



ELDERSHIP IN TODAY'S CHURCH

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I Introduction

This handbook was first published in 1975. Though it has gone through several printings, the original purpose remains: It provides a brief introduction to the office of ruling elder.

Eldership in Today's Church is written for women and men who are elders or elders-elect.

Who is an elder? He or she is a member of a local congregation, elected by that congregation and ordained to rule in the Church. The elder's role requires vision, daring and faithfulness—a challenging but rewarding way to express care for God's people.

The Origin of “Elder”

The word “elder” comes from the Bible. As long ago as the time of Moses, elders were appointed to govern God's people. There is debate over the precise meaning of the word “elder” in the New Testament.

Three main views exist:

- (1) “elder” refers to a position comparable to that of an elder in a present-day presbyterian church (following the synagogue model of rule by lay elders)
- (2) “elder” in the Book of Acts describes ruling elders while later biblical references such as Titus 1:4–9 refer to ministers
- (3) “elder” refers to a position similar to our modern minister of Word and Sacraments.

It comes as a surprise to many readers to discover that the Westminster Assembly, which gave The Presbyterian Church its subordinate standard *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, took the third view. The Assembly established the office of ruling elder not on New Testament references to the eldership but on the concept of gifts of government (Romans 12:7–8; 1 Corinthians 12:28).

However, in the writer's opinion, the second view, (2), is most faithful to biblical intent. In Acts 14:23, we read that elders (plural) were appointed in every church. Since the early church at that stage consisted mainly of house churches, it is unlikely that these elders were all ministers. It is more plausible to think they were elders along the model of elder in the synagogue. At this early period it seems natural that the church would adopt the synagogue system for its government. However, later references to the word elder would seem to refer primarily to ministers.

Today, elders play an essential role in the governing of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. The Church has developed its government founded on and agreeable to the Bible. The Bible is “the standard of all doctrine by which we must test any word that comes to us from church, world, or inner experience” (from Living Faith, 5.1, a statement of faith published in 1984 by The Presbyterian Church in Canada).

II Who is an Elder?

An elder is a man or woman elected by a congregation and ordained to rule in the Church. Elders, along with the minister or ministers, form the session. The session meets regularly with a minister serving as moderator. The purpose of meeting is to

- provide leadership for the congregation
- plan and provide for the pastoral care of the people.

Two attributes are important for people called to be elders:

- he or she is a Christian
- he or she is a member of the Church.

When elders have a clear knowledge of what it means to be a Christian and what the church is meant to be, they have a foundation for fulfilling their role as church leaders. For this reason we begin by asking the meaning of the words “Christian” and “church.”

Being a Christian

It is often said that a Christian is one who believes in God and accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

That answer could be right. The problem is with the word “believe.” Belief is often understood simply as the acceptance of certain statements, such as “God is Creator” and “Jesus is Saviour.”

The Bible goes much further in its use of the word. For the Bible, the words “believe” and “faith” mean personal trust. In scripture we learn that the reality of God is known only in faith, in the risk and response of the whole person to God. Faith means saying “yes” to God *with one's whole life*.

For this reason, to be truly Christian, belief must never remain at the head level. It involves one's total personality.

Christians have made contact with God at a special point in experience. We see God as holy and ourselves as needing

forgiveness. In a remarkable way, which we are never fully able to explain or comprehend, we find forgiveness through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Jesus Christ is the mediator or bridge-builder between God and ourselves. Christ came to bring us back into harmony with God and with God's purposes for life.

God's reconciling act in Jesus Christ is a mystery
which the Scriptures describe as
the sacrifice of a lamb,
a shepherd's life given for his sheep,
atonement by a priest.

It is also the innocent dying for the guilty,
the ransom of a slave,
payment of a debt,
and victory over the powers of evil.

Such expressions interpret the love of God
revealing the gravity, cost, and sure achievement
of our Lord's work.

Yet that love we cannot fully explain.
God's grace, received by faith alone,
pardons and justifies,
redeems and reconciles us.

(Living Faith 3.4.3)

Christians serve not an idea, nor a set of rules, but rather a living God who has spoken decisively in Jesus Christ and continues to speak by the Holy Spirit. Christians love the world as God's creation and follow Jesus' teaching in loving others. "‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’" (Matt. 22:37–39)

We know God as Creator, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit.

What is our degree of experience of God? Some people struggle all their lives, never being quite sure. God uses them just as well as those who seem sure of their faith. God honours the person who has faith as small as a grain of mustard seed.

Being the Church

You, and all the other believers, are the church. The church is people—people who are called to worship and serve a living God. God has spoken decisively in Jesus Christ and continues to speak by the power of the Holy Spirit. The church is present when God's word is truly preached, the sacraments rightly administered, and where church life is ordered according to the word of God (*Living Faith* 7.1.6).

The New Testament gives us a picture of the body of believers called the church. In the New Testament, the word “church” never refers to a building but to the group of believers. In the early church, despite its shortcomings, we see men and women sharing a deep fellowship and a great sense of oneness. Their feeling of unity arose from a commitment to the living Christ in mission, evangelism, and social concern.

The New Testament speaks of the church in many ways. One striking way, an amazing metaphor, is the church as “the body of Christ” and church members as “being in Christ.”

Christ is the head of the body. Church members are seen as forming various parts of it, each part being essential for the body's overall health. Each Christian, then, is regarded as having a role in the life of the church. Everyone is important in Christ's work.

St. Paul develops this idea in 1 Corinthians, chapter 12. Several years ago, a Roman Catholic chapel in southern Ontario burned down. All that remained was a charred crucifix with hands and feet missing. In time a new and impressive chapel was built, and this crucifix was placed on the altar. Many visitors asked, “Why have you placed that scorched crucifix with no hands and feet on your new altar?” The answer was, “To remind us that we are Christ's hands and Christ's feet.” That, in part, is what it means to say that the church is “the body of Christ.”

The worship and service of the living Christ—that is the essential task of the church.

III Elders and The New Testament Church

The Presbyterian Church in Canada believes that, in having ruling elders, it is being faithful to the pattern of authority found in the New Testament. Even the word “presbyterian” comes from the Greek work “presbuteros” meaning elder. Elders formed part of the life of the New Testament church. “Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust” (Acts 14:23). Elders are also referred to in Acts 11:30 and 15:22.

It seems logical that the government of the very early church would include ruling elders. Most Christian converts were Jews who would be familiar with the office of elder in their own synagogues. One may even see the first beginnings of rule by elders as far back as the Old Testament and the elders of Israel.

But the presbyterian system of church government is not an exact copy of the New Testament era. The early church was too fluid and changing to serve as an exact model for churches today. An office similar to that of ruling elder was part of the early church but even the word “elder” seems to go through a change within the New Testament. Early references (as in Acts) probably refer to ruling elders, and later references (as in Titus 1:4–9 and 1 Peter 5:1-7) mainly to ministers. Clearly the New Testament depicts a church in transition.

The eldership embraces an important principle. The Presbyterian Church in Canada gives church members significant participation in decision making. We recognize that the entire church is the people of God. Authority rises from the individual congregation through a system of church courts. However, in another sense, authority is from the top down. Every elder and every church court serves Christ and seeks Gods will. The upward movement is balanced by the downward movement as church courts attempt

to seek God's will through the collective decisions they make.

We value rule by church courts where many people participate and where church members, through their ministers and elders, have a voice. However, it is incorrect simply to say that our church courts are democratic. Democracy is rule by the people. The whole point of the presbyterian system is to seek rule by God, although the precise determining of God's will is a challenging matter.

The early church was a small minority group. As years passed and persecution increased, a need arose for strong and centralized authority. This need was supplied by the president of councils of presbyters who eventually took the title of "bishop" (a word meaning overseer).

Soon a system of government evolved which largely ignored the idea that the authority of the church should be exercised through representatives. A small group assumed leadership responsibility for the whole church. In many ways the Protestant Reformation was an endeavour to restore the church to its New Testament shape.

Contrary to popular belief, the presbyterian system had only its barest beginnings under John Knox in Scotland. (John Knox lived from 1505–1572.) More accurately, the presbyterian system of church government, as we now know it, dates from the work of Andrew Melville and the *Second Book of Discipline in Scotland* (1578). Though there are complexities here, we believe that the office of ruling elder is our attempt to be faithful to what we know of church government in the New Testament.

IV The Elder in The Presbyterian Church in Canada

A. Called to be an Elder

God calls women and men to the ruling eldership of the Church. That call is discovered and affirmed by their election in a congregation.

When people agree to be elected, they discover their own sense of call. What is that process like? How do people feel about their call? How would they express it?

When experienced elders remember their first response, they share some common answers—feeling inadequate, unworthy and afraid. They ask “Who, me?” When asked what helped them move beyond their hesitations, they also share some common things. They tell of their desire to serve, to make a positive difference, and to answer a spiritual challenge. Often an encouraging word from a minister or another person helped them to act on their desire to serve.

Not all people respond to God’s call in the same way, as the biblical stories of Moses and Isaiah illustrate. When God called Moses to speak to the Pharaoh on behalf of his people, Moses, too, had a “who me?” experience (Exodus 3:1-4:17). On the other hand, when God called Isaiah and declared his sin blotted out, Isaiah responded with eagerness to God's challenge. “Here am I; send me!” (Isaiah 6:8)

Elders experience God's call in a variety of ways but always in a specific context. As that context changes, an elder’s call may develop in different ways. For example, in a long pulpit vacancy the role of pastoral care may become more important. Developing leadership skills for regular worship may help the congregation experience continuity in the midst of guest preachers. Or a sudden growth in the church school may mean that elders take more responsibility in teaching classes until volunteer growth

catches up with the student numbers. Occasionally elders may go back and reclaim an eldership role that has been long dormant. It is helpful, therefore, if elders are challenged from time to time to explore their call again within the current congregational context.

An elder whose call is discovered and affirmed by the congregation is someone whose need for God is as great as anyone else's. In addition, that person is willing to serve God's people, provide the Church with leadership, pastoral care and inspiration.

B. What Are the Qualities of an Elder?

In considering the eldership, we don't look for perfection either in ourselves or in others considered for this office. It is not likely that we shall find it! Rather we look for a growing Christian commitment.

An elder is a member of the Church who is an example to believers (Book of Forms 106.1). What does "example" mean?

An Elder Has Personal Concern for People

Each elder is assigned a small group of members and adherents in an "elder's district." The elder cultivates a personal relationship with those persons through "visiting, counselling and encouraging them in the Christian life" (Book of Forms, Section 109.4).

Since each elder has a district, eldership is a pastoral office as well as a ruling one. To be pastoral, one needs to care for people. "Caring" is another word for Christian love and is one of the chief qualities required for the exercise of this office.

Personal care is also shown in the leadership decisions that are made in the congregation. Caring leadership is a key aspect of eldership.

An Elder Is a Committed Christian

The office of elder exists for the wellbeing of the Church. One's commitment to the Christian faith should be the main reason for

accepting eldership. The elder's faith is vital, personal and nurtured through the church. The office is not a “reward” for service or a means of obtaining status in the congregation.

An Elder Is a Person of Sound Judgement

The word “elder” suggests maturity. In former times this meant someone older. Today we look for and want young elders as well as older ones, but the criterion of seeking people of sound judgement remains. When nominating or electing someone to eldership, people ask “Is this a person who will assist the session in making wise and helpful decisions?” The quality of decisions made by the session is of crucial importance in congregational life.

An Elder Leads an upright Life

Elders are honourable in behaviour and mature in relationships. They are people who care deeply for the people of the church and the world. They trust in God. The Book of Forms 106.1 quotes 1 Timothy 4:12 saying that elders are to be an example “in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity.”

V The Election and Ordination of Elders

When the session decides that the congregation needs additional elders, people are elected by vote (Book of Forms 132). It is the session's responsibility to examine carefully those who are nominated or elected and verify their suitability to the office. Many sessions provide classes to instruct elders-elect in the work and responsibility of the office.

Ordination

What does ordination mean? “Ordination” comes from the same root word as the word “order.” One who is ordained is set within a certain order—in this case, that of elder. In the PCC, ordination is for life; however, some sessions have opted for term service (Book of Forms 108). Ordination to the eldership is not to be confused with ordination to the ministry of word and sacraments. That order is different from the ruling eldership.

Ordination has also meant that, as a Church, we are seeking God's blessing on the people being ordained. Elders are blessed in the power of the Holy Spirit and sent out to fulfill their task.

Ordination in The Presbyterian Church in Canada is either by prayer alone or by prayer and the laying on of hands. At the service of ordination, four questions are asked of the elders-elect:

Questions at Ordination

1. Do you believe in God the Father, made known in His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom the Holy Spirit witnesses in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments?

This question implies the doctrine of the Trinity. Christians believe that God is Creator, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit. God is eternally one, yet three. God's self-expression is most complete in Jesus and continues to come to us by the Holy Spirit. The

Scriptures speak to us of God and bear witness to God's actions in history.

2. Do you accept the subordinate standards of this Church, and do you promise to be guided thereby in fostering Christian belief, worship and service among the people?

The subordinate standards of The Presbyterian Church in Canada are *The Westminster Confession of Faith* as adopted in 1875 and 1889 (written between the years 1643 and 1647), *The Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation* of 1954, and such other doctrines as the Church may yet adopt. Our Church, under the continual guidance of the Holy Spirit, follows this pattern of authority in deciding matters of belief:

Jesus Christ
the Scriptures
subordinate standards.

The Church's authority is Christ revealed in the Scriptures, the Christ who continues to speak through the Church. This means that the subordinate standards must be tested by the Bible. Indeed, that is why they are subordinate: They are under Christ and God's word addressed to us in the Bible.

The Westminster Confession of Faith clearly recognizes this pattern of authority:

- (a) Christ is acknowledged to be the head of the Church (Chapter 8, section 1; Chapter 25, section 1).
- (b) Chapter 1 speaks eloquently of the authority of the Bible. The authors of *The Westminster Confession of Faith* regard their work as under biblical authority.
- (c) Chapter 20, section 2, gives magnificent expression to the liberty of the individual conscience: "God alone is lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his word. . . ." We are not asked to accept doctrines which our conscience tells us are contrary to God's word.
- (d) In Chapter 31, section 4, we read that "All synods or

councils . . . may err . . . therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as an help in both.” The Westminster Assembly, which produced *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, was itself a church council, and therefore liable to error. Therefore, by its own standards, we are obliged to correct on those points where it is not in harmony with the teaching of the Scriptures.

Most Christians will recognize the difficulties in having subordinate standards. The positive advantages, however, should be stressed. As a Church we have objective Standards by which to measure ourselves. We are a confessional Church and it is a source of strength. It gives us an added sense of direction and a connection with our past. These are important factors in moving into the future in the service of Jesus Christ, our Sovereign and Head.

3. Do you accept the government of this Church by sessions, presbyteries, synods and general assemblies, and do you promise to share in and submit yourself to all lawful oversight therein, and to follow no divisive course but to seek the peace and unity of Christ among your people and throughout the Holy Catholic Church?

Do you accept the government of this Church? The word “accept” here means obedience to the courts of the (Church. The question implies that the presbyterian system is one way in which Christ rules the church. There is no implication that this system is right and that all others are wrong. Indeed, this question recognizes that we are part of the church world-wide, the holy catholic church, and that our task is to seek the peace and the unity of Christ’s people wherever they are.

4. In accepting the office of Elder, do you promise to perform your duties in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, striving to build up His Church and to strengthen her mission in the world? Acceptance of the office of elder is a response to the call of God. Building and furthering the church’s mission is discharged in the grace and strength of Jesus Christ.

A complete description of the election and ordination of elders is found in section 132 of the Book of Forms.

VI Presbyterian Church Government: a System of Church Courts

Presbyterian Church government is a system of church courts made up of ministers, members of diaconal ministry and ruling elders. Other church staff may also be invited to attend session. These are the four courts of The Presbyterian Church in Canada:

Session

Presbytery

Synod

General Assembly

The elder's authority is exercised corporately through this system of church courts, the lower always subject to the higher.

The word “court” may bother people. It summons images of judges and juries, rather than groups of men and women trying to do the work of the church. Yet the word is a suitable one since the Church courts make decisions that are legally binding.

A. The Session

Every Presbyterian congregation has a session comprised of the minister as moderator and all of the ruling elders in the congregation.

In ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacraments, ministers in The Presbyterian Church in Canada are also ordained to rule. This ministerial office includes within it the function of governing, along with ruling elders.

The session meets, usually monthly, to provide leadership for the congregation and oversight of the pastoral care.

Duties and authority of session

Authority resides in the session as a whole and is exercised corporately. The individual elder has only that authority that the session may, from time to time, see fit to delegate to her/him.

The session is responsible to God and is under the authority of presbytery and other courts of the Church. It is not responsible to the congregation.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada believes in the parity of elders. That is, the newest member of session may have as much say in decision-making as the most senior member. Newly ordained elders are not required to sit quietly in session meetings for years before voicing their opinions.

Here are the main responsibilities of the session.

1. The session appoints and provides for the administration of Baptism and the observance of the Lord's Supper.
2. The session regulates the hours and the forms of public worship.
3. The session regulates the occasions and manner of receiving offerings in public worship.
4. The session governs all matters concerning church music and appoints the organist and choir director.
5. The session decides when the congregation needs additional elders. It is responsible both for the election and admission of new elders. The congregation "calls" new elders to this office by vote. The session admits such people to office after careful examination of their faith and conduct.
6. The session assigns to each elder a district within the congregation. Exceptions are often made for those who have other responsibilities, such as clerk.
The elder keeps a list of members and adherents residing in her/his area and makes a special effort to know them through "visiting, counselling, and encouraging them in the Christian life" (Book of Forms 109.4).
7. The session admits people to church membership.
8. The session supervises the work of Christian education in the congregation. The superintendent, teachers, church school officers, and weekday group leaders are appointed and hold office as the session directs.
9. The session directs the congregation to fulfil its responsibilities undertaken at baptism. At baptism, both

the parents and the congregation are trusted with the nurture of children in the Christian faith. Normally, this means providing Christian instruction and training and challenging young people to confirm, by their own profession of faith, the vows taken on their behalf.

10. The session keeps the congregation informed of the church's work carried on under the direction and authority of the General Assembly, its boards and committees, supervises the raising of funds in support of Presbyterians Sharing. . . and assures that contributions are forwarded regularly to the treasurer of the Church. Interestingly, the Book of Forms (113.6) assigns stewardship to the session, not the Board of Managers (“The session is responsible for all decisions relating to stewardship. . .”)
11. The session, as it is able, provides assistance for the poor, usually through a session benevolent fund established for this purpose.
12. All groups and organizations in the Church are under the supervision of the session. Formation of any group or organization to operate under congregational auspices requires session approval.
13. Church discipline of members is under the authority of the session. Discipline may involve excluding a person from membership, but it is better exercised positively in pastoral care and concern for each member of the congregation. This involves personal conversation with troubled people and a healing ministry to those who have etred or lost interest in the church.
14. The session controls the use made of the church buildings. The maintenance of the buildings is usually committed to a Board of Managers, or a committee of session.
15. The communion roll of the congregation is reviewed annually by the session in accordance with section 125 of the Book of Forms.

For a complete statement of duties and authority, see the Book of Forms 105–114.

B. Presbytery

Presbytery is the basic administrative unit of the church.

Presbytery is composed of all ministers, diaconal ministers and representative ruling elders from each pastoral charge within a given geographical area. That is, each pastoral charge delegates one of its elders to be its representative to presbytery. Half the membership of presbytery consists of ruling elders while the other half are ministers and members of the diaconal order.

For example, the Presbytery of Montreal includes all the Presbyterian Churches on the island of Montreal as well as some Churches as far as sixty miles away. Some presbyteries are smaller than this in area, others larger.

Every congregation is under the care and jurisdiction of a presbytery. Sessions and congregations are set up only through a presbytery. The well-being and vitality of congregations in its bounds is one of the main concerns of this court.

The minister serves under the authority of presbytery and not that of session. Some people are confused at this point, believing that the minister is subject to the wishes of his/her congregation and session. On many matters, of course, the minister can act only through the authority of session. Nonetheless, the minister is accountable only to the presbytery. For instance, the session cannot tell the minister what to preach. The minister alone has control of the pulpit and is responsible not to session but to presbytery for exercise of this control.

The session is under the authority and direction of presbytery as well. It is the presbytery which approves a call to a minister or diaconal minister and inducts or recognizes her/him into the pastoral charge.

If the congregation wishes to sell or mortgage any of its property, it must first obtain permission from presbytery. The congregation corresponds with the presbytery through the session.

The number of presbytery meetings in a year varies. Some presbyteries meet monthly; others, four or five times a year. Additional meetings are called, as needed.

C. Synod

The synod is the court responsible for the good order and effectiveness of the presbyteries within a given geographical area. The number of presbyteries within a synod varies.

A minister and one elder from each pastoral charge within synods bounds are members of synod and are expected to attend its meetings held once a year.

While synods continue to have an important legal and administrative function, increasingly the emphasis at meetings of synod is placed on fellowship and learning experiences. Some synods focus on youth leadership. Some synods reflect on church interaction with public policy within a region.

d. General Assembly

Each year, one-sixth of the pastoral charges of The Presbyterian Church in Canada are invited to send a minister and representative elder to General Assembly. A moderator, chosen by election, presides over the Assembly. While Presbyterians honour the Moderator and consider it to be the highest office in our Church, strictly speaking she/he is Moderator only of the General Assembly as it meets, not the head of the Church. As a focus for the unity of the denomination, the office of moderator is one of special influence. The Moderator represents the Church on many religious and state occasions.

The General Assembly meets once a year. Since it is the highest Church court, it is viewed with great importance. Like the other Church courts, the General Assembly makes legislative, executive and judicial decisions. It is the final court of appeal in matters of policy, doctrine and discipline. It is not an annual meeting giving a year-end review. Nor is it a conference.

The presbyterian system is one that attempts to involve the members as much as possible. It strives to make the voice of the Church heard from the local congregation right up to the highest court. This is a recognition of the fact that the entire Church is the people of God.

VII Local Church Organization

Congregations in The Presbyterian Church in Canada typically organize church life using the following groups:

Session

Board of Managers

Trustees.

This chapter will explore the organizational shape of these three groups.

a. Session

The duties and responsibilities of session are described in an earlier chapter (pages 21–23). How does the session carry out these responsibilities?

1. Ministers moderate meetings of session. For this reason they are properly addressed as "moderator."
2. The session appoints a clerk, who keeps minutes of meetings. In practice the clerk is regarded as much more than a recorder of minutes and is often thought of as the leading elder. People frequently express their concerns about the Church to the clerk. Years ago clerks held office for long periods, but recently there has been a tendency to appoint them for a stated period of time. In any case, the choice should be made with the greatest of care.
3. Session meetings are not open. Only members of session are invited, though the session may open meetings when it considers it advisable. Elders should preserve the confidential nature of session meetings.
4. The moderator calls meetings when, in her/his judgement, they are needed. Due notice of such meetings should be given. It is best, of course, that the session have regular stated meetings.
5. The moderator and two other members constitute a quorum.

6. Session meetings are opened with prayer. The names of those present are recorded. The minutes of the last stated meeting are read, and when approved, signed by the moderator and the clerk.
7. The session keeps a:
 - a) roll of members in full communion;
 - b) register of baptisms;
 - c) church directory listing all members and adherents of the congregation.
8. The session reviews the communion roll every year (See the Book of Forms 125).
9. The session issues letters of transfer, usually on request, to people leaving the congregation (125.2).
10. The session cannot hear complaints against the moderator. Such complaints are properly made to the presbytery.
11. It is the duty of the session to tend the interests of the congregation.
12. The session is subject to the presbytery and the other higher courts of the Church.
13. The session appoints a representative elder to attend meetings of the presbytery and the synod. Alternate representative elders may also be appointed.

The preceding outline represents the basic organization of sessions. But session organization may vary widely. Sessions may notice new organizational ideas and adopt those best suited to their needs.

Committees

Generally speaking, committees are helpful in doing the work of the session. Committees meet and report regularly. When committees accomplish clear objectives, people enjoy being part of them.

Some years ago, a group issued what came to be known as the LAMP Report (Life and Mission Project, The Presbyterian Church in Canada) with the recommendation that each session have four committees under which it organizes the work of the

congregation. For the information of sessions, we list these committees with a brief description of their intended function.

1. The Policy and Planning Committee
This committee is responsible for general planning and evaluation of the congregation's work. It surveys the needs of both the community and the Church and attempts to frame some sort of planned response to those needs. It asks the question: Where are we going and what are we trying to do? It sets goals for the congregation to meet so that it is always attempting to move forward.
2. The Committee on Worship and Nurture
This committee gives leadership in all matters of worship, education, and training. Sessions have responsibility for the church school. Of equal importance is Christian education for adults.
3. The Mission and Outreach Committee
This committee takes responsibility for congregational activity in evangelism, social action, special ministries to the community, participation in national and world mission, and personal witness in the vocational setting. Education and training for these involvements are normally the work of the committee on worship and nurture. The mission and outreach committee needs to coordinate its work carefully with the Policy and Planning Committee.
4. The Committee on Finance and Maintenance
This committee fulfils the function of the Board of Managers described in the Book of Forms. That is, if a congregation has such a committee, it would not have a Board of Managers. Forming this committee may appear to be a radical step, but it has the effect of bringing the supervision of the congregation under one body, that is, the session. Some congregations in following this suggestion have simply made the existing Board of Managers a committee of session. Of course, this should be done only with great care and after careful planning. (See the Book of Forms 113.6.5.)

The session always retains final authority. Committees exist to recommend to session a course of action or to fulfill responsibilities delegated to them. The committees are usually chaired by an elder, but the membership may include non-elders as well as session members. By changing the membership of committees regularly, congregations ensure a constant flow of new ideas into their work.

Sometimes it's hard to get committees to meet. One congregation has solved the problem of inactive committees by having all committees meet on the same night every second month. This is one model that sessions may find appropriate to their needs. Each session is free to organize itself as it considers best.

Sessions often take a fresh look at their organization. Planning—called strategic or long-range planning—is a means of re-evaluating local church structure and program. The statement, “But we've always done it this way” should not discourage sessions from trying new approaches. In a world that has changed, and is changing rapidly, sessions must be alive to new needs and opportunities.

More complete information on session organization is found in the Book of Forms 115–131.

b. The Board of Managers

Instead of a committee on finances and maintenance, most congregations have a Board of Managers.

While the session is a court of the Church and is responsible to presbytery, the Board is a committee of the congregation and is responsible to the congregation.

Here is information concerning the Board of Managers (Book of Forms 158 ff.).

1. The Board is chosen by the congregation at a congregational meeting. An adherent may be a member of the Board.
2. One-third of the Board retires each year. Those retiring may be re-elected.

3. The duties of the Board centre on the financial affairs of the congregation and on the care and maintenance of the church building(s).
4. The Board appoints and dismisses the caretaker.
5. The Board has no jurisdiction over public worship.
6. Board meetings are opened and closed with prayer.
7. Three members make a quorum.

c. Trustees

Trustees are members of the congregation in whose name the property of the congregation is held as provided by the trust-deed. Elders may, of course, be trustees. For further information see the Book of Forms 149 and Appendix C.

d. Relationship of Session and Board of Managers

Although the session has oversight of all matters within the congregation, it is important for the session and Board of Managers to work cooperatively.

“It is the duty of the session to watch over all the interests of the congregation . . .” (Book of Forms 128). These interests include the financial affairs of the congregation. In the discharge of this duty the session may, from time to time, require the Board to report its proceedings to it. In fact, the session may require any board, committee, or society in connection with the congregation to do the same.

The Board supervises the maintenance of the church property, the session the use of it. Obviously there should be communication between the two groups on this subject, as use will affect maintenance. Some congregations have a “Building Reservations Committee” on which the Board has representation. Both groups should be aware of the use being made of the church property.

The finances of a congregation are basic to its very existence. It is amazing, then, to note how haphazardly the financial needs of some churches are handled. Congregations wishing assistance with stewardship programs may consult The Presbyterian Church in Canada national office.

In particular, each congregation should have

- a budget presented at each annual meeting
- a regular flow of clear information about the financial situation within the congregation
- a planned process to encourage financial responsibility such as an annual visit to each home.

With regard to stewardship, the Book of Forms (162) states that the Board must “co-operate closely with the Session (which is responsible for all aspects of stewardship) in encouraging the liberality of the people. . . .”

Some churches experience tension between the Board and session. How should such tension be handled? Once more, each group needs a clear idea of its sphere of authority. Both groups need good communication. It is advisable, when possible, to have some session members also on the Board of Managers. This practice ensures a constant flow of information. Moreover, the two groups may meet jointly on occasion. Beyond that, key members in both groups should talk to one another about church business. Personal conversation often shrinks problems.

VIII The Elder's Visit

Elders provide pastoral care through regular visits to the people in their districts. It is important to have a good sense of the purpose of the visit. At least three reasons can be given for these visits.

1. By visiting people, elders express their concern, the care of Christ, and the Church's care. In a world that is increasingly impersonal, we value the expression of personal regard for people.
2. By visiting, elders express the availability of Christ, the Church, and themselves. Elders are present as ambassadors for Christ. However simple the visit may be, it will have this important dimension: Elders represent Christ and the Church.
3. By visiting, elders communicate with those visited. They participate in two-way communication. The elder provides an invitation for people to talk. During the conversation elders are aware that they can communicate the good news of the gospel and to share this message through the witness of the Church.

Three words—concern, availability, communication—sum up the elder's work in visitation.

In addition to these principles of visiting, some elders have found the following suggestions useful:

1. Listen

When God appeared to Solomon in a dream and asked what wish he wanted fulfilled, Solomon had the wisdom to ask for a "heart with skill to listen." We often express love and concern for people by listening to them. Listening itself is a ministry. Try to see things from their point of view. The person who has learned to listen will not worry about what to do on an elder's visit.

2. Ask open questions

Open questions are those that invite an answer in some

detail. Inquire about people's life and their church life using questions like these:

- How has your new job worked out?
- How have you been feeling since the car accident?
- Tell me, how are the children enjoying church school?

If the person has not attended church for some time, the elder might say: "We've missed you at church lately. Has there been a problem?"

The conversation focuses on the person's needs. Where possible, the conversation may be directed into matters of personal faith. If that is not possible, at least some reference should be made to the Church and its work during the visit.

3. Take something

Many elders hand deliver the communion card. Or, they may deliver some publication such as a pamphlet, a recent church newsletter, or other church publication. Avoid the temptation to simply "drop" the item and not provide the visit.

4. Be honest

Elders are open and honest about the Church and themselves. If a question is asked to which you do not know the answer, you may reply, "I don't know the answer to that question but I'll try to find out if you would like." Don't worry about trick questions. They rarely occur.

5. Know the Congregation

Elders are not expected to have a detailed knowledge of theology, but they should know the congregation. Elders keep informed about congregational life and present it with some enthusiasm during the visit.

6. Keep an elder's book

Elders may keep a book on their district. It is best, however, not to write down opinions on people visited, but to record information such as names, ages, occupations and special

dates. For instance, a young person may be away at college. Should that person be sent the congregational newsletter or the Presbyterian Connection newspaper?

7. Vary your elder's visits

Ideally, the elders should visit their district four times a year, as well as at times of death, sickness, or celebration. Some may wish to vary the visit with an area coffee party. A party brings people together and gives them that feeling of belonging that they may lack in church services, especially if they are new to the community and the Church.

Other elders have started an area Bible study group which meets monthly or more often. The idea of a monthly Bible study session remains as a marvellous ideal. Probably it will be for the very few who feel confident enough to lead such a group.

Regardless of how often one may visit, the point is that elders should seek the best way of expressing pastoral concern for the people in their area.

8. Don't gossip! Don't argue! Don't apologize!

Don't gossip! It drags down the whole purpose of the visit. Regardless of how inadequate elders may feel, they must remember that they are there in the name of Christ.

Don't argue! The other person may be both wrong and unreasonable in what is being said, but to argue will usually do no good. Generally speaking, it is helpful to view hostility as the expression of some deep need within the person. It is difficult to realize that part of one's role may be to absorb that person's hostility by conversation and a kindly reaction. Occasions may arise, however, when the rule of not arguing must be broken and a direct confrontation becomes essential.

Don't apologize! The elder should seek to be supportive of the minister, the program of the Church and the life of the congregation. Of course, occasions arise when we have to admit that something did not work out well.

9. Go with a friend

If new elders are anxious about visiting, a senior elder or minister may accompany them on their first round of visits.

Some anxiety in visiting is natural. One never quite knows what is on the other side of that door. It is a help to know that almost all elders and ministers have experienced this anxiety.

10. Deal with specific problems

If the radio or television is on, the elder may offer to come back later or simply ask if the sound could be lowered.

If people say, "I don't like the minister," you might respond, "It's impossible to find a church where everyone likes the minister. But, we can continue to support the Church and serve Christ in spite of personal differences with the minister or any other person."

Another person may say, "I don't like the way things are run at the Church." You might reply, "The Church leaders are always happy to have constructive criticism. I'll be glad to take your suggestions back to the appropriate committee. Are you interested in serving on the committee that works on this? May I suggest your name?"

11. Visit with a positive attitude

Be friendly. Know the names of the people being visited. Go with conviction. Have confidence that your task is important and right. Do not be too quick to judge the results of the call. A visit, which may seem simple and of little effect, may well be used in a significant way by God. Visiting is the best way the church knows of saying to people, "We care about you." There is no substitute for a personal visit.

12. Pray before going

Here is a sample prayer which may be of some help: Eternal God, as I visit today, may the Holy Spirit direct my conversation. Bless and help the people whom I visit. Amen.

13. Pray in the home

The elder is rarely asked to pray in the home, but some elders may wish to do so.

If one is asked to pray, or if the situation seems to indicate that a prayer would be appreciated, here is a prayer that may be used:

Loving God, we thank you that we share in the work of your church. We are glad to have a part in helping to build your reign in our world. May the blessing of your presence rest on this home. In Jesus' name. Amen.

14. Relax

Be relaxed about it all, for the work of the church is God's work. It is your privilege to enter into that work. Do it well and you will never regret it.

These are elements of the caring ministry of the elder: being a friend, knowing how to listen, expressing concern.

IX A Checklist for Elders and Sessions

1. Has your congregation a strong sense of purpose and mission?
 - Has the congregation adopted a statement of purpose?
 - Are church groups related to this purpose or have some of them outlived their usefulness? Are new groups needed?
 - Does the budget reflect your interest in others?
 - Does the sense of mission include awareness of what Jesus called the two greatest commandment—we are to love God and others?
 - Is the congregation clear that it is, above all, to be a community of caring in obedience to these commandments?
2. Is there a developed educational program in your church?
 - Does this program reflect the purpose of the congregation?
 - Are there adult study groups?
 - Are children welcome in your church?
 - How do you extend that welcome?
 - Is the church school growing? Are there any problems with which the session might help? Which curriculum does your church school use? Why? What could help the church school grow?
3. How do you assess the Sunday morning service of worship?
 - Is the service in touch with the real needs of the worshippers?
 - Does the music reflect our joy in Christ?
 - Is there a junior choir? Should there be?
 - Is concern for others part of the worship?
 - Are there any changes that should be made in the service?
4. Does the congregation attempt to understand and respond to community needs?
 - Have you looked at the community to see where it's hurting?

- What has your congregation done to meet these needs?
- Has your congregation attempted to survey the community for prospective members for church and church school?

5. Does the organization of the congregation encourage participation?

- Are young people involved in the decision-making process?
- Are there any young elders? Are there young people on the Board or on committees?
- Are women given a fair share in the decision-making?
- Do session committees include non-elders, and is there a reasonable turnover to allow a constant flow of new ideas?
- Does the session genuinely listen to the voice of the people, or are a few elders making all the decisions?

6. Has the congregation a growing interest in the mission of the church at home and abroad?

- What is being done to personalize the mission of the church?
- Does the session provide for mission education in the congregation?

7. How would you rate communication within the Church?

- Do people know and understand what the church is trying to do?
- Do elders make their visits regularly?
- Are the church bulletins neat and attractive?
- Is there need of a congregational newsletter?

8. How open is the congregation to change?

- Does the session see change as an opportunity or threat?
- Are committees chaired by the same people year after year?
- What evidence of change has there been in the last two years?

9. How does your church rate on friendliness?
- When last did you invite someone to worship?
 - When last did you greet a visitor to your Church?
 - Is the ushering friendly and welcoming? Does your Church attempt to involve new people in the duties of ushering, or are the same people at the door week after week?
 - Try having a “Friendship Sunday.” Print invitation cards for members to invite people on a specific day.
10. Do you assess the church only in terms of worldly success?
- Is your main concern the state of finances in the church?
 - Is your main concern the size of the morning congregation?
 - How do you think our Lord would assess your congregation?
11. Are you too tough on others?
- Do you carry your fair load in session meetings?
 - Do you speak up at session meetings?
 - Are you critical of others in session meetings?
 - In what positive and concrete ways do you express Christian love for others in the session?
12. Is your church living up to its financial obligations?
- Is the level of giving to Presbyterians Sharing realistic?
 - Is the minister paid a reasonable stipend?
 - Is the Church properly maintained with the decor bright and modern enough to attract young people and others?
 - Is there a stewardship committee?
 - Are there regular visitations?
 - Is a clear budget, expressing congregational financial goals, presented at the annual meeting?
 - Is sufficient financial information made available to the congregation?

X Additional Resources

This booklet provides information which will be useful to elders in their work. Since it is just a brief introduction, though, it is incomplete. For a full statement of matters concerning church government, refer to the Book of Forms, a book containing the rules by which our Church is governed. For instance, if one wants to know about the work and authority of the session and the Board, that is the book to consult. It would be useful for every elder to have a copy.

In addition to the publication that you are holding in your hand, our Church has made available other resources to assist elders in their work:

Not by Constraint by John Cameron.

This 35-page booklet deals with the pastoral responsibilities of elders. It is a straightforward resource providing insight into building relationships, visitations and special situations an elder may encounter. It has practical suggestions for elder's districts and communion cards and is also a good resource for not-so-new elders.

For more support and resources for elders and sessions, contact Canadian Ministries at the national office of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

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