about her grandchildren. Her son and daughter-in-law both have demanding jobs outside the home and must rely on a variety of caregivers. Catherine notices that her youngest grandson, Robbie, is fearful at bedtime, whines about many small things and refuses to eat many nutritious foods. Catherine worries that the busy and somewhat chaotic home life of her son’s house is contributing to Robbie’s anxieties, but Catherine doesn’t know what to do about it.

Role play #3

George and Martha are long-time members of your church. On the day you call at their home, Martha is out shopping, but George uses the opportunity to complain about the new modern music that is being introduced into the worship service. George finds it loud and offensive. He can’t understand why the minister allows it to happen. In fact, George says indignantly, it’s almost as if the minister is encouraging this new music, even though the “people who pay the bills” at the church don’t like it.

Role play #4

Robert and Janice have been co-producing a congregational Easter play for many years in your church. The congregation loves and appreciates the play. This year, though, Robert makes an appointment to talk with his elder about his increasing difficulties in working with Janice. She is a high profile member of the congregation and Robert feels as if things must always go her way. This seemed okay for the first few years, but this year, when Robert suggests some minor changes to improve the play, Janice flatly refused to try them. Robert is discouraged and is considering withdrawing as director of the play.

Role play #5

Harold is a wealthy retired businessman who attends church occasionally but considers your congregation as his own. Harold wants to donate \$10,000 to the church building fund to install a beautiful stained glass window. The session and board, in their yearly planning last year, defined repair to the Sunday school hall as a first priority on church building fund money for the next few years. Harold calls his elder and asks for a visit to discuss the situation.

Role play #6

Denise is a single 26-year-old who is a nurse at the local hospital. Denise was raised in a Christian home and had her membership transferred to your congregation. The minister noticed that Denise had not been in church for a while. One day the minister bumped into Denise at the hospital and said, "I've noticed that you haven't been at church for a while and we miss you." Denise apologized, then said that, despite her commitment to her faith, she had not been comfortable with the more traditional congregation. She also missed seeing other young adults her age. The minister is not sure how to handle the situation but has asked the elder to have coffee with Denise and talk about this.

After completing the role plays, brainstorm ways in which elders might improve and enhance pastoral care. These ideas might include keeping a journal, including children in conversations during visits, phoning once a month, and so on. If the journal is popular, provide each elder with a notebook.

Part 3: Leadership (about 1–1.5 hours)

Provide magazines and newspapers. Ask participants to cut out headlines, articles or pictures of people who are leaders in the world. Talk about the different leadership styles these examples represent. What are qualities of good leaders? (People may list things like good listener, honest, trustworthy, believes in the equality of all people, supports others, patient, experienced, willing to try new things, shares responsibility, empowers others, and so on.)

Ask individuals to identify their own personal "top three" leadership gifts by choosing three from the list generated above. Write them on three separate Post-it notes. Ask elders to choose only one of the notes and stand up with it stuck to their finger. Ask: Do you think you currently are able to make good use of this leadership

ability in our church? Each person should then move to one end of the room where you have posted a “Yes” sign or to the other end where there is a “No” sign. Some may, of course, stay in the middle. Repeat with the other two Post-it notes.

Spend some time in group discussion. Are the leaders (in this case, elders) able to use their leadership gifts in an appropriate way? (For instance, a well-organized person who likes to empower others makes a good chairperson of a committee.)

Further leadership development

Invite elders to divide into smaller groups to learn how to enhance leadership skills. (The selection of the leadership areas is best done prior to the event so you are prepared for specific types of small groups.)

Choose from the following areas:

- Bible study leadership
- Adult study leadership
- Leading a discussion
- Leading a meeting
- Leading a game or ice-breaker
- Developing a team
- Helping change to happen

Give people an opportunity to learn about and practice the leadership area they have chosen.

Send out with joy

Plan a fun way to celebrate the learning and polishing of skills – give everyone a helium-filled balloon, have a celebration of cake and ice cream, or teach a “going out” song using signing or simple liturgical movement.

Retreats and Workshops

Elders as Leaders

A General Workshop on Being an Elder

A one-and-a-half-hour workshop

Workshop Outline

- | | |
|--------------------------------|------------|
| 1. Gathering | 10 minutes |
| 2. Who are we as elders? | 10 minutes |
| 3. What do we do? | 50 minutes |
| 4. What resources can help us? | 10 minutes |
| 5. Conclusion and leave-taking | 10 minutes |

1. Gathering

As people gather, provide refreshments and name tags. Post on the wall a chart which reads "What is an elder?" Provide large Post-it notes, markers and larger blank paper. As people are waiting for everyone to gather, invite them to jot down a word or phrase or draw a picture that exemplifies "elder" in their mind.

Alternatively, for a more light-hearted introduction, divide appropriately sized paper into parts and invite people to draw a part of an elder – head, hair, eyes, body, arms, legs, hat, and so on. Glue the "elder" together on a large chart with a creative or light-hearted title like "The Perfect Elder."

Explain to the elders that you will explore three questions in the workshop, but your main focus will be on #2.

1. Who are we as elders?
2. What do we do as elders?
3. What resources can help us?

Post these questions on a chart so everyone can see them.

Setting the scene

Before getting into the three questions, use a quick pick activity. This Q&A activity provides a brief background about the nature of the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition and why we have elders in our tradition.

Cut apart the "Presbyterian Q&A" activity on pages 66–67. Shuffle the questions among half the participants and the answers among the others. Begin by asking the person with question #1 to read it and the person with answer #1 to respond. Proceed through the seven questions and answers. Then move to the following activity.

2. Who are we as elders?

Presentation by leader:

As you provide the following explanation, post two signs: "Teaching Elder" and "Ruling Elder."

*We have two types of ordained ministry recognized by The Presbyterian Church in Canada: teaching and ruling. **Teaching elders** are the ministers of congregation, but they may also be employed in special ministries such as camping, administration or inner-city missions. **Ruling elders** share responsibility for the spiritual oversight of the congregation, for Christian Education, discipline and regular visitation of members in their assigned districts. As Presbyterians, we believe that the tradition of having teaching and ruling elders comes to us through a long history which is both biblical and historical.*

(Suggest to the elders that the topic of the historical and biblical roots of the elder would make an excellent subsequent workshop.)

Post another sign – "Call" – as you provide the explanation.

The word "call" is important in our Presbyterian tradition. We believe that God calls elders in their ministry. Why are you "called" to be an elder, but you might be "appointed" to a community board?

Pause and allow time for suggestions.

In the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition, using the term "call" expresses that God is actively involved in our lives and church communities. A call takes place within a community, in a particular context and a particular community of faith. Elders are called and ordained for life, but churches may choose either life or term service for a variety of reasons. The important thing to remember is that we as Presbyterians believe that through the community and through the thoughtful prayer and reflection of the prospective elder, God calls elders into leadership within the church.

3. What do we do?

Begin with a statement like this:

The task of the ruling elder – what we are called to do – is so broad that sometimes it can get quite fuzzy. It is helpful to remember that ruling elders, as a group, have five main tasks. In a moment we will be looking at the five main tasks, but first let's do a true/false quiz, which helps us start thinking about the role of the elders.

Photocopy this quiz and divide people into pairs or groups of three to work on the quiz. Answers appear on page 68. Explain that these statements come from our *Book of Forms*.

True or false quiz on the role of the ruling elder

1. An elder must be a professing member of the congregation and must be "an example to the believers in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity."	
2. Elders may be ordained for life or ordained for a shorter term.	
3. It is the duty of the elders to meet regularly with the minister in order to establish good order and provide for pastoral care of the congregation.	
4. Elders, meeting in session, are responsible for seeking out, preparing and admitting people as professing members of the church.	
5. The session is not responsible for Christian education of prospective members. That is the task of the minister and/or Christian education committee.	
6. In our denomination, elders and ministers are jointly responsible for worship.	
7. Christian education is the responsibility of the session.	
8. The session is responsible for all aspects of stewardship and mission. This includes all stewardship decisions.	

The five main tasks

Say: According to our Book of Forms, there are five main tasks that elders should perform for the spiritual well-being of the congregation.

As a group or in pairs, give the group five minutes to try to define what the five main tasks of elders might be. When they have completed this, distribute the “Five Main Tasks for Elders” handout (pp. 69–70). Spend five to ten minutes reading together the five main tasks of the elders and the subtitles. Ask:

- Are there surprises in this list? Are there things there that you did not realize are the responsibility of the elder? Are your elders doing things that are not on the list?
- What questions does this list raise for you for the future?

How these tasks get done

Say: It is important to have strong leadership by elders in a congregation. Committed, gifted lay leaders are the backbone of any congregation. They are the true leaders, as ministers come and go. They are the glue that holds the congregation together.

Obviously it is not the intention of the Book of Forms or our denomination that elders should individually be all things to all people. The session has a certain amount of discretion about how it can delegate or distribute some of the tasks for the spiritual up-building of the church. But the underlying principle is this: It is the responsibility of the session to see that these things happen in a healthy, constructive way.

This implies that, on each session, there should be a mix of leadership skills.

Distribute the “Leadership Skills of Elders” sheets (pp. 71–73). Give everyone five minutes to complete this exercise. Advise them that these sheets will remain fairly private. While the elders are working on the sheets, post a chart paper that lists areas of leadership skills. When participants have finished their individual sheets, distribute Post-it notes and ask them to put on your wall chart a blank Post-it note if they recognized that skill in themselves. For instance, if they checked off that they had shepherding or visioning skills, they should put a Post-it note on each of these statements listed



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on your wall chart. (This provides a quick visual way to see what leadership skills are present – and missing – from the session.¹¹) When all have finished, invite observations.

What does this say about our session? Are we heavy on one set of skills? When we have our next election of elders, do we need to encourage people in whom we see missing skills? Are there people with the “missing skills” who might help us as a committee of session?

4. What resources can help us?

Display resources that are helpful to Presbyterian elders and take 30 seconds (no more) to describe each. Suggest that they might set up a lending resource shelf for elders with many of these resources.

- *Equipping Elders* – a compilation of the best of *For Elders* and *Equipping for Elders* resources published from 1997–2009, The Presbyterian Church in Canada
- List of regional staff who can provide ongoing elder training
- *Eldership in Today's Church*, Stephen Hayes, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1994
- The Elders' Institute in a Box Courses: *Caring for the Congregation in the 21st Century*, *Discerning a Call to Eldership*, *How to Make a Pastoral Visit*, *The Roll of the Elder*
- Variety of online course from the Elders' Institute: www.eldersinstitute.ca
- *Book of Forms*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada
- *This Presbyterian Church of Ours*, John Congram, Wood Lake Books, 1995
- *Presbyterian Questions, Presbyterian Answers*, Donald K. McKim, Geneva Press, 2003
- *The Roots of Who We Are*, Rodger Nishioka, Bridge Resources, 1997
- *Being a Presbyterian in Canada Today*, Stephen Hayes, 1994
- *Prayer Guide for Elders*

5. Conclusion and leave-taking

Invite participants to say, in one sentence, something they have learned from the workshop that they had not been aware of when they arrived.

Conclude with a prayer. Include in the prayer some of the things mentioned by participants.

Alternatively, you may choose, prior to the workshop, a commissioning biblical verse for each elder. Here are some suggestions: 2 Corinthians 13:13; Romans 15:13; Hebrews 13:20, 21; Philippians 4:7; Numbers 6:24–26; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; 1 Corinthians 16:13; 2 Timothy 2:1; Ephesians 6:10; Deuteronomy 31:6; Mark 12:29–31. As the verses are distributed, pass a bowl of water from elder to elder and, as you read the verse, move around the circle and invite each elder, one at a time, to dip a finger in the water and make the sign of a cross on the back of the hand or forehead of the neighbouring elder.

¹¹ One session that did this exercise was amazed to note that, despite the size of the session, there was no one on session who perceived themselves as a visionary leader. When it came time for an election of new elders, the session called particularly for people with gifts in planning and visioning.

Presbyterian Q&A

Q1: Where do Presbyterian churches come from?

A1: You can find Presbyterian/Reformed churches all over the world, and each area has its own history, but our “family tree” has its roots in Europe in the early 16th century with church leaders who were critical of beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic Church at the time and wanted to reform it.

Q2: How did Presbyterian churches come to be in Canada?

A2: There are reports of Reformed French Protestants (called Huguenots) as early as 1560. Canada received its first taste of Scottish Presbyterianism when the British captured Louisbourg in 1758. The first Presbyterian congregation was founded in Quebec City in 1765. In 1770, a number of Germans of Calvinist persuasion who were living around Lunenburg ordained one of their own members as a minister.

(This Presbyterian Church of Ours, by John Congram, Wood Lake Books, 1995, p. 21)

Q3: What do we mean by a “Reformed” church or “Reformed theology?”

A3: The term “Reformed” emerged at the time of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. “Reformed theology” has several characteristics: it emphasizes salvation through faith alone, the sovereignty of God, being formed and reformed by God’s word in scripture, the church as holy community, and that we should engage our mind and will for God’s glory. Reformed theology also focuses more on glorifying God and the coming of God’s reign than the saving of souls.

Q4: Who are Calvin and Knox and why are they important?

A4: Calvin, a 16th century Reformer in Geneva, wrote and developed a tight, systematic form of Christian theology, which spread widely and was adopted and adapted by later Reformers. John Knox, a Scottish clergyman, while exiled from Great Britain, learned the essence of Reformed theology and polity with Calvin in Geneva. After returning to Scotland, he became the leader of the Protestant Reformation in Scotland. Among other things, Knox believed that public education for all people was very important and set about establishing a public education system.

Q5: What confessions of faith do Presbyterians adhere to?

A5: Throughout 2,000 years of history, Christians, from time to time, have found it important and necessary to formulate a strong and definitive statement of faith. One of the main confessions for Canadian Presbyterians is the Westminster Confession of Faith. This confession arose from the English parliament in sessions held between 1643 and 1646. It provided a systematic and ordered Reformed perspective on the faith. In order to learn the confession easily, the Larger and the Shorter Catechism were written in question-and-answer format. Today, a contemporary version, *Living Faith*, is widely used in our denomination.

Q6: What makes Presbyterians different from Lutherans, or the United Church, or Baptists?

A6: There are many things that are distinctive between Presbyterians and other Protestant denominations. Baptists, for instance, do not believe in infant baptism. Anglicans have a different polity, with bishops exercising authority in many church matters. The United Church of Canada – a union of Methodists, Congregationalists and some Presbyterians in 1925 – adopted the Presbyterian system of government but has more of a “social justice” flavour to its theology, possibly heavily influenced by the Methodists. However, most Presbyterians who visit other mainline Reformed churches find the milieu and worship remarkably similar.

Answers to True/False quiz on the role of the ruling elder

1. True. *Book of Forms* 106.1.
2. False. Elders are ordained for life but they may serve for life or for a term. Sessions that opt for term service do this in consultation with the congregation. If the session decides to adopt term eldership, it is to notify the presbytery and receive its permission.
3. True. *Book of Forms* 109.
4. True. *Book of Forms* 110.
5. False. *Book of Forms* 110.1 states that "the session is responsible for the provision of instruction in the Christian faith of applicants for professing membership."
6. False. See *Book of Forms* 111. The minister is responsible for the conduct and content of public worship. The session is responsible for regulating the hours and forms of public worship.
7. True. *Book of Forms* 112.
8. True. *Book of Forms* 113, 113.6.

Five Main Tasks for Elders

1. Supervision and oversight

- ◆ session meets regularly with the minister
 - supervises and approves all groups in the church
 - establishes policy and procedure regarding use of the church building and property
 - responsible for electing and admitting new elders
 - assigns members and adherents to elders for pastoral care
 - keeps a roll of members, adherents, baptisms, etc.

2. Membership and pastoral care

- ◆ session is responsible for seeking, preparing and admitting professing members and for the pastoral care of all within the fellowship
 - provides instruction for applicants for professing members
 - examines candidates for membership
 - admits professing members to the roll and privileges of the church
 - responsible for provision of baptism, usually in public worship
 - welcomes members in good standing from other branches of the church
 - responsible for restoring members whose membership has lapsed
 - transfers membership when people have moved
 - may discipline/exclude people from membership upon just cause

3. Worship

- ◆ minister is responsible for the conduct and content of public worship and for pulpit supply
 - session regulates hours and forms of public worship and provides for administration of sacraments
 - session is responsible for the appointment of the organist and other leaders of praise, whether volunteers or salaried

4. Christian education

- ◆ session is responsible for providing Christian education for people of all ages, so they may grow in the faith and be active witnesses to Christ
 - responsible for the administration, oversight, support, evaluation and good doctrine of Christian education
 - responsible for educating the whole congregation in its witness and mission to the community and the world
 - responsible for the recruitment, appointment, training and support of teachers and leaders, and the selection and approval of resource materials and programs
 - responsible for encouraging profession of faith
 - responsible for providing instruction for those preparing for baptism
 - responsible for encouraging Christian family living

5. Stewardship and mission

- ◆ session is responsible for all aspects of stewardship and mission
 - keeps before the congregation the life and work of the church around the world
 - develops and maintains programs of mission and outreach to the community
 - arranges for outreach to all ages in the community
 - provides for people in financial or material need in the church and the community
 - ensures that members contribute according to their ability
 - responsible for all decisions relating to stewardship, including how and when the financial needs of the church are to be presented to the congregation
 - provides oversight for the financial support of *Presbyterians Sharing*

Leadership Skills of Elders

Below are ten leadership styles that can be very helpful in a session. Usually, every person has one dominant style but may also have fairly strong elements of one or two other styles. Look over the following descriptions and **check off one, two or three that best describe how you provide leadership.**

Visionary

- I have or like a clear picture of what the future could hold.
- I have enthusiasm for turning visions into reality.
- I enjoy talking to people who will get on board with the vision.
- I'm not easily discouraged or deterred.
- I usually respond to opposition by reasserting my vision.
- I often form teams, align talents, set goals, or manage progress toward the achievement of a vision. To be effective over the long haul, though, I often need other people who work with me.

Example: Martin Luther King, Jr.

Directional

- I have a knack for seeing which path an organization might take as it approaches a critical intersection.
- I can usually clearly answer the question, "Should we stay the course or is it time for wholesale change?"
- I make up my mind after sorting through all the options.
- I like to assess mission, the strengths and weaknesses of options, the resources, personnel and openness to change.
- Sometimes I don't feel comfortable speaking publicly, but I have been told that I am the "wise people" behind the scenes, especially at times of critical choices.

Example: A good interim moderator at the time of a vacancy

Strategic

- I have the ability to take an exciting vision and break it down into a series of sequential, achievable steps.
- I have the ability to form a game plan that everybody can understand and participate in.
- I challenge team members to "stay with the plan," and not go off on tangents. I take the plan one step at a time.
- I work to bring various subgroups into alignment, so that all the organization's energy will be focused on realizing the vision.

Example: Football coach

❑ Managing

- I have the ability to organize people, processes and resources to achieve a mission.
- I love the thought of bringing order out of chaos.
- I find deep satisfaction in monitoring and fine-tuning a process.
- I enjoy motivating team members by establishing appropriate mile markers on the road to the destination.
- I love the day-to-day operational world.

Example: Nehemiah (Nehemiah 2 – 6); bank manager in a new branch

❑ Motivational

- I have a God-given ability to keep my teammates fired up.
- I'm on constant lookout for "sagging shoulders and dull eyes."
- I have a keen sense of who needs public recognition and who needs just a private word of encouragement.
- I often create a positive workplace, because I call out the best in people, cheer people on through their progress, celebrate accomplishments and tell people that they are important to the cause.
- I don't get bitter or vengeful when morale sinks. I view it as an opportunity to dream of new ways to inspire and lift the spirits of everyone on the team.

Example: Jesus with his disciples

❑ Shepherding

- I build a team slowly, love the members deeply, nurture them gently, support them consistently, listen to them patiently, pray for them diligently.
- I draw team members into a rich community experience.
- While visionary leaders tend to attract people because of the compelling nature of their cause, I tend to draw people together almost regardless of their cause.
- Group members may be heard to say, "We want to stay in community and keep our shepherd." What really matters are the community dynamics.

Example: David in 2 Samuel 23, where David is thirsty and his men go behind enemy lines to get him water

❑ Team-building

- I know and understand the vision, but I realize that it will take a team of leaders and workers to accomplish the goal.
- I have good insight into people; I can successfully find and develop the right person for the right task.
- After I have found the right person for the right task, I usually say, "Go ahead and do it. I'll be here for support and encouragement, but you have permission to just get the job done."
- I am more driven by a clear understanding of the vision than by the desire to nurture and build community.
- I may or may not be skilled at managing my team. I may think that management isn't all that critical; if the right person is in the right slot for the right reason, the right things will happen.

Example: Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Church

❑ Entrepreneurial

- I function optimally in start-up mode.
- I feel most energetic when giving birth to something new.
- Once the venture is up and running, once the effort requires steady ongoing management, I tend to lose enthusiasm, focus and sometimes even confidence.
- If I can't give birth to something brand new every few years, something inside me begins to die.

Example: The Apostle Paul

❑ Reengineering

- I am at my best in turn-around situations.
- I thrive on the challenge of taking a troubled situation – a team that has lost its vision, a ministry where people are in the wrong positions, a department trying to move forward without a strategy – and turning it around.
- I love to reevaluate personnel, strategy and values.
- I love to meet with team members and help them figure out where the “old” went wrong and what the “new” should look like. Then I prod members into action.
- I love to patch up, tune up and revitalize hurting departments or organizations.
- When things are patched up, I may or may not be motivated to stay around.

Example: Interim ministers

❑ Bridge-building

- I am able to bring together under a single leadership umbrella a wide range of constituent groups.
- I can help a complex organization stay focused on a single mission. I care about the big picture.
- I am diplomatic, have ability to compromise, negotiate and think outside the box.
- I am flexible, able to listen and understand.
- I love the challenge of relating to diverse groups of people.
- Leading a multi-faceted organization energizes rather than defeats me.
- I often meet privately with heads of various subgroups to keep them focused on their goals and to hear their passion.
- I am an effective advocate for each constituent group, focusing the efforts of all the groups in such a way that it creates a win-win situation for everyone involved.
- I help each group develop a healthy perspective and realize that they can meet the needs of the sub-ministry *and* contribute to the achievement of the overall goal.

Example: Many fine ministers, school principals

Retreats and Workshops

Elders as Leaders

A Spiritual Life Retreat

A day-long retreat for elders

Workshop Outline

Welcome and introductions

1. Introducing the retreat
2. Building your group
3. Singing and praying the Psalms

Lunch

4. Exploring soulscapes of the Bible
5. Closing benediction

Preparing for the workshop:

- photocopy the appendix "Singing and praying the Psalms" (pp. 81–83) for all participants
- optional materials for "Exploring soulscapes of the Bible": wilderness pictures (for projection or hard copy); ear plugs or cotton balls; a basket of stones; desktop water fountain

This retreat may be adapted to suit your situation.

1. Introducing the retreat

Welcome. This is not a session meeting. It is not about some issue or program or task. There will be no votes taken, but some decisions may be made. We are not here to develop a five-year plan, but some planning may happen.

This is a *spiritual retreat*. It is a *retreat*... We are away from our common and usual surroundings. I would like to say that we are away from the phone, but this is probably not so. Many places in our lives come with defined roles and familiar scripts – home, office, church, golf course. Each is like a set on a stage with its own unfolding drama. *This new and different setting allows for new and different roles and scripts.*

This retreat is *spiritual*. It has to do with God, you and God, me and God. It has to do with the basics – existence, life, mystery and meaning, the crux of the matter.

Many spiritual retreats are designed to be *solitary* in nature, involving personal meditation, prayer and study in total silence.

In this retreat, both the morning and afternoon sessions will include some time for individual reflection and some time for group discussion. There will be two *seasons for silence*. For some, silence is a luxurious gift. For others, a few minutes of silence seems like an eternity. Help! I need to *talk* to somebody!

The retreat is in two parts. In the morning we will be *singing and praying the Psalms*. After lunch we will make a spiritual pilgrimage into several *soulscapes of the Bible*.

2. Building your group

Have some fun as a group. Invite everyone to work together for a common purpose by building a group machine. Select one of the following machines and ask each person to be part of it: old-time wringer washing machine, auto assembly line, computer, sausage-making machine, helicopter, car wash, diaper-changing machine, steam train, grandfather clock, jukebox, vending machine, lawn mower, pipe organ.

3. Singing and praying the Psalms

Read the following as an introduction to reflections on the Psalms:

The Psalms, with few exceptions, are not the voice of God addressing us. They are rather the voice of our own common humanity – gathered over a long period of time, but a voice that continues to have amazing authenticity and contemporaneity. It speaks of life the way it really is, for in those deeply human dimensions the same issues and possibilities persist.
– *Walter Brueggemann*

The Psalms are an anatomy of all parts of the soul.
– *John Calvin*

The Language of Faith

The language of faith is poetry and story. It is speech that is liberating, creative and dangerous. It is dangerous because it envisions change. It assumes that God will in fact respond. It is speech that sets us free to see new beginnings.

Praying the Psalms

When we link the Psalms with prayer, we will likely be brought into the “rawness of life.” Most of the Psalms reflect human experiences that demand addressing God. Those experiences may be reminders of the precariousness of life or they may be rare moments of spiritual ecstasy.

The Psalms do not “cover-up” real life. On the contrary, they express such honest, human emotions as fear, anger, rage, vindictiveness, sadness, grief, jealousy, trust and joy.

Reflections on the Psalms

Distribute copies of “Singing and Praying the Psalms” (pp. 81–83) to all participants. Do the reflective exercises individually and as a group, as outlined.

4. Exploring soulscapes of the Bible

The labyrinth as a model for the journey of faith

Read aloud to the group:

All of us are familiar with the word “landscape” – an expanse of scenery. Today we will use the landscapes in our memories to expand our *inner* landscapes through three journeys. We’ll call each of these short journeys “soulscapes.”

Before we start, let’s locate those soulscapes in our minds by using some guided imagery. Make yourself comfortable, close your eyes, relax, breathe slowly in and out.

(Leader speaks very slowly while reading the following.)

As you breath in and out, enjoy the smell of moist earth after a spring shower. Feel the soft breeze on your skin. Hear the birds singing.

You are in your favourite wilderness spot. It is a place you love. It is a place that you look forward to visiting. There is no one to bother you. There is no cell phone. No traffic. You are comfortable in your solitary place.

You walk around a corner. There, in front of you, is a mountain. You climb... up...up...for two hours you climb until you are at the top. What is it like at the top of your mountain? But you can’t stay up on the mountain long.

As you descend, you come to a shallow river. It is a warm day and you walk through the stream to the other side. You have left behind a rocky hillside and now stand in a meadow of green grass.

It is time for you to come back into the group, but, just for a moment, you stand looking back at your favourite wilderness place, the mountain you have climbed, the river you have crossed. Please open your eyes and join the group.

*The stories in the soulscapes are those of Keith Boyer.
As leader, you may wish to substitute your own stories.*

The wilderness: the soulscape of encounter

“Go find a solitary place, out of view of everyone else. But don’t go any farther than five minutes. And if you become disoriented coming back, stop and wait, and we will come and find you.” Those were the precautionary instructions given to those of us who were members of the Pilgrimage and Spirituality course at St. George’s College in Jerusalem. (*Distribute or project wilderness pictures.*)

We were at the edge of the Negev desert, beginning three days of wilderness experiences, which included sleeping in a Bedouin encampment, and a mountain climb. It was near this unforgiving area that Anglican Bishop James Pike lost his way and his life in 1969. We were to be alone in the wilderness for an hour. I had never *felt* silence as I did in that hour. I could hear my body in a way I hadn’t ever before. Each participant was given a straw mat. We were told to consider it to be an altar on which we would sit before the presence of God.

In the Bible, several of the most formative moments occurred in desolate places. In many respects, biblical faith was born in the wilderness. It was into the desert, near Beersheba, that Abraham sent his slave/concubine Hagar with his son Ishmael, with one bag of water. It was a sentence of certain death. But God sent an angel to intervene, providing water and a route to safety. Moses saw the burning bush in the wastelands of the Sinai. There he met the One known as *I Am Who I Am*. Later, it was in the mountains of that same wilderness that he received the Torah, the ten commandments, the law of God. And of course, it was during those 40 years in the wilderness that the Hebrew people, long conditioned to a life of dependent servitude in Egypt, complained bitterly about the manna and the quails, but also encountered God, learned to trust God, and were transformed into a nation.



Photo © Peter Hazlett/Dreamstime.com

Perhaps the most dramatic story of the wilderness encounter occurs in the gospels. Can you picture Jesus leaving the Jordan River following his baptism? Walking up into the Judean wilderness, a god-forsaken place, a place of danger in every form, to be tempted by the Evil One. "Turn the stones to bread." "Jump from the high pinnacle of the temple." "Worship me, and you can have it all."

Are you ready for a desert encounter? (*You might want to dim the lights or, alternatively, provide a spotlight to simulate the desert sun.*) We cannot possibly duplicate the environment or the silence. Plugging your ears might help. (*Provide cotton balls or ear plugs.*)

Assignment: When Jesus entered Jerusalem, some of the religious leaders complained that his followers were making too much noise. His response was that if his disciples were silent, the stones by the side of the road would take up the song. Take a stone as a meditative object. Listen for God. Experience a solitary silence. Be open to some surprising encounters. (*Provide a basket of stones, one for each participant.*)

The mountaintop: the soulscape of dislocation

"I may not get there with you, but I fear no one. I have been to the mountaintop. I have seen the Promised Land." Two days later, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. Perhaps he had a premonition of what was to come, because what turned out to be his final sermon alluded to the story of Moses on Mount Pisgah, overlooking the promised land.

The Bible describes many mountaintop experiences: Noah at Mount Ararat and a beginning following the flood; Moses encountering God on Mount Sinai, receiving the Torah; Elijah on Mount Carmel, the agent of a demonstration of the power of God and the impotence of the baalim, the pagan gods.

And then there is the mountain of transfiguration. Tradition holds that it was Mount Tabor in central Galilee. Others argue for the much higher Mount Hermon. There we see Jesus, with Peter, James and John. The three disciples observe an awesome mystery. Jesus, bathed in light, is joined by Elijah and Moses. Little wonder the three disciples wanted the experience to last forever. "Let's pitch a tent and stay up here."

But Mountaintop experiences come to an end. They must. And, like Peter, James and John, it is necessary to return to the more mundane realities of daily living. But thank God for the times that have such quality and meaning, or joy, or peace, that we feel we have had a glimpse and experience of heaven.

May I share a few personal mountaintop experiences?

On August 23, 1963, I was in Washington, DC with 250,000 other people who had come to march and stand together, peacefully, non-violently, in a common cause for justice, envisioning with Martin Luther King a vision of racial harmony and an end to the evil of segregation. "Free at last...free at last...thank God almighty we will be free at last," he declared. And we sang in front of the Washington Monument, "We shall overcome, we shall overcome, we shall overcome some day, yes deep in my heart, I do believe, that we shall overcome some day."

July 1, 1967, the arena in Dalhousie, New Brunswick, was filled for what had been billed as a bilingual ecumenical worship celebration for Canada's centennial.

Dalhousie was 70 percent francophone. It had deep cultural and religious divisions. Some were scandalized when they heard I visited a priest in his office in a Catholic church. It had somehow fallen to me to be the coordinator/planner for this event. (I was the new guy on the block.) Thanks to Pope John XXIII and the Vatican Council, a new climate of cautious cooperation was possible. I was able to get the other four protestant ministers and the French and English Roman Catholic priests to take part. But the mountaintop moment for me came when the leaders of the Richelieu Club, the Knights of Columbus, the Orange Lodge, and the Masons led responsive readings and prayers in French and English. Being in that arena was like being on Mount Pisgah.

More recently, in 1996, I carried a cross through the old city of Jerusalem, up the via Dolorosa, the street of sorrows, to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, up some narrow stairs to a rock that since the third century has been the traditional site of the crucifixion. To be honest, I'd seen such processions on television and was not particularly impressed. But as I walked the final steps, I found I was shaking, nearly weeping, moved beyond words, to be enacting the most holy drama in history. Carrying the cross to Calvary...

The mountaintop is a place of elation. Sometimes it is like a spiritual high. However you describe your mountaintop experience, it is a universal truth that we must always come down. There is one truth about having been to the mountaintop – we will never be the same. Life goes on, but with a different perspective, and a profound appreciation for the brief time on the crest of the mountain.

Sing: Hymn # 185, "Jesus on the Mountain Peak," *Book of Praise*

Assignment: Share some mountaintop experiences.



Photo © iStockphoto.com

The river: the soulscape of transition

The river is the soulscape of transition. It is the place of before and after. The river is the place for healing and cleansing and new possibilities. Elisha sends Naaman the Syrian to wash in the Jordan, and Naaman is cured. Centuries later, crowds come to see and hear John the Baptist. He challenges them to enter the river for a repentance baptism. Hundreds step into the murky stream and step back onto the riverbank as renewed and forgiven. There is Jesus, insisting that John baptize him. There in the river, he receives confirmation of his identity and vocation. The heavens open. He hears a voice: "You are my beloved son." The remainder of his life is purpose driven. Faithful to his calling, he sets his sights on Jerusalem, and makes the journey to a Good Friday death and an Easter resurrection.

Rivers are also for crossing. Joshua leads the Hebrews across the Jordan to claim their Promised Land. The river is a symbol of crossing boundaries from old life to new life – and from death to resurrection...

Sing: *I looked over Jordan, and what did I see, comin' for a carry me home... a band of angels, comin' after me, comin' for to carry me home...*

And in Ezekiel and Revelation, the river is described as a healing stream that transforms everything it touches (Ezekiel 47). As we approach the end of our time together, let us come to the river as the soulscape of transformation.

Assignment: Design and assign discussion topics and/or, if you can find a desktop water fountain, give people some reflection time near it.

Photo © Elisafocci/Dreamstime.com



5. Closing benediction

Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength,
They shall rise up on wings as eagles,
They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not faint,
Help us Lord, help us Lord, in your way.
(Isaiah 40:31)

This workshop was prepared by Keith Boyer, who served as the Mission Consultant for the Synod of Central, Northeastern Ontario and Bermuda.

Singing and Praying the Psalms

Psalm 42 – a Psalm of spiritual yearning

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.

When shall I come and behold
the face of God?

My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say continually to me
“Where is your God?”

These things I remember
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?

Hope in God; for again I shall praise,
my help and my God.

My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.

Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.

By day the Lord bestows steadfast love,
and at night God’s song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.

I say to God, my rock,
“Why have you forgotten me?

Why must I walk about mournfully
because the enemy oppresses me?”

Like a deadly wound in my body,
my adversaries taunt me
while they say to me continually,
“Where is your God?”

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?

Hope in God; for again I shall praise,
my help and my God.

Discussion

1. Identify phrases in this Psalm that touch your life.
2. Write your own version (paraphrase) of a part of this Psalm.

Psalm 137 – a Psalm of dislocation

By the rivers of Babylon –
 there we sat down and there wept
 when we remembered Zion.

On the willows there
 we hung up our harps.

For there our captors
 asked us for songs,
 and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
 “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How could we sing the Lord’s song
 in a foreign land?
 If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
 let my right hand wither!
 Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
 if I do not remember you,
 if I do not set Jerusalem
 above my highest joy.

Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites
 the day of Jerusalem’s fall,
 how they said,
 “Tear it down! Tear it down!
 Down to its foundations!”
 O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
 Blessed shall they be who pay you back
 what you have done to us!
 Blessed shall they be who take your little ones
 and dash them against the rock!

Discussion

1. Complete individually and discuss the following sentence: “Seeking to live as a person of faith in these days, I am reminded that I am living in a *strange or foreign* land when...”
2. Envision and discuss *strategies for engagement* with the numerous *powers and principalities* that you encounter in your day-to-day living – work, marketplace, popular culture, government policies.

Psalm 23 – a Psalm of hope

The Lord is my shepherd;
 I shall not want.
 The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures,
 leads me beside still waters,
 restores my soul,
 and leads me in right paths
 for the sake of the Lord's name.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
 I fear no evil;
 for you are with me;
 your rod and your staff – they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
 in the presence of my enemies;
 you anoint my head with oil;
 my cup overflows.
 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
 all my life,
 and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
 for the length of my days.

Discussion

1. The 23rd Psalm is among the best known scriptures of the Bible. You may be familiar with its King James Version of 1611. The above text is as it appears in *The Book of Psalms* of The Presbyterian Church in Canada (as are also Psalms 42 and 137 in this section) and is based on the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. What differences, if any, stand out for you? Do they change the meaning of the Psalm for you? In what way?
2. This ancient song of faith and hope, based in an agrarian society, describes God using the metaphor of *shepherd*. As a person living in a modern, secular, technological and urban environment, what metaphors for God would you use for our time and context? Make a list and discuss.
3. Select the line or phrase that you find to be most meaningful, reassuring or hopeful. Explain your choice to others in the group.

Retreats and Workshops

Visioning a Healthy Future

How Child-Friendly Is Our Congregation?

A one-hour workshop

Things have changed. We all know that. Today's parents and children expect to be fully included in the life and mission of the congregation. If we ignore this fact, we do it at our peril. Young families will simply come to visit and move on to another congregation where they can be more fully involved.

Sometimes I hear comments like this: "Young people today don't appreciate what they have. When we were young we walked two miles to school and never complained. We went to Sunday school in the morning, then stayed for worship. Then we went back to the church for evening service. It seems as if young people now-a-days have too much."

Well, there may be some truth in this. But if we are to have child-friendly, vital churches, there are two important facts to consider. *We simply cannot blame children, youth and young families for living the "good life" that we helped to shape.* All of us worked hard to have more amenities, and those of us over 50 enjoy them too.

The second important fact is that, regardless of our different contexts, children, youth and young families *have a spiritual hunger* that can be met by our congregations. Having more material possessions than we had when we were younger does not necessarily make for happier living. Everyone needs God.

Structuring a workshop around the questionnaire

You may simply do the questionnaire (pp. 87–88) or you may use the following outline to develop a workshop on the theme "How Child-Friendly is our Congregation?"

- | | |
|---|------------|
| 1. Mix and mingle | 10 minutes |
| 2. Introduce purpose of gathering | 2 minutes |
| 3. Do questionnaire | 10 minutes |
| 4. Debrief: What have we learned about ourselves? | 15 minutes |
| 5. Where do we go from here? (Three models) | 15 minutes |

1. Mix and mingle

Photocopy the “Mix and Mingle” sheet (p. 89). As people arrive, give each person a sheet and a pencil. Ask them to mingle and write in each square the name of a person who matches that description.

2. Introduce purpose of gathering

Use some of the points in the preamble (p. 84) to introduce the idea that the group has gathered to explore how child-friendly your congregation is, and also to begin to plan one or two new initiatives that will improve children’s ministry.

3. Do questionnaire

The questionnaire (pp. 87–88) may be done individually or in small groups.

4. Debrief: What have we learned about ourselves?

As people talk, list ideas and concerns on chart paper.



Photo © Dreamstime.com

5. Where do we go from here?

Suggest that there are at least three models that may be used for follow-up. Decide which one works best for your situation.

Model #1: Congregational task group based around concerns from the questionnaire

Form a congregational task group that will meet regularly. Choose one or two of the areas listed in the questionnaire and form an action plan to increase activity within the congregation. To whom will this task group report?

Model #2: Congregational task group based around milestones in church life

A task group designs a congregational plan based around baptism (ages 0–1), baptism birthdays (ages 1–2), prayer (ages 2–3), church school (ages 3–4), worship (ages 4–5), friendship (ages 5–6), Bible (grades 2–4), communion (grades 5–6), profession of faith (grades 7–9), witness and service (grades 9–12). The resource *The Child in Our Hands: Milestones*, by Lee Hovel (Youth & Family Institute, Augsburg College, 1999) is an excellent resource for this, available at www.youthandfamilyinstitute.org.

Model #3: Community task group

Form a community task group with other denominations or congregations. Invite leaders who are like-minded about ministry with children and youth. Plan events or activities around specific areas of concern that might be offered together, such as

- keys to nurturing faith in family
- building healthy self-worth in Christian families
- listening skills
- how to make the most of family time
- dealing with anger
- family or intergenerational seasonal celebrations
- how communities and churches can work together to encourage reliant, mature, responsible youth and children



Photo © iStockphoto.com

Questionnaire:

How Child-Friendly Is Our Congregation?

Inclusion in educational programs

- We provide age-appropriate church school.
- We provide training for our church school leaders.
- We budget adequately for learning materials.
- We provide some all-ages (intergenerational) learning opportunities.
- We give children and youth opportunities to share their learning with adults.

Inclusion in worship

- We provide places in our sanctuary or worship area where small children can see.
- We provide a worship bulletin for children.
- We provide at least four intergenerational/family worship services per year.
- Children have the option of either staying in worship or attending age-appropriate classes.
- Children are given offering envelopes and expected to use them regularly.

Inclusion in service within the congregation

- Children help regularly to usher and take up the offering.
- Children are trained and encouraged to read scripture and/or prayers in worship.
- Older children are trained and encouraged to lead games and programs for younger children.
- Children are expected to be part of clean-up days at the church.
- Children are expected to provide music leadership in worship and fellowship times.

Inclusion in service outside the congregation

- Children are expected to join adults in visiting shut-ins and nursing homes.
- Children are expected to participate in outreach efforts (e.g., food banks).
- Children are encouraged to do some community volunteer work.
- Children participate in some activity or study to learn about world mission.
- Older children are invited to reflect on what they learn by serving.

Intergenerational inclusion

- Most of the adults in the congregation know the names of most or all of the children.
- Adults are tolerant of children in worship.
- At all important meetings (e.g., annual meeting) children's needs are considered.
- Children are given pastoral care by elders or special pastoral care providers.
- At least once a year children, youth and adults work together on a service project.

Inclusion in use of the building

- Children are allowed in every room of the church.
- If areas are off-limits (e.g., the secretary's computer), this is clearly communicated.
- There are child-level coat racks and appropriately sized tables and chairs.
- Children are allowed, with supervision, to use the kitchen.
- Older children providing leadership are entrusted with keys to locked cupboards for necessary equipment.

Support for parents

- Parents are given a baptism gift and information about beginning Christian nurture at home.
- Parents are given help to pray with their children.
- Parents are given help on how to prepare their children for worship or communion.
- Resources are suggested/made available for family devotional time.
- Parents are encouraged to do simple Christian rituals with their children.

Mix and Mingle

Find someone who...

...worries about kids	...first learned about God from their mother	...went to church camp as a child or teen	...helped at a Vacation Bible School recently
...talked with a child under ten today	...played with a child within the last week	...had a conversation with a teen within the last week	...remembers family devotional times
...plans to do something interesting in the next month	...can call at least one kid on the block by name	...believes that kids are more unruly now than 20 years ago	...is helping someone through university or college

Retreats and Workshops

Visioning a Healthy Future

Forward Thinking: A Quick-Start Process for Congregational Visioning

Forward Thinking, a “quick-start” process, was developed to help congregations engage in a simpler, faster visioning process. This process

- starts with action plans and moves to clarification of vision;
- builds on gifts that are already present within the congregation;
- uses a simple planning process that can be repeated yearly.

In the traditional method of visioning, developing a congregational plan can be a painful, slow and laborious process. Church leaders want to consult broadly (rightly so!) with all groups and individuals in the congregation. The result? Lots of data! Then the problem becomes how to distill all this data into a pithy vision statement that captures the complexity of life in your congregation. How do you wade through the information to develop a clear plan of action?

Forward Thinking has been used by a number of congregations in Canada to quickly and accurately define new ministry foci for the upcoming year. Because it is intended to be repeated every year, it reduces the anxiety of having to get the mission and vision statements “exactly right” or inclusive of all possibilities. The action plan reflects the direction of new ministries in the congregation for the year ahead.

Steps in the *Forward Thinking* process

Step #1: Congregational gathering

- a. From the energy and laughter... (the gifts of the people)
- b. Connecting the dots (possibilities for ministry)

Step #2: Wordsmith gathering

- a. A look at the action plans; is there a common theme?
- b. From the theme(s), draft
 1. a mission statement
 2. a vision statement
 3. value statements
 4. a motto

Step #3: Congregational gathering – fun and focus (eliciting feedback)

Step #4: Congregational sign-up – making a world of difference

Possible timeline

February: Congregational gathering (step #1)

March to May: Wordsmith gathering (step #2)

Late May: Congregational gathering (step #3)

Summer to fall: Congregational sign-up (step #4)

Instructions for how to run the *Forward Thinking* process

Step #1: Congregational gathering

a. From the energy and laughter... (The gifts of the people)

It has been my experience that this type of gathering generates lots of two things – energy and laughter. Since this segment of the process is based on the work of Luther Snow in *The Power of Asset Mapping: How Your Congregation Can Act on Its Gifts* (Alban Institute, 2004), you will want to purchase that book.

1. Identify a time for a congregational gathering. Invite all ages and all sorts of people. Food is usually helpful. Plan a pot luck meal after worship, a Friday evening Italian dinner using frozen lasagna and garlic bread, a Saturday soup and sandwich lunch, or a retreat setting. Promote at least one month prior to the event and ask people to commit themselves by signing up.
2. At the gathering, when people are ready to “work,” divide them into small tables (separating family members) with groups of four or five. At each table, put *lots* of paper (half sheets of 8.5 x 11 inch paper) and at least one marker for each person.

Tell the people that you are going to give them 13 statements and each person will answer the statements personally, writing IN BLOCK LETTERS. Show an example – write a word like “MUSIC” in large block letters on your sheet of paper and remind people that this is what each sheet should look like.

Each of the 13 statements must be answered on a separate sheet, but everyone may answer the statements several times if they wish. For instance, when they are asked to name something that they know a lot about, they may wish to write two or three things, but each should go on a separate sheet of paper. (It is okay to talk while doing this work, or people may work on their own.) Instruct people to just throw their answers into the middle of the table.

Give all the tables, together, the first statement. Ask them to put up their hands when their table has completed statement 1. Then walk around to the various tables giving them the next statement, since the tables will work at different speeds. Proceed until all the statements have been answered.

Statement 1: Name something about yourself that is strong.

Statement 2: Name something positive about our church building. (If you do not worship in a church, name something positive about the site where you worship.)

Statement 3: Name a positive physical aspect of our community.

Statement 4: Name something you *care* a lot about.

Statement 5: Name something you *know* a lot about.

Statement 6: Name talents or skills you see in someone else at the table.

Statement 7: Name talents or skills you see in someone else in the congregation who isn't here.

Statement 8: Name a group or association you are part of outside the congregation.

Statement 9: Name institutions associated with the congregation. (You may have to give examples here – If there are teachers, name "schools." If your church holds a mortgage, name "banks." If there are politicians, name "government," etc.)

Statement 10: Name some institutional decisions that affect the people in our congregation and community.

Statement 11: Name something you like to spend money on.

Statement 12: Name something you can make or do that people would pay you for.

Statement 13: Name something the congregation likes to spend money on.

b. Connecting the dots (Possibilities for ministry)

As Luther Snow reminds us in *The Power of Asset Mapping*, this next step – connecting the dots – creates a bridge between what is and what can be. This next step is just plain fun, so invite people to be playful and creative. Each table simply shuffles around the sheets of paper – all containing assets and gifts present at the table – until a new creative ministry appears. You will be trying to identify action plans – "If we combined W plus X plus Y, we could have Z at this church." (Z is the action plan.)

It helps to give an example of how this might work. Here is the example I use: If we combined [Laura and Joan's love of crafts] with the [junior youth group] and [our church's passion for Presbyterian World Service & Development] we could have a – Z – [fundraising awareness night sponsored by the junior youth.]

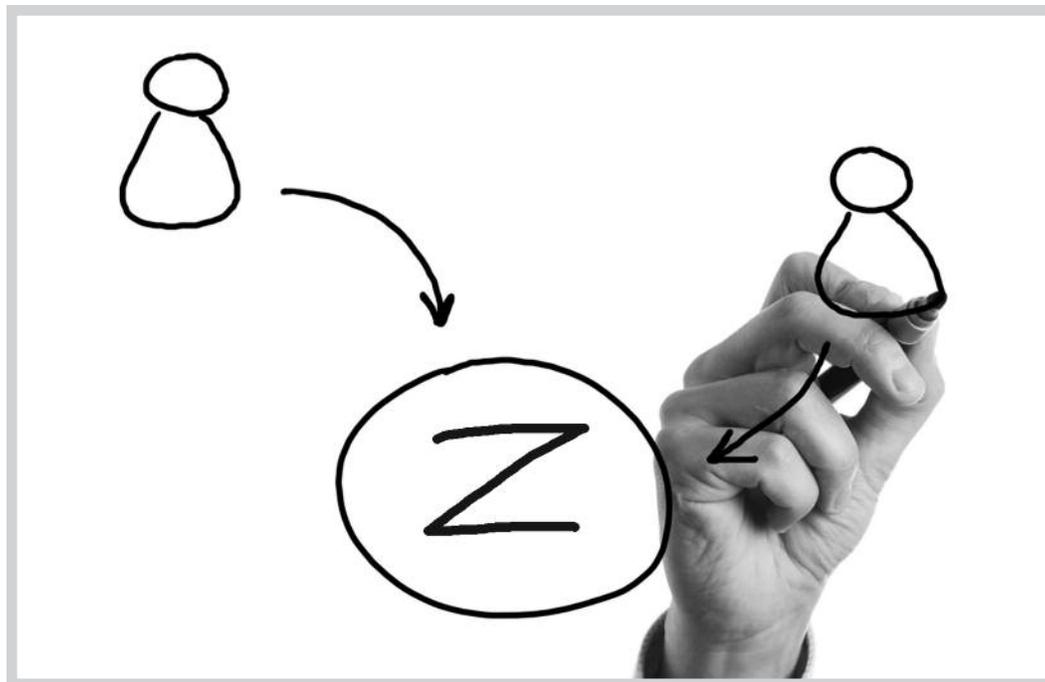
Here's a second example: If we combined [our city's beautiful park] with [member of the horticulture club] with the [large number of retired people in our church] we could sponsor a – Z – [St. Andrew's spirituality garden in the park].

One congregation in Stanley, New Brunswick, was unique in its involvement with the local public school. When they realized this, they also saw that both the school and the church shared a deep concern about HIV and AIDS. One of their action plans looked like this: When we combine [volunteering at school] with [our annual bake sale] with [concern about AIDS] we could have a – Z – [joint school-church bake sale to raise money for an AIDS program].

I always use a connecting-the-dots example that emerged at one workshop and makes people roar with laughter. While it is facetious, it reminds people that they can have fun with this process. It also reminds people that not all the action plans need to be implemented. The group came up with this: If we connect [the junior choir moms] with [love music] and [love scotch tasting] we have a – Z – [happy junior choir support team].

Give people about 15 minutes to make some connections at their table. When they are finished, ask them to tape the connecting-the-dots statements to the wall so all can see. Invite each table to read their statements to the others. It has been my experience that a group of 20 or 25 people will generate about 12 creative, imaginative action plans that are deeply rooted in their own congregational experience and giftedness.

When all the action plans have been explained, ask a prayer of blessing on them. Then explain the next steps. The plans will be given to the "wordsmith" group – a group of six or seven people with this combination of gifts: some writing skill, time to donate, one or two elders, the minister, people from a cross section of ages. (Congregations, in their wisdom, can figure out who this group will be and how they will be named. The important thing to note is that this is not a permanent group. They are doing a task on behalf of the congregation and others may have a turn next year.) Remind the people gathered of the responsibilities of the wordsmiths (see step #2) and tell them that the wordsmith group may need to do some discerning about whether or not *all* the action plans can be implemented just now.



Step #2: Wordsmiths gathering

a. A look at the action plans; is there a common theme?

Prior to the meeting, type or print out all the action plans generated at the congregational meeting. Discuss these things:

1. Are there common themes? Can any be combined? If we combine some, would they lose key elements?
2. Do we have time, energy and money to implement all the action plans? Are there some that are more timely than others?

If you have already drafted good mission, vision, values and motto statements, skip to step #3. If not, proceed below.

b. When the wordsmith group has decided on the action plans for the year ahead, begin the process of developing the following:

1. mission statement
2. vision statement
3. values statement
4. motto

Mission, vision, values and motto statements change from time to time according to societal and congregational changes. They also vary as people change in how they want to express their faith in Christ.

Following are brief definitions.

Mission Statement

- Is a one-sentence statement of what the church does
- Is short and concise
- Can be easily memorized, even by children
- Is used often, perhaps at each worship service

Vision Statement

- Explains how the church does what it does
- Can be three to five points or a single paragraph

Values Statement

- Outlines ideas, principles or practices that the congregation holds dear
- Expresses core ideas
- Provides boundaries within which people are free to live out their gifts for the well-being of the whole congregation

Motto

- Is a snippet of the mission statement
- Is useful on an outside sign, in a newspaper ad, on radio/TV spots or in the Sunday bulletin

Examples from two different churches

Church A

Mission Statement:

We are a *caring* congregation seeking to *share* with others the good news of Christ.

Vision Statement:

We will care and share by

- offering our building free of charge to community groups that build relationships
- offering, whenever able, to provide meals for the homeless
- being intentional about inviting others to worship and study with us
- being intentional about offering hospitality to guests who visit our church

Values Statement:

We value

- having five generations in our worshipping community
- having meals together
- having harmony in our congregation
- having enough money to provide free meals for others

Motto: The little church with a big heart

Church B

Mission Statement:

Our church works to bring *justice* and the *peace* of Christ to a hurting world.

Vision Statement:

We will work for justice and peace by

- offering at least one educational event each year on a justice issue
- providing one paragraph for our church bulletin each Sunday on a justice issue and communicating what our church, as a whole, is doing about it
- inviting one guest each year to speak in a worship service about peace and justice
- adding five new resources (DVDs, books) on justice and peace to our church library

Values Statement:

We value

- having people highly educated in justice issues so we can learn from them
- having to stretch financially so it reminds us of the needs of the poor
- being in a downtown setting where we see justice issues all around us
- being able to participate in the Give-Peace-A-Chance campaign in our city

Motto: Just us and peace

When you have finished writing the mission, vision, values and motto statements, check back to see if they match well with the action plans formulated in the congregational meeting. Make adjustments as necessary.

Step #3: Congregational gathering – fun and focus

In a light-hearted but persistent way, present your statements in many different ways to the congregation – in worship, newsletters, by email, posters and skits. Send notices to all existing groups asking them to read the statements to participants. Ask for feedback to any of the elements that have arisen from this process – the action plans; the mission, vision, values and motto statements.

You might, for instance, post five posters around the room at coffee time – one for each of these: action plans, mission statement, vision statement, values statement, motto. Invite people as they mix and mingle over coffee to add questions, comments or suggestions to the charts.

Step #4: Congregational sign-up – making a world of difference

Post a poster for each of the action plans. Add pictures. In as many ways as possible, talk about each action plan and invite congregational members to sign up for at least one.

You may also use this time to highlight existing, ongoing ministry. For example:

Be a volunteer at our Inn from the Cold Program

or

Sign up for our Boarding House Ministry

or

**Sign here for more involvement with the
Canadian Foodgrains Bank.**

One of the several advantages of this style of visioning process is that it includes a broad spectrum of the congregation. Also, because the action plans come out of a serendipitous and playful group process, no one feels hurt if a “pet project” cannot be tried. This visioning process for new ministry is so energizing that people will want to do it again next year!

Retreats and Workshops

Visioning a Healthy Future

Healthy Church Development

A three-hour retreat or ongoing study for elders

Introduction

We live in a time of heightened health awareness. Wellness is a topic of concern in every area of life: personal, public, corporate, economic, political, institutional, environmental and ecclesiastical. Numerous books promote living a healthy lifestyle. Media pundits discuss the state of the nation's political health and look for evidence of a healthy economy. Scientists express grave concern regarding the health of the environment.

This workshop stimulates discussion regarding church health. Short dramatic readings encourage consideration of church development issues and introduce three programs that congregations of The Presbyterian Church in Canada have found helpful.

The material that follows is designed to be used for a self-directed three-hour session retreat. It may also be adapted to provide shorter units of study/discussion at three or four consecutive session meetings.

If your session has more than six members, small group discussion is important. The optimum number of participants in a discussion group is three to four.

Preparation

Whether using the material for a retreat or at consecutive session meetings, the scripts (pp. 103–111) should be copied and parts assigned in advance of the retreat or meeting. The process will work best if the scripts are assigned to people who have some sense of the dramatic. (Do not try to match a part to a particular elder's point of view.) Due to the brevity of each reading there is limited opportunity for character development, but each role does have some personality consistencies within it.

A minister/moderator may take the part of a ruling elder but should not take the role of the minister. All roles are gender inclusive.

In a retreat setting, every participant should have a copy of the Retreat Agenda (pp. 98–101) and the Bible Discussion sheet (p. 102). (If the readings are used in several consecutive meetings, every participant should have a copy of the related discussion questions.)

All elders should be provided with pen and paper for taking notes during the readings.

Obtain at least one copy of each of the books described in the third skit (pp. 107–111). See the bibliography (p. 112) for information on availability. Those assigned the role of introducing the book should receive it with their scripts.

Session Retreat Agenda

Part 1: Beginning the Discussion (20 minutes)

a. Bible Discussion – The Parable of the Sower

Ensure that every participant has a copy of the Bible Discussion sheet (p. 102). Follow the instructions on the sheet.

b. Discussion Starter Skit 1 – The Ride Home (30 minutes)

Have five people read the skit (pp. 103–104). Following the skit, discuss these questions:

1. Do you recognize yourself in any of the characters? Which one and in what way?
2. If you were a sixth passenger in *The Ride Home*, what would you say?
3. Which of the following statements most closely describe prevailing attitudes in your congregation: (choose up to three)
 - a. *We want to grow but we don't want to change.*
 - b. *We want to change but without offending anyone.*
 - c. *Just wait, society will change and people will return to the church.*
 - d. *If we do nothing the church will die.*
 - e. *We have to bite the bullet and change, even if some people leave.*
 - f. *I just hope the church will still be here when I die.*

Part 2: The Tipping Point (30 minutes)

Have five people read Discussion Starter Skit 2 – The Tipping Point (pp. 105–106). Following the skit, discuss these questions:

1. This conversation introduces the concept of the “tipping point.” How would you visually illustrate that concept? (Hint: Have you ever played the games *The Straw that Broke the Camel's Back* or *JENGA*?)



2. What “tipping point” can you identify in the history of your congregation or a congregation you have attended? Was it immediately recognized or did it take some time to realize significant change had occurred?
3. Do “tipping points” just happen, or can they be anticipated, engineered or planned?
4. Tipping points involve a change in balance or equilibrium. Is such change possible without discomfort?

Break (15 minutes)

If you are using this material at a retreat, plan a refreshment break here.

Part 3: The Presentations (45 minutes)

Have five people read Discussion Starter Skit 3 – The Presentations (pp. 107–111). Following the skit, discuss these questions:

1. As the minister observed, all three approaches focus on church health, but there are differences. What would you consider to be the most significant points of difference?
2. Each approach identified factors in congregational life (*purposes, keys and quality characteristics*). In what ways do they interrelate or overlap?
3. If you had an opportunity to ask each of the presenters one question, what would it be?

Part 4: The Next Steps (30 minutes)

a. Discussion

Having been introduced to three ways of developing church health, which statement most closely reflects your present point of view:

- a. *I have a clear leaning toward using one of the programs presented.*
- b. *I think we should use one of the programs presented, but I'm not yet sure which one.*
- c. *I think we need to consider other approaches to improving our church's health.*
- d. *I think we are a pretty healthy church just as we are.*

b. Express an opinion

Following discussion in your group, indicate your personal preference by moving to a part of the room designated to correspond to one of the four statements.

- If statement "a" has the greatest support, immediately seek a second indication regarding the preferred program by moving to one of three designated areas.
 - If there is near unanimity, appoint a planning task force (3–5 members) to establish a timeline, obtain resources and implement a process. Go to Closing.
 - If there is considerable divergence of opinion regarding approaches, go to the next step.
- If statement "b" has the greatest support or there is a divergence of opinion regarding approaches, ask each participant to write a question on an index card, the answer to which would help them come to a decision. Establish a task group to research the answers to the questions raised and ask them to report to the next session meeting. Go to Closing.
- If statement "c" has the greatest support, establish a task group to obtain information on other resources and report back to a future meeting of the session. Go to Closing.
- In the unlikely event that statement "d" has the greatest support, offer to share your story with other congregations by sending your story to Canadian Ministries at canadianministries@presbyterian.ca. Go to Closing.

Closing (10 minutes)

The closing provides an opportunity to affirm the work that has been done and to seek God's blessing on the next steps. To encourage a transition into an atmosphere of worship, begin with a minute of silence. A time for positive reflection and sharing is included. The final act is a sharing of the peace of Christ. A suggested script is provided.

Ask participants to form a circle.

Leader:

As we come to the conclusion of our retreat, let us enter into a time of silence.

The scripture that has been foundational to our work is Jesus' Parable of the Sower. Listen to it once again. (*Read Luke 8:4–8*)

Let us read the parable in unison as it is printed on your Bible Discussion worksheet.

In the course of our time together, what is one thing you have heard about healthy church development that has taken root in you? It could be a concept, an idea or a phrase. We don't have time for long explanations, but please share in a word or two some seed that has been sown in you today.

Allow time for individual sharing. This is not a time for group discussion. Thank each person for what they offer without additional comment.

Let us pray. Mighty God: May the seeds that have taken root in us today bear fruit according to your purpose for (*name of your church*). We are thankful for an introduction to new concepts, reminders of time-proven truths, and an open sharing of concerns and ideas. In the words of one of your saints:* "For all that has been, thanks! For all that will be, YES!" In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

*Dag Hammarskjöld

Let us share the peace of Christ with one another, using the words, "*(Name), the peace of Christ be with you.*" The response will be, "*(Name), and also with you.*"

Bible Discussion – The Parable of the Sower

When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to him, Jesus said in a parable: “A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.” As he said this, he called out, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” (Luke 8:4–8)

Instructions

- Read the text in unison.
- Answer the questions individually.
- Discuss your responses in small groups (3–4 in each group).

1. How would you describe your gardening experience?

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I deserve a “green thumb” award | <input type="checkbox"/> If I look at a plant, it wilts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I say, “Buy it rather than grow it” | <input type="checkbox"/> I enjoy other people’s gardens |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I enjoy special times with God through gardening | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |

2. What do you consider the main point of Jesus’ parable?

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fruitful growth is a matter of luck | <input type="checkbox"/> Be a discerning seed-sower |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fruitful growth requires careful preparation | <input type="checkbox"/> Gardening is risky |
| <input type="checkbox"/> There are many reasons why seeds don’t thrive | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |

3. How would you describe the spiritual roots of your congregation?

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pretty shallow | <input type="checkbox"/> Deep and strong | <input type="checkbox"/> Dry and thirsty |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Weak and vulnerable | <input type="checkbox"/> Growing daily | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |

4. What areas of your church’s life and ministry effectively support growth and fruitfulness? (select up to three)

- | | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Worship service | <input type="checkbox"/> Prayer | <input type="checkbox"/> Pastoral care |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hospitality | <input type="checkbox"/> Study | <input type="checkbox"/> Mission activities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Outreach | <input type="checkbox"/> Fellowship | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |

5. What areas of your church’s life and ministry are most in need of improved health? (select up to three)

- | | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Worship service | <input type="checkbox"/> Prayer | <input type="checkbox"/> Pastoral care |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hospitality | <input type="checkbox"/> Study | <input type="checkbox"/> Mission activities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Outreach | <input type="checkbox"/> Fellowship | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |

Discussion Starter Skit 1: The Ride Home

The Setting:

The minister and four elders from Knox Presbyterian Church are returning from The New Millennium Conference. The conference, sponsored by a well-known American mega-church, was hosted by a large Alliance congregation in a major Canadian city. Satellite communications linked the sponsoring mega-church with four Canadian sites and 16 locations in the United States. The total conference registration exceeded 17,000 participants. Worship and major presentations were projected on a large screen. Once on the highway for the ride home, the minister opens the conversation.

Minister: Well, what did you think? Are you glad we went?

Elder 1: I'm still trying to take it in. There must have been 800 people attending! Just at our location. Never mind all the others.

Elder 2: It reminded me of a youth conference I attended 40 years ago.

Elder 3: They sure are on to something! Imagine a church that has a weekly attendance of... What was it? Over 15,000 and growing. They must be doing something right.

Elder 1: We get excited when we have to put out extra chairs on Christmas Eve.

Minister: Are you glad we went?

Elder 1: I think so. I'm just trying to relate what we heard to who we are. I mean, Knox is so different. We go back to 1870. They were founded in 1975. We have had 12 ministers and they have had only one. We are Presbyterian and they are... What are they?

Minister: They are independent. They have no denominational affiliation.

Elder 2: At one point I felt they wanted *us* to join *them*.

Minister: That's what happening these days. There are associations of churches that cross denominational lines. Did you pick up any ideas that could apply to us?

Elder 3: Well, it was clear to me that a lot has to change at Knox if we want to *grow*. As I see it, we have been treading water for years. We really aren't keeping up in attendance, and there are hardly any youth in the church.

Elder 1: *What* do you think has to change? Where would *you* begin?

Elder 3: I'd start with worship. Did you hear an organ at the conference? Did we sing any familiar hymns? Every keynote speaker said growing churches have given up using the organ. That's where I'd start. At our next session meeting I think I'll move that we completely change our ministry of music: organ, hymnbooks, choir... If we want to grow we've got to get with the times.

Elder 2: But at what cost? How many people will leave if we give up the organ in favour of a band? And I like hymns. I even like the organ.

- Elder 3:** That's my point! Our worship meets *your* need, but it's not attracting young people, is it?
- Elder 1:** I think it would be a mistake to change everything all at once. Changes have to be made gradually. I was impressed by their clown and puppet ministries. Now *there* would be a place to start. Everybody likes clowns and puppets. Knox could be known as the church that has a children's story with puppets every week. Just imagine our empty front pews filled with children!
- Minister:** I like that picture. I was also impressed by the mini-dramas that they included in the worship and as part of the sermon. That's something *I* wouldn't mind working on.
- Elder 3:** We can do that, too. But I don't think we will grow until we change our music.
- Elder 2:** We'll appoint *you* to inform Mary that she is no longer needed as organist and choir director. No one has yet mentioned the third presentation. I think we lack small groups. We have the WMS, the monthly men's breakfast, quarterly couples' fellowship evenings, and the youth group, such as it is.
- Minister:** Don't forget the Bible study.
- Elder 2:** Look at the groups they had! Every member was assigned a group. That's 15,000 people in small groups! I think that's the secret of their success. Based on that third presentation, it looks like we will *never* grow unless we have small groups. (*brief pause*) I've noticed that someone's been awfully quiet so far.
- Elder 4:** Me? I'm just listening. Taking it all in.
- Minister:** No one has mentioned their social action program. Do you remember? They assigned some of their small groups to work at community soup kitchens and they are active in Habitat for Humanity. That showed they don't neglect justice ministries.
- Elder 3:** But we have to begin with music.
- Elder 1:** I'd start with puppets.
- Elder 4:** I'm confused. (*reflectively*) I was impressed by all that we saw and heard. Clearly they are doing things that have appealed to lots of people. But I'm left with many questions. This is the fourth conference I've attended in the past 10 years. A few years ago, I went to a synod conference. The speaker from the college said churches must offer three things: solid biblical preaching, excellent Christian education and effective pastoral care. Then there was the presbytery evangelism event we attended. It was all about paradigm changes and living in a post-modern world. Last year we sent a delegation to the stewardship conference. We were told to be aware of how people are different. Some give because they want to be faithful and others give because they want to make a difference. Now, today, we have heard and seen another approach. I find it all overwhelming.
- Elder 3:** We have to start by changing the music.

Discussion Starter Skit 2: The Tipping Point

The Setting:

A meeting of the session of Knox Presbyterian Church is underway. A delegation is about to report on a recently attended church development conference.

Minister: The next item on the agenda is The New Millennium Conference. There were over 800 in attendance at our location and over 17,000 in different cities across North America. We had a very lively and stimulating conversation on the ride home. Who would like to begin?

Elder 3: I came away from that conference convinced we have to make changes around here! We just can't do things the way we've always done them. I'd start with our music ministry.

Minister: It sounds as if we are picking up where we left off.

Elder 4: I agree we have to make changes. But how can we know *what* to change and *how* to change? Where do we start? We have been talking about decline and growth for 20 years or more. I remember when we hoped we would "double in the eighties."

Elder 2: I remember Key 73! We went door to door giving out booklets.

Elder 3: We have to start with the music. Growing churches don't use organs. I think every conference speaker said that. We also need to invest in a really good projector and screen.

Elder 1: Music is a lightening rod. I think it would be prudent to initiate change by adding something, like puppets or clowns. We don't want to lose members by making changes.

Elder 4: Whatever we do needs to be well thought out. The congregation expects us as elders to lead in ways that will grow the church, not disrupt it.

Minister: I've just finished reading a book that I found very relevant when thinking about change. *The Tipping Point*, by Malcolm Gladwell, explains how change occurs when three important factors come together. He calls that coming together a "tipping point." Gladwell illustrates how tipping points can result in either positive or negative change.

Elder 1: That's for sure. Look at what happened when we added Passing the Peace to our service. Four good families packed up and left.

Elder 2: And I heard that St. Paul's down the street changed its music to guitars and drums and people are staying away in droves.

Elder 4: So what are those three important factors?

Minister: If I remember correctly, Gladwell called them, “the *Law of the Few*, the *Stickiness Factor* and the *Power of Context*.” I think of them as leadership, message and context. Sometimes they come together to form a “tipping point” and change happens.

Elder 2: But often they don’t come together. Look at doubling in the ‘80s.

Minister: Gladwell’s book is full of examples of tipping points. Do you remember the midnight ride of Paul Revere? He spread the word that “the British are coming.” Did you know that there was another person with a similar mission? William Dawes carried the same warning in another direction and is barely remembered. The towns he went through had similar anti-British leanings, but Dawes was not Revere. Revere had personal connections that Dawes lacked.

Elder 4: That’s the issue of leadership. What about message? We have the best news anybody could ever hear.

Minister: Gladwell says that the way the message is *packaged* is important. He calls it the “stickiness factor.”

Elder 1: And what about context? There’s not much we can do to change our community. Sunday sports and shopping are here to stay. And I haven’t been to a movie in years. There’s nothing fit to go and see anymore! Remember *Singing in the Rain* and the *Sound of Music*? Puppets and clowns will bring children and parents back to the church.

Elder 3: There’s no doubt everything’s changing and so are we. We used to talk about saving for a rainy day. Well, how hard does it have to rain? I say it’s time to throw caution to the wind. We have to go for broke. Remember that hymn we used to sing: “Give us the heart of Abraham for changes make us bold”!

Minister: I think we need to make changes. But they need to be right for us. I don’t think we can simply *copy* what another church, even a successful church, has done. We need to ask and answer some important questions before we embark on a process of change.

Elder 1: What questions?

Minister: Well, one is, “Whom in our community is God calling us to serve?” The answer will influence a lot of what we decide to do. And another is, “How can we best utilize our human and financial resources to glorify God?” What I’m saying is, I think we need to do some serious analysis before we embark on a particular course of change.

Elder 4: I suggest we consider several church development resources at our next meeting.

Elder 2: I agree. I’ll make that motion.

Minister: I’m aware of several. I’ll distribute some materials and we’ll receive summaries at our next meeting. Are we agreed? Now let’s move on to the committee reports.

Discussion Starter Skit 3: The Presentations

The Setting:

A meeting of the session of Knox Presbyterian Church. Following the last meeting, the minister distributed books and resources related to church development to three elders. Each was asked to report on the material given to him/her at a stated hour. About half an hour into the meeting, the minister/moderator speaks.

Minister: I see it's time for our stated hour. At our last meeting we agreed to devote an hour to considering several church development resources. Who would like to be the first to report?

Elder 3: I can start. I was given the book *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission*. It's by Rick Warren. He's the founding minister of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California. Before I tell you about the book, let me tell you about his church. From its beginning, Rick Warren wanted to reach people who seldom went to church. He began with a Bible study in his home in 1979. The Bible study grew to 15 members. Then, in response to the distribution of 15,000 flyers, 205 people attended the first worship service in 1980. Today, Saddleback Church has 22,000 members, more than 200 specific ministries, six weekend services held in three venues at the same time at a 140-acre church campus site! And get this: each venue offers a different style of music, but with the same message projected on a big screen!

Minister: Those are really impressive numbers. Saddleback sounds a lot like the church that sponsored the conference we attended.

Elder 1: Is Saddleback a Presbyterian church?

Elder 3: No. I think it's Baptist. They insist all members need to be baptized as adults. And from looking at their website, I think they are probably more conservative than we are. It struck me that Warren didn't seem to be aware of inclusive language. He refers to "men" when I assume he means "people." But I think any church could make use of many of the *ideas* in the book.

Elder 2: What does it propose?

Elder 3: Rick Warren believes that a church needs to grow in health before it tries to grow in numbers. He says a church needs to be driven by five New Testament purposes. And he believes that building up the faith of people is more important than developing programs.

Minister: Can you tell us about those five purposes?

Elder 3: Warren names them: *Worship, Ministry, Evangelism, Fellowship and Discipleship*. He describes each, using the Bible. I should say one thing I liked about his book is its clarity. Many pages have boxes that summarize key points. For example, one says, "A clear purpose not only defines what we do, it defines what we don't do" (p. 87). Warren says most churches focus on one purpose rather than all five. That made sense to me, because as I look at Knox, I think we focus on fellowship and ministry, and do nothing regarding evangelism.

Elder 1: So how do you become "purpose driven"?

Elder 3: Warren describes a process of church development and illustrates it with concentric circles he calls the five circles of commitment. People move from the outside in, from community to the core of the church's life. In order to achieve that, Saddleback offers four basic courses. Picture a baseball diamond with first base being Committed to Membership and home plate being Committed to Missions. The step-by-step process is all well laid out in the book.

Minister: It sounds as if you were impressed by the book and its development concepts. Any final thoughts before we go to the next report?

Elder 3: I think reading the book helped me broaden my understanding. I know I've been talking a lot about music, and I do think we have to make changes, but there's a lot more to consider. I think we have to ask why we do what we do. For example, whom are we trying to attract to Knox? I've always thought we were here for everyone, but I think we need to have greater clarity regarding whom God wants us to reach. Presbyterians? Unchurched? Seniors? Young couples with no church experience?

Minister: Thanks for your informative report. Who would like to be next?

Elder 1: I was given a book by a consultant named Kennon Callahan. I remember him from that Stewards by Design Conference we attended a few years ago. He was the main speaker. He told some wonderful stories and we have implemented some of his suggestions, like our calendarized budget and the ways we now encourage generous giving. His book is called *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*. I was also given a workbook that goes with it.

Elder 4: I was at that conference. Callahan was an excellent speaker. It was the first time I had seen someone use PowerPoint. That really helped me follow his presentations.

Elder 1: He writes the way he speaks, clearly and concisely. Often he says the same thing two or three times using different words. The title of the book says it all. Callahan recommends that churches identify and build on key congregational strengths. He lists 12 key areas, six of which are "relational" in nature. He describes the remaining six as "functional."

Minister: What are the six relational areas?

- Elder 1:** *Specific, Concrete Missional Objectives; Pastoral and Lay Visitation; Corporate, Dynamic Worship; Significant Relational Groups; Strong Leadership Resources; and Streamlined Structure and Solid, Participatory Decision-Making.*
- Elder 2:** I think we are pretty strong in a few of those areas. Worship, leadership and decision-making are Knox's strengths. What about the other six?
- Elder 1:** They are: Several Competent Programs and Activities; Open Accessibility; High Visibility; Adequate Parking, Land and Landscaping; Adequate Space and Facilities; and Solid Financial Resources.
- Elder 2:** I think we have some needs there. There are areas of our building that aren't accessible, our parking lot is limited to 10 spaces, we could take our church sign to the *Antiques Road Show*, and the nursery is small. On the other hand, we do have a few good programs like the Couples' Fellowship, the Bell Choir, the WMS and the Men's Breakfast. And we have pretty solid finances, thanks to some recent bequests.
- Elder 1:** We have 10 parking spaces in the summer and seven in the winter. And I'm not sure I agree with you about the nursery. A lot of churches have nurseries just like ours. Callahan says that we can be an effective church even if our parking is limited and our building has some challenges. He says we should build up our strengths. That's where his long-range planning workbook comes in.
- Minister:** Say some more about that.
- Elder 1:** The hardcover book describes each of the keys to an effective church. The Planning Workbook takes participants through a planning process. I could imagine us using it. It asks good questions.
- Minister:** I believe St. Andrew's in Nearby Town used Callahan's book to develop a long-range plan last year.
- Elder 1:** If possible, I think it would be best to invite someone from beyond Knox who is familiar with the twelve keys to lead the process. It can be done in two sessions and would help us develop a long-range plan to be presented to the congregation at the Annual Meeting.
- Minister:** I like the idea of building on congregational strengths.
- Elder 1:** Callahan makes it clear he is not talking about the power of positive thinking. Building on strengths is a recognition that God has blessed each congregation with gifts and resources and it is important to make use of them. The planning process involves identifying strengths, then expanding them, and finally adding new ones.
- Elder 2:** We have a good choir and bell choir, but we have no children's choir. Adding a children's choir would expand our ministry of music.
- Elder 4:** I like the idea of identifying and expanding strengths. But I wonder if we can be sufficiently objective. Can we really assess our strengths ourselves?

- Elder 3:** I know we have a good choir, and it's been good for many years. Knox has a reputation for good music in town and throughout the presbytery. We were even asked to sing for the opening of synod. The choir may be a strength, but the church hasn't grown because of it, or the bell choir, or the WMS, or the Men's Breakfast.
- Elder 4:** I'd like to give my report. I think it addresses the issue of objectivity. I was given the book *Color Your World with Natural Church Development*. It's by Christian Schwarz.
- Elder 1:** I don't think I've heard of him.
- Elder 4:** He's based in Germany and developed Natural Church Development (NCD) based on research involving 1,000 churches in 32 countries around the world. To date, over 40,000 churches in 70 countries have used NCD.
- Elder 3:** I think there was an article about it in the *Presbyterian Record* a few years ago.
- Elder 4:** There were eight articles; one for each of the eight quality characteristics recognized by Schwarz.
- Elder 2:** According to my notes, that's eight for Schwarz, 12 for Callahan, and five for Warren. What are the eight?
- Elder 4:** In his research, Schwarz found a clear link between church health and numerical growth. Healthy churches grow naturally. He also found that healthy churches had high scores in eight areas of congregational life: *leadership, worship, ministry, small groups, spirituality, evangelism, structures or governance, and relationships*. He assigned adjectives to each to describe the quality. For example, for worship the important quality is "inspiring." Every church has worship, but some churches have a worship service that is more inspiring than others.
- Elder 2:** But how do you measure that? When it comes to worship, everyone has different likes and dislikes.
- Elder 4:** That's what Schwarz discovered! There isn't any one style of worship that guarantees inspiring worship. His research led him to conclude that different styles can be equally inspiring. He studied churches of different denominations and traditions in very different contexts, looking for principles of church health that were true globally.
- Elder 2:** But how do you measure qualities?
- Elder 4:** With a carefully designed tool, a survey that gives a score in each of the eight areas. The data from the survey is compared to data from thousands of other churches and a congregation is able to identify both its strengths and its area of greatest need. Based on the results, every church has a maximum factor and a minimum factor.
- Elder 3:** Minimum factor. That sounds like negative thinking to me.

- Elder 4:** Schwarz explains that the church is like a body. When one part of the body is unhealthy, the whole body is affected. In his research, he found that a church's minimum factor held the church back from better health. He also found that churches need to use their strengths to address their most pressing area of need.
- Elder 2:** You said something about a survey. Is it like that questionnaire we sent out in the newsletter last year? Remember, the one that asked questions about summer service hours and suggestions for fall programs?
- Elder 4:** Not at all. It is a 91-question survey with high statistical accuracy. It is completed by 30 carefully selected core participants of the church.
- Elder 3:** Then what?
- Elder 4:** The data is sent electronically for scoring. Based on the results, a support team coordinates the design of a plan of response and the congregation implements the plan. The plan will help concentrate energy where it will be most beneficial. About a year later, a second survey is completed. Many congregations improve their scores in all areas and usually get a new minimum factor. Using NCD involves a cycle that could take up to five years. The research also indicates that most congregations experience increases in worship attendance while working through the process.
- Minister:** We have had three excellent and informative presentations. All three had one thing in common. They focus on quality and health more than quantity.
- Elder 4:** I need to say one more thing. While it is possible for a church to do Natural Church Development on its own, most congregations make use of a coach. If we decide to use NCD, I think a synod staff person is able to provide coaching for us.
- Minister:** Thanks again to our three presenters. Now let's take some time to consider possible next steps.

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This workshop was prepared by Keith Boyer who served as the Mission Consultant for the Synod of Central, Northeastern Ontario and Bermuda.

Retreats and Workshops

Visioning a Healthy Future

Sabbath Moments and Transforming Ministries

A three- to four-hour workshop

Use this workshop at

- a special session meeting
- a Saturday workshop
- a congregational or session retreat

Use some or all of the sections under “Making Use of the Sabbath Year,” according to the nature of your group. Although this material suggests some small group and some large group activity, if you are a small session, you may choose to do this work with the total group.

Prior to the retreat, provide three participants with “Sabbath Moments and Transforming Ministries: A Scenario” (p. 117) and ask them to be prepared to read it at the workshop.

1. Gather; offer refreshments

2. Invite the three people to read the scenario, taking the parts of Don, Lynn and Matthew

3. Explore “Sabbath energizes”

- a. Under “Making Use of the Sabbath Year,” read section 1: “Sabbath energizes” (p. 118).
- b. In small groups, invite elders to do one of these things:
 1. Share stories about times when they took a break and it was a rejuvenating experience.
 2. Talk about a practice that they would like to cultivate in order to become energized (e.g., give themselves permission to do whatever they feel like on Sunday afternoon or always meet someone they love for dinner out on Friday nights, etc.)

4. Explore "Sabbath is for reflection"

- a. Under "Making Use of the Sabbath Year," read section 2: "Sabbath is for reflection" (p. 118).
- b. On a beautiful cloth, set out pens, journals, art, some Bibles, copies of the scripture verse in this section (Matthew 12:9–13), candles and matches. Invite the elders to visit the table and choose any articles that will help them in a time of quiet reflection and prayer. Invite them to find a quiet space and, in 10 to 15 minutes, reflect on scripture, write in their journal or pray.

5. Explore "The context for ministry has changed; have we?"

- a. Under "Making Use of the Sabbath Year," read section 3: "The context for ministry has changed; have we?" (p. 118).
- b. In a large group, make three charts with the years 2010, 1990 and 1970 as titles, one on each chart. Recall, and jot down, characteristics of each of these eras. What is life like in each of these times? (It often helps people to recall more accurately if they take a moment to remember how old they were or how old a child or grandchild was in that year.)

Using three more pieces of chart paper, jot down characteristics of your church in each of these eras. When you are finished, talk about these things:

 1. How has the worship changed?
 2. How has the programming changed?
 3. In what ways are the service and mission opportunities different?
 4. How has the church membership changed?
 5. How has the context around the church (the community) changed?
- c. In small groups, discuss this: What are some conclusions that can be drawn from this study?



Photo © George Tsaritsianidis/Dreamstime.com

6. Explore "Sabbath is a time for evaluation"

- a. Under "Making Use of the Sabbath Year," read section 4: "Sabbath is a time for evaluation" (p. 119).
- b. Vote with your feet. At one end of the room, post a "10 = We're great" and at the other end of the room, post a "1 = We don't like to think about this." Ask people to move to the end of the room that most clearly expresses how good they think the session is at ongoing evaluation of the ministries and programs of the church. Invite participants to vote again to express where they would like to be. (It is entirely possible, for instance, that people may not want to evaluate some aspects of church life because they fear hurting the feelings of others. But it may be that there is some desire to help struggling ministries or programs come to an honourable conclusion.)
- c. List the gifts and strengths of the people in the congregation. Invite the group to list on chart paper all the gifts and strengths they see in the members of the church, e.g., musical ability, interest in justice, strong awareness of missions, lots of children, etc. (You may need to remind people to stay focused on gifts and strengths. People tend to lapse into deficiencies!)
- d. Use a simple evaluation tool such as the one below. (Modify to suit your congregation.)

Evaluation

On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 = strongly agree), how are things in our congregation?

1. If I were a newcomer to our congregation, I would feel welcome. 1 2 3 4 5
2. People have a sense of being cared for in our congregation. 1 2 3 4 5
3. Our worship is uplifting, with good music and preaching. 1 2 3 4 5
4. Our congregation serves the community. 1 2 3 4 5
5. Our congregation provides learning for all ages. 1 2 3 4 5
6. Things our congregation does well: _____
7. Areas needing attention: _____

- e. Rank, using consensus if possible, all ministries of your church, under one of these four categories:
 1. This is a struggling ministry, and we want to help it make an honourable ending.
 2. This is a viable ministry, but we do not have the leadership gifts to do it at this time.
 3. This is a viable and supported ministry, but we need to give it more attention.
 4. This excellent ministry is working well, and we shall continue to support and encourage it.
- f. Agree that, at a later session meeting, you will think through how the session can communicate with the people involved in these ministries.

7. Explore "Sabbath creates new visions"

- a. Under "Making Use of the Sabbath Year," read section 5: "Sabbath creates new visions" (p. 119).
- b. Have fun with this! Write at the top of a coloured bristol board (it is possible to buy bristol board with balloons on it...) "Our dreams." Pass out coloured circles and invite individuals or small groups to brainstorm dreams. Remind people that brainstorming is not evaluated. Everyone can pretend that there is unlimited money and people to do the program.
- c. After posting the visions, read and enjoy them. At some later point you may wish to return to them and ask, "Is there a vision on this board that could make our congregation a more vibrant and outreaching community of faith?"

8. Explore "Sabbath is a spiritual journey"

- a. Under "Making Use of the Sabbath Year," read section 6: "Sabbath is a spiritual journey" (p. 119).
- b. Invite elders to draw a line across a page and to put birth on one end of the line and their current age on the other. Working individually, ask them to identify three or four significant things that have happened on their spiritual journey, writing a word or drawing a small picture to describe this time. After all have finished, use questions like these to explore spiritual journeys:
 1. Were there patterns in your significant times?
 2. What role did the church play in these times?
 3. Who were the people who helped make these times important?
 4. Looking back, how do you see God at work in these times?
- c. Think back over the history of your congregation. What are the important spiritual moments in the life of your community of faith? How can these be celebrated and used as a basis for new ministry?

Sabbath Moments and Transforming Ministries: A Scenario

The worship committee at St. Andrew's, Harmony, agrees that the Sunday services are very good. The preaching is thoughtful and thought-provoking. The liturgy is meaningful and worshipful. The appearance of the sanctuary helps create a sacred atmosphere.

Don: There's just one thing that bothers me. I'm not entirely certain our choir adds much to the worship experience. In fact, I think they actually detract from it.

Lynn: What do you mean?

Don: Well, I don't mean any disrespect, but as singers, I think they're past their prime.

Lynn: I can't believe you said that! They may not be the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, but they're among the most faithful people in this church.

Don: I'm not questioning their devotion, but you know as well as I do, they're down to the faithful five. Two of them have been with the choir for over 60 years and the others aren't far behind. I've spoken with them. They say they're reluctant to retire simply because there are no younger people willing to take their places. They're wonderful people, but the best they can offer is the proverbial joyful noise.

Matthew: What are you suggesting, Don?

Don: I'm suggesting that maybe it's time to try worship without a choir.

Lynn: Worship without a choir! What's wrong with you? We're Presbyterian... we have to have a choir!

Matthew: Let's not be too hasty, Lynn. Let's at least explore this a bit. Don, have you thought about what the worship would be like without any special music?

Don: We don't have to give up special music altogether. There may be some Sundays we don't have any, but there are at least three people I can think of who have beautiful voices and could provide an excellent solo now and then. Maybe they'd even sing duets or trios. Then there is Anna who has been studying flute all through high school. I think she'd play at some services.

Lynn: Why don't they just join the choir?

Don: They don't have time right now. They've got jobs and are busy with their children. Anna's getting ready for university. You know how it is.

Matthew: So you're saying we should focus on the gifts God has placed in our midst to provide the best worship possible.

Don: Exactly! There may be a choir again some day or we might even develop a small orchestra if we can find the musicians. We need to recognize our strengths and limitations.

Lynn: Well, you might have a point. We want our worship to inspire. Maybe we should give this some thought.

Making Use of the Sabbath Year

*"A sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labors as God did from his."
(Hebrews 4:9–10)*

1. Sabbath energizes

When the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada declared that the period from Advent 2006 until Advent 2007 would be a Sabbath Year, a few people mistakenly concluded that the church was being called to hibernation, to do nothing but rest. Naturally, this was never the intention. The sabbath is not meant to paralyze, but to energize, God's people.

"One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?' And he said to them, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.' Then he said to them, 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.'" (Mark 2:23–28)

2. Sabbath is for reflection

Sabbath is not only meant for rest but also for reflection and faithful obedience to the will of God. It is important to remember that the sabbath was made for God's people, not God's people for the sabbath. Jesus has declared that it is lawful to do good on the sabbath. We are called to use this sabbath time wisely for good purposes.

"He left that place and entered their synagogue; a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, 'Is it lawful to cure on the Sabbath?' so that they might accuse him. He said to them, 'Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath.' Then he said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other." (Matthew 12:9–13)

3. The context for ministry has changed; have we?

One of the ways sessions and congregations might use this Sabbath Year is by pausing and contemplating what it means to be the body of Christ in the world today and tomorrow. These contemplations may lead to changes in ministry. Change, however, can be a difficult and painful process. We may be excited about repainting the living room or buying a new car, but when it comes to the way we "do church," we often prefer the status quo. We tend to resist church changes.

It might be helpful, however, to remember that we worship and serve a God of change. The Psalmist claimed, "God has put a new song in my mouth..." (Psalm 40:3). God spoke through Ezekiel, saying, "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you..." (Ezekiel 36:26). Jesus talked about providing new wineskins for new wine (Luke 5:38). He gave his followers a new commandment (John 13:34) and revealed a new covenant (Luke 22:20). Peter wrote about "...a new birth into a living hope..." (1 Peter 1:3). The Revelation of John describes a voice

from heaven speaking of a new Jerusalem and saying, "See, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5).

It might also be helpful to remember that The Presbyterian Church in Canada not only understands itself to be Reformed, but also reforming. We strive to be people open to the "illumination and correction of the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures" (*Book of Forms* 447.2).

4. Sabbath is a time for evaluation

If your session recognizes a need for some level of transformation within the congregation, like the imaginary worship committee in the opening scenario, hard questions can be asked in a sensitive manner about which ministries ought to continue and which have outlived their usefulness. An underlying question could be, "Are we doing good things, or are we just doing things?"

The process of assessment invites people to prayerfully discern God's will and prepare plans to follow God's leading. The session should approve and oversee any assessment process.

Sabbath moments can become stewardship opportunities through which a congregation makes decisions about how to employ the people of the congregation effectively and use their gifts efficiently in the service of Christ. It might be discovered that some ministries need to be brought to an honourable conclusion. Others might simply need to be refocused or revitalized.

5. Sabbath creates new visions

The session might also contemplate encouraging the congregation to undertake a ministry never before tried to meet emerging needs. Such new ministries ought to grow naturally within the local context and out of the gifts and abilities of the congregation. If a congregation does not have the people or resources to carry out a ministry well, it might be an indication that the ministry should be postponed.

6. Sabbath is a spiritual journey

Sabbath is not just a day of the week but a spiritual journey. The Sabbath Year can be used to process change. As noted in the Life and Mission Agency report to the 2006 General Assembly, "Sabbath is a time to embrace a new and God-centred perspective of what we do as we move forward in faith to be the Church of Jesus Christ in today's world" (*The Acts and Proceedings*, 2006, p. 289).

One of our former moderators, The Rev. Jean Morris, was quoted in the same report as saying, "It is my hope and prayer that this time of reflection will help us as a church learn more about the biblical concept of Sabbath and God's gift to us through it. May this year of preparation for a Sabbath Year be a time of insight and spiritual growth for our denomination" (*The Acts and Proceedings*, 2006, p. 289).

Retreats and Workshops

Visioning a Healthy Future

Feeding the Hungry: A Workshop about Restaurants and Churches¹²

A three-hour workshop

How do we help newcomers feel welcome in our church? This three-hour workshop draws parallels between what we have experienced – a welcoming restaurant – and what we would like to be – a welcoming church. Churches and restaurants share something in common. Both want to feed hungry people in a welcoming environment.

Planning for the Workshop

You may do this workshop with congregational leaders.

- Recruit a Workshop Coordinator. (See “Role Description for Workshop Coordinator,” p. 132.)
- Promote and “sell” the workshop. When the invitation to participate is extended beyond the session, it is essential that as many elders as possible attend. Attendance at this workshop should not be considered “optional” for elders. Welcoming is everyone’s business.
- Gather up some materials – black markers, newsprint, easel, index cards, masking tape, three-quarter inch coloured dots.
- If you wish to have different people read the four presentation parts, recruit those readers.
- Arrange for nutritious but simple snacks and beverages.

¹² This workshop was inspired by the Alban Institute publication *Feeding the Flock: Restaurants and Churches You’d Stand in Line For*, by Russell Chandler (Alban Institute, 1998).

(Post a schedule where all can see)

Introduction (10 minutes)

Presentation #1: Meals with Jesus (15 minutes)

- Small Group Bible Discussion – The Picnic (20 minutes)

Presentation #2: Restaurants You'd Stand in Line For (10 minutes)

- Group Assignment: Restaurant Pros and Cons (10 minutes)
- Group Reporting (10 minutes)

Break (15 minutes)

Presentation #3: From Restaurants to Churches (10 minutes)

- Group Discussion – Part 1 (10 minutes)
- Group Discussion – Part 2 (30 minutes)
- Voting (5 minutes)

Break (5 minutes)

Presentation #4: From Vision to Implementation (5 minutes)

- Group assignment: The Destination Church Action Plan (20 minutes)

Closing (5 minutes)



Photo © Sebastian Czappnik/Dreamstime.com

On the Day of the Workshop

On the day of the workshop, do these things:

- Make the necessary physical arrangements. Set out tables so that five people can work around each. Make sure all can see the presenter. As participants arrive, encourage husbands and wives and members of the same family to sit at different tables. Also, try to establish a gender balance in the table groups.
- Set on each table a copy of "Notes for Table Group Facilitator" (p. 132) and a copy of "Destination Church Action Plan" (p. 135).
- Set out for each person a copy of "Small Group Bible Discussion" (p. 133) and a copy of "Group Discussion: From Restaurants to Churches" (p. 134).
- Set out refreshments and name tags.
- Set out gathered supplies. For each table, you will need a black marker, two sheets of newsprint, five unlined index cards, masking tape, and a package of three-quarter inch coloured coding dots. You will also need an easel with newsprint for the group.

Workshop in Detail

Introduction (10 minutes)

Welcome

Welcome participants and ask each table group to select a Table Group Facilitator. Ask the selected person to review the half page of notes (p. 132). Ask each table group to appoint a Scribe by presenting that person with the marker. If participants do not know each other, instruct participants to introduce themselves to their table group by stating their name. Invite each person to tell what favourite food they would order at a restaurant if cost was of no concern.

Read:

There is a story about an elderly aunt who went for a flight in a single engine plane piloted by her nephew who had recently earned his wings. By all reports, it was an uneventful flight with a gentle takeoff and a smooth landing. As the proud pilot helped his passenger out of the plane, she remarked, "Thank you for those two flights." Her nephew was perplexed. "What do you mean, Auntie? That was only *one flight!*" "No, it was two flights," she replied. "My first and my last."

There are other situations in which one becomes two. Many people have first and last visits to restaurants. For any number of reasons they do not return. They may even deter others from a first visit by their comments.

The same phenomenon is true for churches. A single visit becomes first and last. Wouldn't it be helpful to listen to the conversations of those attending worship for the first and last time at your church? How did they evaluate their experience? They seemed affirming in the ritual of exiting pleasantries following the service, but what did they *really* think? Many churches do not obtain sufficient information from first time guests to undertake follow-up contact. We only know that the first visit was also the last, and wonder why.

Presentation #1: Meals with Jesus (15 minutes)

Read:

References to food are found in many Bible stories.

The definitive event of Judaism is retold annually in a meal – the Seder meal eaten at Passover. Two other Jewish festivals also involved pilgrimage to Jerusalem and feasting. Pentecost, also known as the “Feast of Weeks,” was linked to the spring grain harvest. Sukkoth, also called the “Feast of Booths,” was associated with the autumn grape harvest.

When reading the gospels, it is evident that Jesus enjoyed mealtimes. He was frequently seen eating and drinking. Let’s draw on our group biblical story memory bank and list some meals-with-Jesus stories.

(Invite participants to name meals-with-Jesus stories. Accept them in any order. When they are done, read or refer to the scriptures related to the seven examples given below. Many of the meals appear in more than one gospel with slight variations. Help fill in the gaps as you are able.)

The Picnic: Matthew 14:13–21 – Feeding of 5,000

The Intimate Meal: Luke 10:38–42 – Mary and Martha

This story contrasts two kinds of nourishment: physical (Martha) and spiritual (Mary)

The Interrupted Meal: Mark 14:3–9 – Anointing of Jesus

In the house of Simon, the leper, a woman breaks a jar and anoints Jesus with ointment of nard. “What she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

The Sacramental Meal: Mark 14:12–26 – The Last Supper

This is the legacy meal Jesus left his disciples. “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26).

The Party: John 2:1–11 – The wedding feast in Cana

Mary: “They have no wine.” Jesus fills the jars with water. “You have kept the good wine until now.” This is sometimes called “Jesus’ first miracle.”

The Walk to Emmaus: Luke 24:13–35

Disciples walking to Emmaus on Easter day do not recognize the risen Jesus (“Their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”) until they invite him to have a meal with them. Returning to Jerusalem, they report: “He had been made known to them in the breaking of bread.”

The Resurrection Breakfast Barbecue: John 21:1–14

Peter and other disciples are fishing. The risen Jesus calls from the shore, “Come and have breakfast.” They eat bread and fish. “They knew it was the Lord.”

Are you full? Is it any wonder the Psalmist wrote, “Taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8)? Now let’s use one of the meals-with-Jesus stories to give biblical focus to our workshop: the story of the feeding of 5,000.

Small Group Bible Discussion – The Picnic (20 minutes)

Using the “Small Group Bible Discussion: The Picnic” sheet (p. 133), read the scripture passage aloud. Review the assignment as it is printed. Read the text a second time. Instruct participants to complete the sheet on their own. When five minutes have elapsed, ask each person to introduce themselves (i.e., tell his/her story) to their group in one minute.

In the full group, invite participants to tell their imaginary names and why they came to Jesus. Record the motivating factors or “hungers” on newsprint (common responses are: curiosity, need for healing, search for meaning, need for forgiveness, etc.).

Presentation #2 – Restaurants You’d Stand in Line For (10 minutes)

Note to Presenter:

Thank you for doing this presentation. This presentation is intended to encourage workshop participants to reflect on positive and negative restaurant experiences and introduce the concept of what the food service industry describes as “destination status.” Most workshop participants will be able to relate to the personal experiences in the script. If you prefer to substitute other anecdotes or illustrations from your personal experience, write them down in order to keep the script concise and of similar length.

Read:

“There will be a 30 minute wait for a table.” We were at Aunt Catfish’s, a restaurant in Daytona Beach, Florida. On the way, we had passed at least 12 restaurants with half-empty parking lots in order to park in the overflow lot across the street from Aunt Catfish’s. My sister-in-law seemed surprised. “Only half an *hour*? We’re in luck! Often, the wait is over an hour!” It was worth the wait. The ambience, the food, the cost and the entire experience conveyed this was a restaurant worth standing in line for.

A restaurant with plenty of available tables is a worrisome problem to owners and managers. Restaurants without customers don’t make money. Every empty table represents a loss on investment. A restaurant with a roomful of empty seats won’t survive. You’ve seen the cycle – a well-publicized Grand Opening, attempts to establish regular clientele, and then, months or a year or two later, a quiet closing.

The goal of every restaurant is to achieve what is called “**destination status.**”

McDonald’s has achieved destination status. The golden arches represent a meal-time experience that will be fast, economical, convenient and familiar in a child and family friendly environment. McDonald’s sells uniformity. It may be close to five other restaurants serving similar or, in all likelihood, *much* better food, but McDonald’s has found its niche.

Eric Schlosser, author of the bestseller *Fast Food Nation* writes, “McDonald’s spends more money on advertising and marketing than any other brand. As a result it has replaced Coca-Cola as the world’s most famous brand. McDonald’s operates more

playgrounds (8,000) than any other private entity in the United States. It is one of the nation's largest distributors of toys (10 million Happy Meals a week). A survey of American schoolchildren found that 96% could identify Ronald McDonald. The only fictional character with a higher degree of recognition was..." Can any body guess? "Santa Claus. The impact of McDonald's on the way we live today is hard to overstate. The Golden Arches are now more widely recognized than the Christian cross" (p. 4).

Let's see how you do on some McDonald's trivia:

- How many McDonald's restaurants were there in 1960? (250)
- How many were there in 1973? (3,000)
- How many are there today? (McDonald's has reached "global realization" with 15,000 restaurants in 120 countries plus 15,000 in the United States, for a total of 30,000)
- How many are there in Canada? (1,200 – The first opened in 1967 in Richmond, B.C.)
- In 1994, where did 15,000 people line up for their first McDonalds burger? (Kuwait City)

Restaurant owners, including the management of McDonald's, know how vulnerable they are. They know that potential patrons are free to accept or reject what they offer in terms of menu, service and ambience. For example, whatever happened to Howard Johnson's restaurants?

One of the most successful and highly rated restaurant chains in the United States is Cracker Barrel. There are over 500 currently located in 42 states. They are known for a broad front porch lined with rocking chairs and several wooden barrels with a checkerboard painted on the top. Entry to the restaurant is through a gift shop featuring many nostalgia items from the 1940s and '50s. A wooden folk-art game is found



Photo © Phototravel/Stockphoto.com

at every table. The walls are lined with antique signs and old farm implements. The menu features a choice of home-style meals: chicken and dumplings, meatloaf, grilled pork chop, catfish, macaroni and cheese, and cherry cobbler.

Cracker Barrel restaurants are not, like McDonald's, at most interstate interchanges. But Cracker Barrel has achieved **destination status**. Research indicates a significant number of holiday travellers consider the location of a Cracker Barrel when planning their itinerary. (The Cracker Barrel website includes a trip planning option with printable maps identifying the locations of its restaurants along the selected route!)

While travelling in the United States, I have eaten at a good number of Cracker Barrel restaurants. The first three visits, in my judgment, were excellent, satisfying experiences. I understood why they were so highly rated.

Then I went to one in Binghamton, NY. Soon after we were seated, it was clear something was wrong. It was supper hour but there was no wait. The table was not completely set. The menu was torn and came with dried gravy. Adjacent vacated tables had not been cleared of plates with scraps of uneaten food. The wait staff seemed inattentive and preoccupied. We had to ask for the biscuits and corn muffins that are normally brought to the table with the meal. The paper towel dispenser in the washroom was empty. After bringing our meals, our waitress vanished. A few minutes later the manager appeared and cleared several tables. Having had high expectations from previous Cracker Barrel visits, we left disappointed and concerned. Was this the beginning of a trend? Happily, we have since eaten at several others in different locations with the service and quality we had come to expect.

What restaurants are you willing to stand in line for? That is, what are the qualities that keep you coming back to satisfy your hungers? And what factors lead you to feel like the woman who went for a flight in a two-seat single engine plane piloted by her nephew. When she got out she said, "Thanks for those two flights." Her nephew was perplexed. "What do you mean, Auntie? That was only *one flight!*" "No, it was two flights," she replied. "My first and my last."

Group Assignment: Restaurant Pros and Cons (10 minutes)

Ensure each table is supplied with a marker and newsprint.

Read:

Here's your next group assignment: Take a sheet of newsprint. Divide it into two columns, heading one "Pros" and the other "Cons." Under "Pros" list the qualities of a restaurant that make it worth standing in line for. Under "Cons" list the factors that transform one visit into two: the first and the last. In both cases try to be detailed and descriptive. Avoid generalities such as nice, good, etc.

Group Reporting (10 minutes)

Ask each group to present its list of restaurant pros and cons.

Break (15 minutes)

Presentation #3 – From Restaurants to Churches: Making the Connection (10 minutes)

Note to Presenter:

Thank you for doing this presentation. This presentation is intended to help participants link the positive and negative factors regarding restaurants to congregational life and mission. Most participants will be able to relate to the personal experiences in the script. If you prefer to substitute other anecdotes or illustrations from your personal experience, write them down in order to keep the script concise and of similar length.

Read:

In this presentation, we will begin to make the connections between restaurants and churches. What do restaurants and churches have in common? They seek to feed hungry people in a welcoming environment.

More than half of all new restaurants fail in their first three years. Research indicates that 68% of people who stop patronizing a restaurant do so because they perceive the *restaurant is indifferent to their needs and doesn't care if they return.*

Many people drop out of church telling a similar story. Like restaurants, churches go awry when they forget their purpose and refuse to adapt to the needs and interests of their members and adherents.

In his book *Restaurants That Work: Case Studies of the Best of the Industry*, Martin Dorf writes, "Why do some restaurants succeed while others close their doors soon after they open? Unfortunately there are no easy answers. Most restaurateurs and consultants would agree that the success of any restaurant depends on hundreds of factors. The ability to create a restaurant concept that satisfies customer demand within a given time frame is difficult enough without having to contend with constant changes in demographic mix, food trends, competition, and economic conditions."

Richard Melman of *Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises* writes, "Today's diner is not satisfied with bread alone! It used to be that to run a successful restaurant, all you needed was good food. Then you needed not just good food, but good service too. Now you need to deliver great food, good service, ambience, and possess a real sense of what people want."

Both restaurants and churches are very dependent on word of mouth for growth.

Soon after beginning ministry in one church, one of my parishioners gave me some advice about the restaurants within walking distance of the church. "Go to the In-Towner Coffee Shop for the best hot turkey sandwich in the city." It was good advice. The ambience wasn't much, but she was right about the food and the price was right. In fact, I went back a number of times, overlooking the fact that the person who had designed the menu was not very good at spelling. I never ordered a **b-o-w-e-l** of soup.

I wonder if that helpful member spoke as positively about her church as she did about the In-Towner restaurant. Did she ever say to her friends, "Come with me to my church. They offer a gracious welcome, beautiful music, and a message that speaks to your life."

Word of mouth is an important ingredient for growth. It can also be a significant cause for decline. Has anyone ever told you about a bad restaurant? Perhaps not first hand, but second hand or third hand? Bad news about a restaurant spreads like wildfire and gets enhanced as it's passed on. Research indicates that as many as 300 people may be influenced by a person who shares a bad news story about a restaurant with 10 to 12 other people.

By the time a bad news story makes the rounds, the story of a neglectful waiter may evolve into allegations of salmonella in the salad and E. coli in the chicken soup.

The same thing happens in relation to churches. The person who attends worship as a first-time guest and feels ignored will likely tell others, "They're not a friendly church. I went there and no one said a word to me." And the story of a Thursday night conflict between two choir members regarding the laundering of the choir robe collars may be transformed into rumours that the congregation is seriously conflicted. "I hear they're always fighting in that church."

Do you see how much churches can learn from restaurants?

While lunching in the food court of a mall, I overheard two young women discussing restaurants. What caught my ear was the comment, "The food was awesome!" I had no idea whether she was talking about beef Wellington or Buffalo wings. But "awesome" signifies a strong recommendation.

What would it take for first-time attendees and long-term participants to report to friends, family and neighbours that *our church is awesome*?

What adjustments/improvements/changes could we envision that would transform (*name of your church*) into a church that people would "stand in line for"? What would it take for us to become a **destination church**?

Let's do some visioning. Let's imagine our church as one that people would stand in line for – a *destination church* that newcomers and regular participants would describe as "awesome."

As a first step let's consider the issue of who we are called to serve and feed.

Most churches consider themselves to be "friendly." Preacher and teacher Barbara Brown Taylor writes that church signs that advertise "all welcome" remind her of the sign in the produce department promoting "vine-ripened tomatoes." She suggests that a more honest and accurate sign would be, "We will do our best to make you feel welcome," while some churches should warn, "Christians inside! Enter at your own risk."

Just as restaurants focus on attracting a particular clientele, churches need to consider what "niche" they will fill. It is difficult to be all things to all people. In our church, all people may be welcome, but some people are more welcome than others. That is to say, a number of factors, including demographics (Who lives in our community?), facilities (How does our building influence whom we can serve most effectively?), and ethos (What characteristics and attitudes make our congregation distinct?) will help us identify the focus of our ministry.

Work through Part 1 of the worksheet (p. 134). After we have done that, I'll introduce the rest of the assignment.

Group Discussion: From Restaurants to Church – Part 1 (10 minutes)

Ask people to follow the instructions on Part 1 of the worksheet (p. 134). After 10 minutes of discussion, ask each group to report their response to the statement "God calls our church to serve and feed..." Collect an index card from each table and tape them on a wall or display board.

Group Discussion: From Restaurants to Church – Part 2 (30 minutes)

Read:

With the results of Part 1 in mind, use Part 2 of the worksheet (p. 134) to choose four “pros” from your earlier group discussion regarding restaurants (written on newsprint) and relate them to a current church program, process or practice.

For example, if the condition or cleanliness of the washroom was considered an important factor in considering a return visit to a restaurant, how might the condition of the washrooms of our church impact the impressions of first-time guests?

Or what would “food that is fresh” as a restaurant value look like in relation to our worship service or church programs?

And if a “welcoming atmosphere” was identified as a restaurant quality, how could we improve our ministry of hospitality?

Choose four qualities and relate them to our congregation with four concrete proposals that will have a positive impact on our life and ministry and thereby make us a more attracting church. We will allocate half an hour to this important activity.

(After 30 minutes of discussion, ask each table group to name the four pros and describe the related proposals. When each group is finished reporting, collect and display the index cards. As the groups report, there may be some duplication. Match the cards with very similar proposals. If there are significant differences in somewhat similar proposals, consider them as different and display them as stand alone ideas.)

Voting (5 minutes)

Provide each participant with a strip of five “voting dots.” One is to be used in relation to the card from Group Discussion Part 1. Do participants agree that a particular group is the main one you will seek to serve and feed? Do the dots reflect that there are several groups?

The remaining four dots are to indicate a preference for proposals from those just presented in Part 2. Participants must vote for four different proposals and not place all their dots on one card.

Short Break (beverage and washroom) (5 minutes)

During the break, review and compile the results of the voting. At the conclusion of the break, report the results of the voting (five cards) and prominently display the four best supported proposals.

Presentation #4 – From Vision to Implementation

(5 minutes)

Note to Presenter:

Thank you for doing this presentation. This presentation addresses the vitally important issue of developing a plan of action. Although the presentation is short, it challenges the workshop participants to put their hard work into concrete action. Following the presentation, assign teams to develop implementation action plans for the selected proposals.

Read:

All too often good innovative ideas remain just that: creative and positive good ideas. They are left unrealized because of a crucial *missing link*.

Many congregations pass excellent resolutions about membership growth, mission and outreach, improved stewardship, leadership training, additional staff, and expanded ministry at their annual meetings. All too often they pass the *same or similar* resolutions year after year after year, because nothing changed from one meeting to the next.

The concern was real. The commitment was genuine. *But there was no plan for implementation.* The resolution had no action plan. There was no process established to move from vision to reality.

We have been comparing restaurants and churches. One way in which restaurants and churches are different is that restaurants that don't have an action plan go out of business, usually very quickly. Churches without an action plan decline, often slowly. Most churches die gradually and incrementally.

But thank God for the miracle of transformation possible in the gospel of Jesus Christ! We are, after all, an Easter people. Churches can and do experience newness of life. They can turn around and become *destination churches*. Churches on a plateau or that are in decline are able to become "churches to stand in line for."

Remember the leftovers in our Bible story? They remind us that God has blessed the church with an abundance of resources for feeding the hungry. People are hungering for good news, and the gospel of Jesus Christ provides the nourishment they need.

What is needed is a plan of action – the identification of the definitive steps that will turn an excellent idea into reality.

Here's the final assignment: Take the four *destination church* proposals receiving the most votes and identify the steps needed to implement them. Estimate the cost and the human and other resources required to put the plan into action. Each table group will work on one proposal.

Group Assignment: The Destination Church Action Plan (15 minutes)

Although time-limited, this activity will provide the session with a preliminary implementation plan. Assign each group one of the four proposals. If there are fewer than four groups, create four teams. If there are more than four groups, assign the same proposal to more than one group. Their suggested action plans may prove to be complementary.

Closing (5 minutes)

Ask participants to gather in a circle for the closing of the workshop.

Read:

Let's begin with silence. (*Allow for at least 30 seconds of silence*)

Now listen for a word from God in a reading from the gospel of John. It is a continuation of the story of a breakfast barbecue.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." A second time, he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep." (John 21:15–17)

"Feed my sheep." We are surrounded by neighbours who are hungering for good news. May the work we have done today enable us to more effectively serve them. May we become a "destination church," known throughout our community as a place where the bread of life can be found.

Let us pray. Sustaining God, we live in a time when many hunger for that which truly satisfies. We pray that what we have discussed today, and what we will do as a result, will bring honour to Jesus. Bless (*name of church*) in order that we may be a blessing to (*name of community*). In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.



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Role Description for Workshop Coordinator

Thank you for serving as the Workshop Coordinator. In this role you will

- lead the opening and closing
- read the sections in regular type under the “**Read**” headings (instructions to the leader are set in italics within parentheses)
- recruit several people to read Presentations 2, 3 and 4, although you may choose to read these yourself
- make arrangements for space, refreshments, supplies and registration
- make the opening presentation, “Meals with Jesus”
- provide leadership after the group discussions
- monitor the flow of the workshop and keep the process moving

Notes for Table Group Facilitator

Thank you for serving as a facilitator for your table group. You remain a full participant in the group, but must skillfully balance participation with your mandate to lead and facilitate.

In your role you will

- keep the discussion on topic (centred on the assigned task)
- ensure that everyone in your group has an opportunity to speak
- keep track of the time

Assigned group tasks may include

- brainstorming: *compiling a list of spontaneous ideas without judgment or comment*
- consensus building: *seeking general agreement from the entire table group*
- selecting: *choosing one proposal over another or parts of several proposals to form a new whole*
- prioritizing: *ranking in order of importance or some other quality*

Small Group Bible Discussion: The Picnic

Matthew 14:13–21

[When Jesus heard about the death of John the Baptist], he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Instructions

Read this text imagining that you are one of the crowd. You have come a long way to see and hear Jesus. You are not a neutral observer. Get into the story. Give yourself a name, an occupation, a life, etc.

My name is _____

My occupation is _____

Two significant facts about my life situation are

Using your imagination, answer the following questions:

How did you hear about Jesus? *(Be creative!)*

Why did you come to this desolate place to listen to Jesus?

What will you tell your friends about this amazing afternoon?

Introduce your imaginary self and share your story with your group.

Group Discussion: From Restaurants to Churches

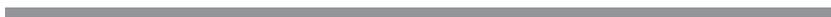
Part 1 – Who are we called to serve and feed?

The following descriptions are intended to encourage conversation. The conversation should help us identify the people in our particular context who would or could most likely experience our congregation as a “destination church.”

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Presbyterians in our community/region | Single young adults |
| Senior citizens | Boomer empty-nesters |
| Families with young children | Gay/Lesbian couples |
| Homeless people | University students |
| Intellectually challenged adults | Recent immigrants |

God calls our church to serve and feed:

Write your description on an index card.



Part 2 – Choose four “pros” regarding restaurants and relate them to our church

As a group, choose four “pros” regarding restaurants from your previous group discussion.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Relate each of the four “pros” to a church program (e.g., worship), process (e.g., welcoming) or practice (e.g. advertising). Taking into account the people you are called to serve and feed, what changes, improvements or innovations could you envision related to each area?

When you are finished, write the “pro” and the change, improvement or innovation on an index card.

Group Assignment: Destination Church Action Plan

In order to be a more attracting "destination church," we will *(write proposal)*

The steps required to make this proposal a reality are

The estimated financial cost for making this proposal a reality is

The human resources required to make this proposal a reality are

Please give this worksheet to the Workshop Coordinator

Bibliography

Books of interest

Schlosser, Eric. *Fast Food Nation*. Harper Collins Canada, 2005.

Perry, Robert L. *Find A Niche and Scratch It: Marketing Your Congregation*. Alban Institute, 2003.

Dorf, Martin E. *Restaurants That Work: Case Studies of the Best in the Industry*. Watson-Guptil, 1992. (Look in your public library for this very interesting book.)

Bass, Diana Butler. *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church*. Alban Institute, 2004.

Additional information on restaurants mentioned in Presentation #2

Aunt Catfish's On The River: www.auntcatfishontheriver.com

Cracker Barrel – Old Country Store: www.crackerbarrel.com

McDonald's: www.mcdonalds.ca

This workshop was prepared by Keith Boyer, who served as the Mission Consultant for the Synod of Central, Northeastern Ontario and Bermuda.