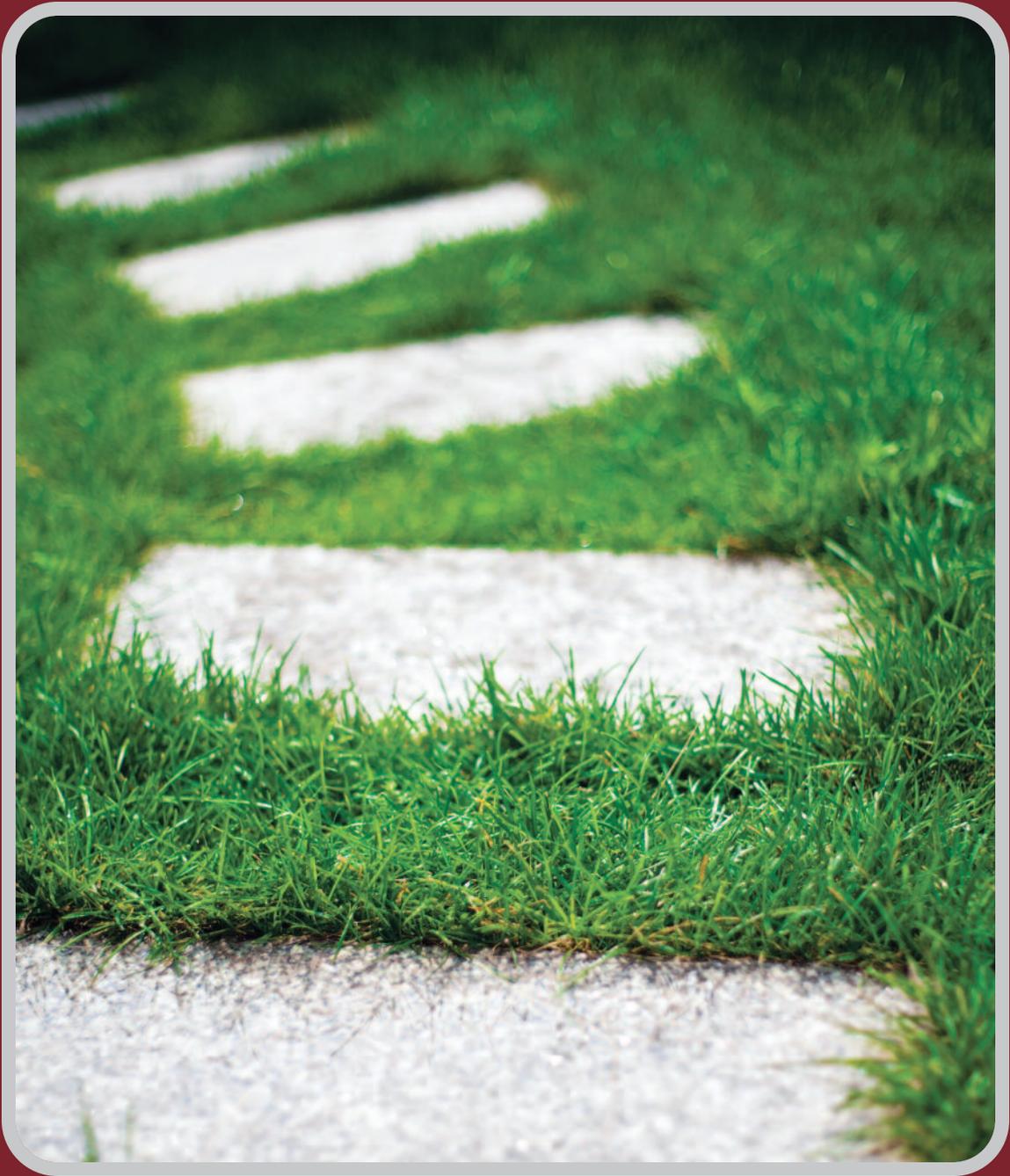


# Equipping Elders



# Equipping Elders



presbyterian.ca | 1-800-619-7301

## **Equipping Elders**

A resource produced by the Life and Mission Agency  
and the General Assembly Office

© The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 2010

Writers: Dorothy Henderson, Barbara McLean, Don Muir  
Compilers and Editors: Karen Dimock, Annemarie Klassen  
Design and Layout: Tim Faller Design, Inc.

Every effort has been made to trace copyrights on the materials included in this resource. If any copyrighted material has nevertheless been included without permission and due acknowledgement, proper credit will be inserted in future printings after notice has been received.

Unless otherwise cited, all biblical references are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada  
50 Wynford Drive  
Toronto, Ontario M3C 1J7  
presbyterian.ca  
1-800-619-7301

PRINTED IN CANADA

---

# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>How to Use This Resource</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Section 1 – Canadian Presbyterians: Who Are We?</b> .....	<b>9</b>
Where Have We Come From? – Our History / 10	
What Do We believe? – Our Theology / 13	
What is important to us? / 13	
Our creeds, confessions and subordinate standards of faith / 15	
Symbols of the church / 18	
How Do We Organize Ourselves? – Our Church Government / 20	
<i>Presbuteros</i> – we are ruled by elders / 20	
The court system / 21	
Top ten reasons why Presbyterian government works / 23	
<b>Section 2 – The Ministry of Elders</b> .....	<b>27</b>
Supervision and Oversight / 29	
Elders are leaders / 29	
Leadership and congregational size / 31	
Rethinking the annual congregational meeting / 34	
Are proxy votes permitted at church meetings? / 38	
The Session and Membership / 39	
Membership matters / 39	
• Why should I become a member?	
• Preparing and admitting new members, baptism and discipline	
A welcoming congregation / 41	
• Where does hospitality begin?	
• Including new people in your congregation	
• A visitor’s wish list	
• Intentional hospitality – a different kind of elder district	
• Welcoming children and youth	

The Session and Pastoral Care / 52

- The district / 52
- The elder's visit – getting started / 53
- A plan for a home visit / 54
- Elder's log / 56
- Staying connected with children and youth / 58
- Spirituality and pastoral care / 60
- Prayers for elders / 61
- Scripture suggestions for pastoral visiting / 64
- Pastoral care through the lifecycle / 65

The Session and Worship / 75

- Fourfold order of worship / 75
- The church year cycle / 76
- Sundays in the church year / 79

The Session and Christian Education / 80

- A checklist for elders / 81
- Some things to discuss as elders / 82
- Two ways to learn: Teacher/Leader Courses  
and *Opening Doors to Discipleship* / 82

The Session and Stewardship / 85

- Marks of a generous congregation / 86
- The M word – talking about money / 88
- Fluctuating offerings / 91
- Watch your language – talking about money / 93

The Session and Mission / 95

- Mission statements of The Presbyterian Church in Canada / 95
- Christian principles of mission giving / 99
- What's the difference between  
*Presbyterians Sharing* and PWS&D? / 100
- Atlantic Mission Society and Women's Missionary Society / 102
- Commonly asked questions about *Presbyterians Sharing* / 102
- Raising awareness of *Presbyterians Sharing* –  
How do we get started? / 107

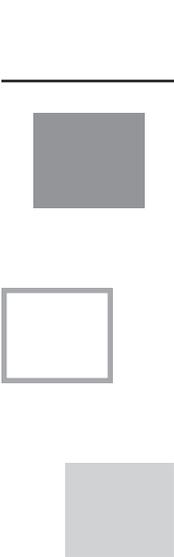
**Section 3 – Electing and Ordaining New Elders . . . . . 109**  
Electing New Elders / 110  
Ordination and Authority / 113  
Admitting Previously Ordained Elders / 115  
Term Service for Elders / 116

**Section 4 – The Care and Training of Elders . . . . . 117**  
Eldership and Lifelong Learning / 118  
Growing as an Elder / 121  
Taking Care of Yourself Through Prayer / 123  
Talking About Your Faith / 124

**Section 5 – The Session at Work . . . . . 129**  
What Happens at a Session Meeting? / 130  
Decision-Making and Evaluating / 134  
    Six Thinking Hats: making good decisions at your session meeting / 134  
    Making decisions in the church by discerning God’s leading / 138  
    Talking with elders about leadership / 142  
    How well are we doing? – a self-evaluation tool for session / 144  
Policies / 149  
    Leading with Care / 149  
    Policy of The Presbyterian Church in Canada  
        for Dealing with Sexual Abuse and/or Harassment / 150

**Section 6 – The Session and Working Relationships . . . . . 151**  
The Session and the Minister(s) / 152  
    A dual relationship / 152  
    Responsibility for worship / 153  
    Responsibility for assessing the performance of the minister / 155  
    Regarding the minister’s continuing education / 156  
The Session and the Board of Managers / 157  
The Session and the Presbytery / 160  
The Session and the General Assembly / 163

**Contact Information . . . . . 165**



# Introduction

The first *For Elders* publication in May 1997 began with the following words: “What is the job of an elder? What is the job of a session?” Many elders find these questions difficult. Sometimes an answer such as “spiritual oversight of the congregation” is given, but what does that mean? How does the session operate within the congregation? And what about the relationship of session to the other courts of the church?

These are good questions. The *For Elders* and *Equipping for Elders* publications that have been produced quarterly since 1997 have sought to answer these and other questions related to the ministry of elders.

This resource, *Equipping Elders*, is a compilation of many of these articles. In some cases the articles are copied directly into this resource; in other instances, they are edited or parts are selected and placed into appropriate sections.

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 team leader of The Vine (2007–2009); 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. Dorothy, Barbara and Don were the editors of these resources as well as the writers of the majority of articles.

Many Presbyterians from across Canada have also contributed articles over the years. Author recognition has been provided throughout this resource, except for those articles written by Dorothy, Barbara and Don. However, where sections have been extracted from articles and placed with others, this has not been possible. This is particularly so in the case of extensive background material provided for a four-part study on ruling elders by The Rev. Frank Breisch. Gratitude is expressed to all those who have contributed generously to the furthering of the ministry of elders by sharing their gifts of wisdom and writing.

Gratitude is expressed in particular to Dorothy Henderson, Barbara McLean and Don Muir, whose diligence and expertise in providing the church with these resources was greatly enriched by their sincere love and care for the ministry of elders in our church.

---

# How to Use This Resource

*Equipping Elders* is designed to inform elders – and perhaps even those who are considering eldership – about the ministry to which they have been called. Elders are invited to keep a copy for themselves and to read through the various sections. There they will find a wealth of information to help them in their ministry as elders: information about who we are in The Presbyterian Church in Canada; practical aids for pastoral visiting and hospitality; gifts for ministry and ordination to eldership; opportunities for elder training and elder care; and the work of the session within the congregation and how it works with other courts of the church.

*Equipping Elders* is also designed as a practical resource for session meetings. It provides many opportunities for discussion and guidance for the session as a whole. A supplemental resource, *Clergy Resources for Session Meetings and Retreats*, also a product of *For Elders* and *Equipping for Elders* publications, includes worship for session meetings and resources for session workshops and retreats.

*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.

“...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... 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



# Canadian Presbyterians: Who Are We?

- Where Have We Come From? – Our History
- What Do We believe? – Our Theology
- How Do We Organize Ourselves?  
– Our Church Government



# Where Have We Come From? Our History

---

## Canadian Presbyterians have a long history:

---

- As a people we are part of the Old Testament story of God's covenant relationship with the world.
- As Christians we are part of the 2,000 years of witness to Jesus Christ.
- We are also more recently part of a distinctive history called Reformed and Presbyterian.
- And as The Presbyterian Church in Canada we are also Canadian.

## We are people of the covenant

The history of Canadian Presbyterians begins with a God who takes initiative, makes promises and is faithful. Through Noah and his family, God made an unconditional promise for all creatures – a covenant. Through Abraham and Sarah, God promised to be with people in their life travels. When the Israelites were beaten and crying out in slavery, God sent Moses to lead them toward a Promised Land. God gave people the Ten Commandments as a guide to holy living. God continually took initiative and established or restored a covenant relationship. People throughout history waver between faithfulness and unfaithfulness, obedience and forgetfulness, but God remains constant. We celebrate and remember this covenant.

## We believe in Jesus, the Christ

Presbyterians are first and foremost Christians. We believe that God's greatest initiative was to become a human being in the person of Jesus Christ. We believe that Jesus, a Jew who was born in Bethlehem, grew up in Nazareth, lived and taught in Palestine, was crucified in Jerusalem, was resurrected and appeared to his disciples, was – and is – God. Like the early followers of Jesus, Presbyterians declare, "Jesus is Lord."

What does it mean to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord? It means that Jesus has become our model, our guide, our teacher, our saviour, our friend. Because of his death and resurrection, we are given a life with new meaning and significance. Jesus, the Christ, frees us from self-destruction and death and sends us out to live our lives with purpose and well-being.

Like the covenant relationship established thousands of years ago, the relationship we have with Jesus is a gift. It is God reaching out to us. God asks us to have faith and model our lives after Christ's. In doing this, we will know lasting peace and hope.

Where Have We Come From? – Our History

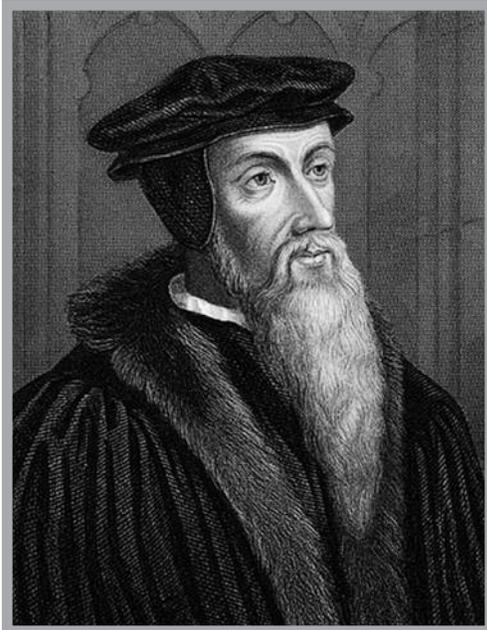
## We are part of a Reformed movement

Presbyterians also claim the names “Reformed” and “Protestant.” Our denomination came out of the Protestant Reformation, a major religious movement that occurred in the early and middle years of the 16th century. At that point in history, the Christian church had divided into two main branches – the Eastern church (Greek and Russian Orthodox) and the Western church (Roman Catholic). In the 16th century, church leaders began to protest the corruption of the Christian church and to seek its reform. They were called Protestants because they were bearing witness (in Latin, *pro plus testare*: to bear witness) to what they regarded as New Testament Christianity.

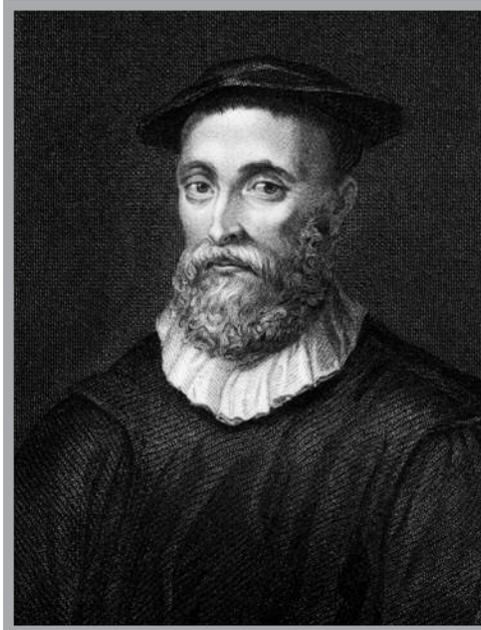
The chief leaders in the Reformation movement were Luther, Calvin, Knox, Zwingli and Cranmer. These leaders were intense, courageous, zealous and assertive. They believed that people were put right in the sight of God by God’s grace alone. They said people received God’s grace by faith and not by anything that they had done. These Reformers believed that all people had access to God through prayer and the Bible (use of the vernacular). They also believed that God’s forgiveness could be received directly, without the intervention of a priest. The Reformers claimed the indwelling of Christ in the believer and stressed the sovereignty of God. They will always be recognized for their hope and confidence in the power of a loving God and for recovering the priesthood of all believers.

### Two important Reformers

Many Presbyterian churches in Canada are named after Reformers, particularly John Calvin (a Frenchman) and John Knox (a Scot who was influenced by Calvin’s teachings).



John Calvin



John Knox

John Calvin (1509–1564) has often been called the “father of Presbyterianism.” Calvin lived in Geneva, Switzerland. From there, Presbyterianism spread throughout Europe. Calvin, like other Reformers, worked hard to develop a church where everyone, not just the clergy, shared responsibilities. Schools were established to provide education for both clergy and laity.

John Knox (1515–1572), after studying with Calvin in Geneva, returned to his native Scotland to establish Presbyterianism. It soon spread to northern Ireland, the United States and Canada.

When we use the word *Reformed* we must do it with care. It doesn’t mean something new, necessarily, but refers to going back, a turning or even a repentance. The key motto for the Reformed church is *semper reformatis*. Reformed and reforming. We are called to constantly be returning to our roots in Jesus and the Bible, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

## We are Canadian Presbyterians

The roots of The Presbyterian Church in Canada are Scottish (our mother church was the Church of Scotland, which is Presbyterian). Our Canadian heritage also includes the work and witness of French Huguenots (Protestants) who came to Canada in the 1600s.

In 1875, various groups of Presbyterians in Canada formed a union and called themselves The Presbyterian Church in Canada. In 1925, some Presbyterian congregations joined with the Methodists and Congregationalists to form the United Church of Canada. The remaining Presbyterians were called The Continuing Presbyterian Church in Canada until the courts, and eventually Parliament, gave them their former name, The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

In 2009, there are almost 940 congregations in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, with members coming from many national and racial backgrounds. There are congregations that worship in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Ghanaian, Hungarian, Korean, Mandarin, Portuguese, Spanish and Taiwanese. There are also many members who come from other branches of the Christian church. Congregations today represent a variety of languages and also a variety of worship styles.

# What Do We Believe?

## Our Theology

### What is important to us?

#### God as Triune

Belief in the Triune God – God as Creator, Jesus as Redeemer and the Holy Spirit as the Sustainer – is central to Christian faith. It is fundamental to both our worship and thought.

The doctrine of the Trinity teaches belief in one God who exists as three “persons” with the word “person” having a different meaning from common usage. The word comes from the Latin *persona* meaning “the mask through which actors spoke in Greek plays”; and this word was derived from the Latin words *per* and *sonare* meaning “to speak or sound through.” The original meaning of the word shows we are concerned, not with a mask that hides, but with a medium that reveals. The one God comes to us in three modes.

The doctrine of the Trinity arises from all that the Bible tells us about God as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. The New Testament writers portray Jesus through his words and actions as divine and the Son of God (see John 1:1–3, 14; Colossians 2:9; and Hebrews 1:1–3).

Adapted from *Being a Presbyterian in Canada Today*, by Stephen Hayes (The Presbyterian Church in Canada, revised 1991), pp. 5–9.

#### The Bible

The Presbyterian faith goes back behind all denominational divisions and interpretations to the Bible. The Bible inspires and guides us in what we believe and how we live. Presbyterians think of the Bible as the written word of God. They consider it the most authoritative source for faith and practice. The writers for the Bible were guided and inspired by God to record events and God’s instructions. By reading the Bible, succeeding generations know what God has done and what God requires.

Scripture is partly shaped by its particular historical and cultural circumstances. We are also conditioned by our own time and culture. We bring to scripture our own presuppositions. The task of joining text with reader involves four major components that are constantly interrelated.

1. We are prompted by the Spirit working on our experience to listen afresh for God’s word witnessed to in scripture.
2. We seek to understand the Bible in its original historical setting, recognizing the variety of material it contains. For this, a wise use of historical-critical methods is essential.
3. We look at the biblical material as a canonical whole. The dangers of quoting isolated proof texts are well known. We look for the underlying unity and

diversity, continuity and discontinuity in scripture, paying particular attention to the relationships between the Old and New Testaments.

4. We bring the biblical materials to bear on our contemporary situation. The gift of discernment is especially needed here. We must pray for the guidance of the same Holy Spirit who inspired scripture.

From *Acts and Proceedings*, 1995, The Church Doctrine Committee, pp. 252–253.

## Worship and the sacraments

Worship gives Presbyterians an opportunity to praise, listen and respond to God. Most congregations organize the worship service into four parts: gathering, listening, thanking and going. These parts are expressed in phrases like Gather in God's name; Proclaim the word of God; Give thanks to God; Go in the name of God.

In worship, we celebrate two sacraments – baptism and communion. Baptisms happen at many points of the church year. Traditionally, communion was celebrated four times a year, but today many congregations offer it more frequently – monthly or even every Sunday. Both baptism and communion are visible expressions of the gospel, given as a way to enter and encourage Christian growth.

Baptism can occur at any age in The Presbyterian Church in Canada. It occurs in conjunction with a profession of faith and admission to church membership. Believing parents bring their child for baptism and promise to raise their child to love and serve God. The entire congregation promises to support the child. Usually the minister pours or sprinkles water on the person's head in baptism. The waters symbolize refreshment, cleansing, new life, and the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Because baptism is seen as an act of the whole congregation and a sign of church membership, baptism always happens in the presence of the worshipping congregation.

Communion, the breaking of bread and drinking of wine or grape juice, reminds us of Jesus. In communion, we are united with Jesus and each other; we are strengthened to go out into the world as a "symbol of hope for a troubled age." Communion is thanksgiving and a memorial of Christ's life and death.

In 1987, the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada invited each congregation's session to study the place of children at communion, recognizing that

- children are capable of the same childlike faith that Jesus required of adults;
- the faith of children may be nurtured by participation in the Lord's Supper;
- the participation of children affirms their place in the fellowship we share as a spiritual family at the Lord's Table.

A survey taken in 2009 indicates that approximately 80 percent of Presbyterian congregations in Canada welcome children to communion.

## Reaching out and serving

The Christian church exists for others. Presbyterians believe that Jesus came into the world to demonstrate God's concern for the world and its people. We recognize Jesus' challenge to follow him (Luke 9:23) and his final commission to us (Matthew 28:19). In congregations, people of all ages learn to care for each other. They are

---

## What Do We Believe? – Our Theology

---

active in mission and worship beyond their own congregation's activities – in politics, economics, social structures, the environment and the world of human needs. One of the clearest messages for us in our daily living is found in Micah 6:8: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" As Christians, we go into the world and try to make it more like God's kingdom.

## Our creeds, confessions and subordinate standards of faith

The creeds and confessions of the church serve as directives for its worship, preaching, teaching, mission and service in the world. These creeds, confessions and declarations merit the knowledge, consent, acceptance and respect of the church's ministers, elders, deacons and people. When they are dismissed with a shrug of indifference or neglected, the church's confessional character is put in question. But when the creeds and confessions are known and used by the church, they help us to understand and express our faith and, through that, to live our faith in all aspects of the life and ministry of the church.

Excerpt from "Confessing the Faith Today," a study document for The Presbyterian Church in Canada, *Acts and Proceedings*, 2003, p. 247–272.

In their ordination vows, elders in The Presbyterian Church in Canada subscribe to the ecumenical creeds, the confessions of the Reformation, and the subordinate standards of our faith.

The subordinate standards are called this because the Bible is the standard by which all things are tested. All else is subordinate to the primary standard, the holy scripture.

In The Presbyterian Church in Canada there are currently three subordinate standards – the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation, and *Living Faith/Foi Vivante*. These are the documents that speak to what we believe as Presbyterians.

The following is a brief description of the creeds, confessions and subordinate standards.

---

### The ecumenical creeds

---

#### The Apostles' Creed

The Apostles' Creed is the oldest and best known of all Christian creeds. Both Protestants and Roman Catholics recite it. It was not prepared by the apostles, but was named The Apostles' Creed because it reflects the apostles' preaching, their beliefs, and the faith for which they lived and died.

This creed began as a simple three-part belief statement:

I believe in God the Father.

I believe in God the Son.

I believe in God the Holy Spirit.

As the years passed, sentences were added to the original three statements. The phrases were expanded to exclude false or pagan teaching about God and to expand on what the New Testament said about the person and work of the Triune God.

### **The Nicene Creed**

In the early church, Christians were divided over the question, “Who is Jesus Christ?” Some thought that he was a good man with a few extra divine characteristics. Others thought that he was God hiding in a human body – not really a flesh-and-blood human being like ourselves. Heated discussions took place around the mystery of the entry of the Creator of all things into human history.

The Nicene Council, which emphasized that Jesus Christ is God, was called together by Emperor Constantine in 325 at Nicea, a little town in what is now central Turkey. Constantine wanted to make Christianity the official religion of his empire and divisions needed to be resolved. The Nicene Council stated that Jesus Christ “is of the same substance as the Father.” At a later council held in Constantinople, this truth was underlined again. The church further insisted that the Holy Spirit was not just a vague power for good, but the very action of God. In 451, at still another council, the church stated that not only was Jesus Christ fully divine but also fully human – the divine and the human dwelling perfectly together in one person.

The Nicene Creed is the most ecumenical of creeds, with Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and most Protestant churches affirming it.

---

## **The confessions of the Reformation**

---

### **The Scots Confession**

The Scottish Reformation took place in the 16th century. It was a stormy time, with much suffering and bloodshed. There were many changes in church life and belief.

John Knox was one of the architects of the Scottish Reformation. He had spent almost five years in Geneva, Switzerland, as the minister of a congregation of English exiles. He was greatly influenced by John Calvin.

Knox returned to Scotland at a time when Scottish sovereignty had been recognized by the English. The Scottish Parliament declared Scotland a Protestant nation and asked John Knox and five colleagues to write a Scottish confession of faith. The six men wrote the Scots Confession in 1560, in a period of just four days. This became the statement of belief for the Church of Scotland. The Confession pointed the way beyond the errors of medieval Catholicism and away from the tyranny of the throne to a new way of faithfulness.

“The Scots Confession sets forth three marks of the true and faithful church: the true preaching of the Word of God, the right administration of the sacraments and ecclesiastical discipline whereby vice is repressed and virtue is nourished. As a call to action in a turbulent time, the Scots Confession reflects a spirit of trust and a commitment to the God whose miraculous deliverance the Scots had experienced firsthand” (*The Book of Confessions*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), p. 10).

## The subordinate standards of our faith

### The Westminster Confession of Faith

For all Presbyterians in the English-speaking world, the Westminster Confession of Faith has been the standard of faith and practice. It was produced in the Jerusalem Chamber in Westminster Abbey between 1643 and 1649. It was originally intended to bring all Christians in Britain together under one church. In the end, the church in Scotland, but not England, embraced it as a doctrinal standard. It was adopted as a subordinate standard by the Canadian Presbyterian Church in 1875.

Wherever the influence of the Church of Scotland has been felt, children have learned the Catechism, theological students have been taught its doctrine, ministers have subscribed to its teachings at ordinations, and boards and committees of the church have always consulted it before making important decisions. After the Bible, for Presbyterians the Westminster Confession of Faith has been the chief doctrinal guide.

You may remember learning the answer to this question:

*Question:* What is the chief end of Man?

*Answer:* Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada has at times modified its stance toward the Westminster Confession, but it has never rewritten it. When it comes to the confessions, the church believes that it does not change any of them. They are products of the time in which they were written and are interpreted in light of our own understanding. As a church reformed and reforming, we have produced other confessions.

### Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation (DFCCN)

The Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation is also a subordinate standard. This one was written in the years following World War II and adopted in 1955. A copy can be found in Appendix E of the *Book of Forms*. The DFCCN affirms the Lordship of God in all things and outlines the understanding of The Presbyterian Church in Canada as it relates to the state. It arose out of the issues of the church following World War II, when the churches followed the state and backed it up in Germany.

### *Living Faith/Foi Vivante: A Statement of Christian Belief*

*Living Faith* was adopted as a subordinate standard of our church by the 124th General Assembly in 1998. Written in modern language, it is intended for an era when not everyone is of the faith. It covers many aspects of faith – from our understanding of God, to what we believe about baptism, to how we are to fulfill our mission in the world. It is an excellent teaching tool.

### How to use *Living Faith* at a session meeting

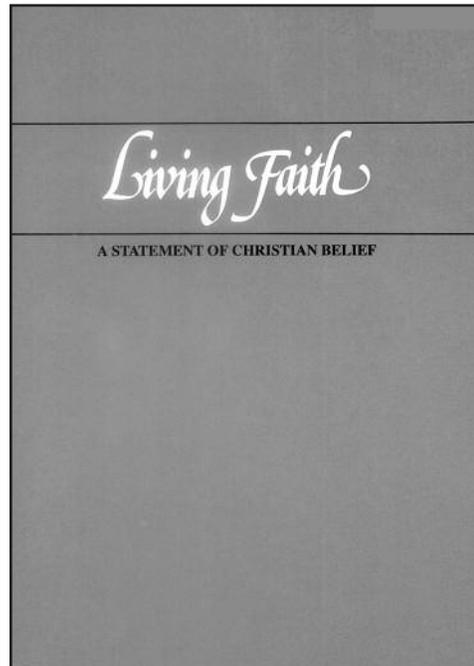
The following exercise, written by Erin Crisfield, will help the session learn more about our church and what we believe.

Choose one section from *Living Faith*, such as Faith (6.1), Discipleship (8.1), Our Mission (9.1), and use the following exercise at the beginning of your session meeting.

1. Work in small groups. Divide the paragraphs in the selected section so each group has one or more paragraphs.
2. Read through your paragraph as a group.
3. Identify the main point of the paragraph.
4. What does this paragraph mean to you? If you had to explain it to someone, what would you say?
5. How can the session enable the congregation to understand and live out this statement?

Once the groups have had time to answer the above questions, ask a spokesperson from each group to report back on 3 and 5. Let these thoughts inform the rest of the work to be done at your meeting. When you have finished, stand and read the full section in unison as the prayer for your meeting and your congregation.

A study guide for *Living Faith*, written by Carolyn Boyer, can be downloaded at [presbyterian.ca/resource-centre](http://presbyterian.ca/resource-centre).



## Symbols of the church

A symbol is a sign that reminds us of something or someone that is not visible to us. Symbols are often very familiar items, but they can come from a different culture and from hundreds of years ago. A symbol can be an object, a photograph, a drawing, a pattern, a colour or a letter. Symbols help us convey important messages without words – sometimes they convey feelings better than words. They can make us think and feel deeply.

Christians share the same symbols, but each branch of the church has symbols that are particularly meaningful. The burning bush, for instance, has become an identifying symbol for Canadian Presbyterians.

---

## Symbols and their meaning

---

### The burning bush

The burning bush reminds us of the bush that Moses saw (Exodus 3:2). It was burning but was not destroyed, because of God's presence. Presbyterians are deeply committed to being the church, the body of Christ that can never be destroyed.



### The dove

The dove is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. At Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove (Mark 1:10). Presbyterians believe in the power of God's Spirit at work in our world and in our own lives.



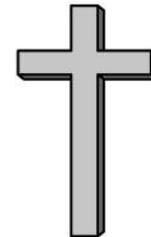
### Bread and cup

The bread and wine are symbols of the Lord's Supper or communion (Luke 22:19–20). The loaf of bread symbolizes the one body of Christ from which we are all fed. The cup of wine symbolizes the blood of Christ that gives us new life. Presbyterians celebrate God's presence and feel nurtured through participation in the sacrament of holy communion.



### The empty cross

The empty cross is a symbol of the resurrection of Jesus. Presbyterians believe that Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins and then rose again. There is a large cross at the front of the sanctuary of most Presbyterian churches. The empty cross reminds us of the new life we have through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.



### The fish

The fish is a symbol for the followers of Jesus Christ. Early Christians used this symbol as a secret sign to identify themselves to each other, because it was dangerous to be a Christian. The first letters of the Greek words for Jesus, Christ, God, Son and Saviour spell the Greek word for fish.



### The open Bible

The Bible is a symbol of God's truth and instruction to us. Presbyterians believe the Bible is the authoritative source for their faith. In many Presbyterian congregations today, just before worship begins, someone will come down the aisle carrying the Bible, place it on the lectern and then open it. This practice began in the Middle Ages as a way for Christians to express respect for the one copy of the Bible available to their community. Today it signifies the centrality of the Bible to Presbyterian worship.



# How Do We Organize Ourselves? Our Church Government

## *Presbuteros* – we are ruled by elders

Presbyterians are known by the type of leadership they have. The Greek word *presbuteros* means elder and it is from this word that we get the word Presbyterian. We are ruled by elders.

As one family under the lordship of Christ, Christian communities have organized themselves in a variety of ways to provide effective worship, pastoral care, discipleship and service. While some Christians follow a model in which all decisions regarding theology and polity are decided by the individual congregation (congregational) and others abide by a hierarchical system of priests and bishops (episcopal), the Presbyterian form of government is based on eldership. **Teaching elders** (usually referred to as ministers or pastors) and **ruling elders** (usually referred to as elders) share in the care and oversight of the ministry of Christ at every level of the Presbyterian church.

### **Biblical origins**

The court system employed by the Presbyterian church is founded in the biblical understanding of the government of God's people. The word *elder* appears many times in the New Testament and also in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. It refers to mature members of the community who are respected for their experience and faithfulness. The word may also designate a particular office of leadership.

In the book of Exodus (18:13–27), elders were chosen to help Moses with the governing of God's people and the settling of disputes. This gave rise to the tradition of appointing elders in the Jewish faith, and as the early church emerged from this Jewish setting, leaders were already familiar with this model of government. The book of Acts (e.g., 14:21–25) describes the appointing of elders for the work of the church. From the early church, too, we get the concepts of leadership by discernment of gifts given by God (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:10–13) for the building up of the body of Christ. Eldership, therefore, is a spiritual role grounded in our being in the church, which is the body and of which Christ is the head.

### **Scottish origins**

Our court system is derived from that of the Scottish church, the work of Andrew Melville and the *Second Book of Discipline*. At the Reformation, the office of the elder was given a key role, with ministers and elders working in partnership as leaders of congregations.

## How Do We Organize Ourselves? – Our Church Government

The elder's role is not limited to session meetings and district work. The overriding role is the task of leadership, of leading the congregation in terms of its fellowship, and its mission and ministry to the world. The collective role of elders acting together is greater than the sum of the individual elders in their pastoral work.

## The court system

### Authority

We believe that Jesus Christ is the only king and head of the church. It is necessary for Christian communities, however, to organize themselves so that they can provide pastoral care, teaching and service, "decently and in order" (while this may seem like a typical Presbyterian term, it comes from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, 14:40).

Government by eldership reflects the principle that authority arises from the individual congregation and goes up through the church courts. Elders are elected by their congregations to serve, and it is from the congregational level that government begins.

There are four courts in the church, beginning at the congregational level and moving upwards:

- the session
- the presbytery
- the synod
- the General Assembly

The lower courts are always subject to the higher ones.

While the word *court* may conjure up legalistic images, the courts of the church are not meant to be forums for "sparring matches, tests of will, combat forms or games" (notes from a lecture at Knox College), but rather the work of women and men working together to govern in the name of the Lord.

The *Book of Forms* begins its section on basic principles for the church courts: "'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.'"

**The *Book of Forms* provides instruction in the polity of the courts. Polity is the rule of systems that gives order to how we govern. The *Book of Forms* provides guidelines for calling ministers, electing elders, holding meetings of the courts, the interrelationships between the courts of the church, and so on. The *Book of Forms* is a key resource for elders. They are advised to have a copy and to be familiar with it. It is based on the church's theology of grace, hope, peace, joy, love and justice. Elders promise to obey it in an effort to live together as a covenantal community with God and with each other. *The Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly (A&P)* is an additional resource for decisions and policies of the church. Every congregation has a copy of A&P. From time to time, the General Assembly asks sessions to consider study documents that result in changes to the *Book of Forms*.**

In terms of authority, the church is not a democracy. Jesus Christ is Lord. In government, the church always seeks the rule of God. The elders therefore govern not as individuals but in community, in the belief that making decisions in the will of the Lord is best achieved by prayerful deliberation in community and reliance on the work of the Holy Spirit. Decision-making is therefore collective, and the church membership is legally bound by the decision-making of its courts.

## Session

Sessions are made up of elders – ruling elders and the minister(s) (the term *minister* includes minister of Word and Sacrament and member of the Order of Diaconal Ministers). Ruling elders are women and men who have been elected by the local congregation and ordained. The session provides for the overall ministry of the congregation, including pastoral care, worship, Christian education, stewardship and mission. It has representation at presbytery. The minister, or teaching elder, acts as the moderator.

## Presbytery

The constituent role of each presbytery is made up of ministers and elders from each congregation within its bounds: one elder for each minister on the constituent role. Retired ministers and ministers without a pastoral charge are placed on the appendix to the constituent role. Presbyteries support and oversee their congregations and ministers. While the scheduling of meetings varies according to geography and need, presbyteries meet regularly throughout the year. The moderator of presbytery may be a teaching or a ruling elder. There are 45 presbyteries in Canada.

## Synod

Each synod is made up of several presbyteries and provides general supervision for them. Ministers and an equal number of elders make up the membership of this court. Some synods operate summer camps and offer educational and training events. Synods normally meet once a year. The moderator may be a teaching or a ruling elder. There are eight synods in Canada.

## General Assembly

The General Assembly meets annually during the first full week of June. It is the highest decision-making body of the church. An equal number of ministers and elders are commissioned by each presbytery to attend (about one-sixth of a presbytery's membership).

The General Assembly votes on matters of theology and polity affecting the whole denomination. It receives, discusses and makes decisions on reports from committees, petitions, overtures, references and appeals. Some issues require study over several years. The General Assembly elects a moderator – who may be a teaching or a ruling elder – to preside over the Assembly and to continue in an inspirational and ceremonial role for the following year.

## Top ten reasons why Presbyterian government works

Let's review what we have learned...

---

### 10. Something old

---

- A. **First Book of Discipline – 1560:** John Calvin's four offices of pastor/bishop, teacher/doctor, elder and deacon were instituted. Congregations were given a voice in the selection of their minister.
- B. **Second Book of Discipline – 1578:** The titles of bishop, pastor and presbyter all referred to the same office. Ordination by the laying on of hands was restored. The offices of teaching and ruling elders were accepted. Elders were elected for life.
- C. **The Form of Presbyterian Church Government – 1645:** The role of the presbytery in examining candidates and the "call" process were developed with greater congregational participation. Ministries other than congregational were recognized, such as military chaplaincy. All these historical documents have shaped our church government as we know it today.

---

### 9. Something new

---

Have you ever heard of a "remit"? A remit is a proposal for something new to happen to the law or doctrine of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. The proposed change is sent to presbyteries for approval or disapproval. Remits usually result from overtures, that is, proposals for change from a lower court to a higher court. This is the way the law of our church grows and develops into something new.

---

### 8. Something borrowed

---

The roots of Presbyterianism lie in the European Reformation of the 16th century. Presbyterian polity was developed as a rejection of governance by hierarchies of individuals (episcopal polity), but also differs from the Congregationalist polity in which each congregation is entirely independent. Presbyterian form of government, developed in Geneva under John Calvin, was introduced to Scotland by John Knox after his period of exile in Geneva. (Adapted from Wikipedia)

---

## 7. Something blue

---

- A. **Book of Forms:** The constitution of our denomination (royal blue cover).
- B. **The Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly:** The annual report of the highest court of our denomination (pale blue cover). This document is available on CD, which also includes the *Social Action Handbook* and the *Book of Forms*. The CD cover is the same pale blue.
- C. **Book of Praise, 1997:** The official hymnbook of our denomination (navy blue cover).

---

## 6. Reformed and reforming

---

“The church is in constant need of reform because of the failure and sin which mark its life in every age” (*Living Faith*, 7.1.6).

We are “Protest-ants.” Our ecclesiastical roots trace back to Martin Luther, who protested the excesses of the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century. Through his teaching, writing and personal action, he began what became known as the Protestant Reformation. This branch of the body of Christ was a re-formation of the church based on new interpretations of holy scripture, with greater emphasis on the love and grace of God and the role of the laity in church life. To this day, Protestants, including Presbyterians, understand that the body of Christ is not static, but a growing, evolving institution guided by the Holy Spirit.

---

## 5. We are what we are

---

*Presbuteros* is the Greek word for elder. This is the root word for Presbyterian. Ours is an elder-based system of church government. Teaching elders and ruling elders form the constituent members of the courts of our church – session, presbytery, synod and General Assembly. They are ordained using the same vows and are set apart, not above or below, for ministry and service within our denomination. It is often too easy to define ourselves as “not this...” or “not that...” or “the church that uses debts instead of trespasses,” rather than simply saying what we are: Presbyterians are Christians in the Reformed tradition, whose system of church government is based on eldership.

---

## 4. Lean and mean

---

*Lean* could, and should, indicate that we do things efficiently. We are cautious with the resources at our disposal, choosing carefully and prayerfully those things that require our attention and input. The courts of our denomination do not have unlimited resources (financial, human or spiritual), so we have learned to use what we have wisely. We strive to be good stewards of God’s gifts. That being said, our courts, agencies and committees do amazing work. The Presbyterian Church in Canada has respect and influence far beyond the mere size of the denomination, particularly in the ecumenical coalitions in which we participate.

---

## How Do We Organize Ourselves? – Our Church Government

---

*Mean* could have a negative connotation. While we cannot ignore the fact that our denomination does not always get it right, and sometimes real hurt happens, *mean* can be, and is, defined as “in the middle.” We are a mainstream denomination. We do not lean very far in either direction on the spectrum of denominations. We are neither conservative nor liberal; we are in the middle of the road. On any given issue, our church may take a stand that is perceived as more conservative-leaning or more liberal-leaning. This positions us very well in terms of society, because that is where most people are – in the middle of the road.

---

### 3. A house with many rooms /a coat of many colours

---

Observe or participate in almost any court of our denomination and you will see a wide variety of people – theologically, culturally and racially. This is one of the strengths of our denomination, that we are able to bring together people with a wide diversity of backgrounds and gifts, and enable them, empower them, to work together. This has not always been easy and we have often struggled to overcome our differences, but in the end we have followed God’s leading and guiding.

---

### 2. Not a democracy

---

Our system of church government is based on a form of representative democracy. Ruling elders are elected; teaching elders are chosen by congregational vote and presbytery decision. Each level of church government is made up of teaching and ruling elders, in equal numbers. It is a “one person, one vote” system, but at every level elders vote based on their belief and conscience. They do not vote on behalf of their congregation, session, presbytery or synod. That being said, The Presbyterian Church in Canada is not a democracy. It is a theocracy. Elders are elected and ordained to seek the will of God and to guide the church according to biblical doctrine.

---

### 1. Scriptural

---

There are 37 references to *elder* in the New Testament, from the Acts of the Apostles to the Revelation of John. While a few of these are references to the elders of Israel, the majority refer to the elders chosen in the various communities of the early Christian church. From the account of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 we see that the presbyters occupied an important place at the very highest levels of the early church.

From a scriptural point of view, in the early Christian church, the chosen elders were the ones who met, thought and reasoned together with the apostles. Together, they led and guided the church.

*Written by Mark McLennan*



## Section 2

# The Ministry of Elders

- Supervision and Oversight
- The Session and Membership
- The Session and Pastoral Care
- The Session and Worship
- The Session and Christian Education
- The Session and Stewardship
- The Session and Mission

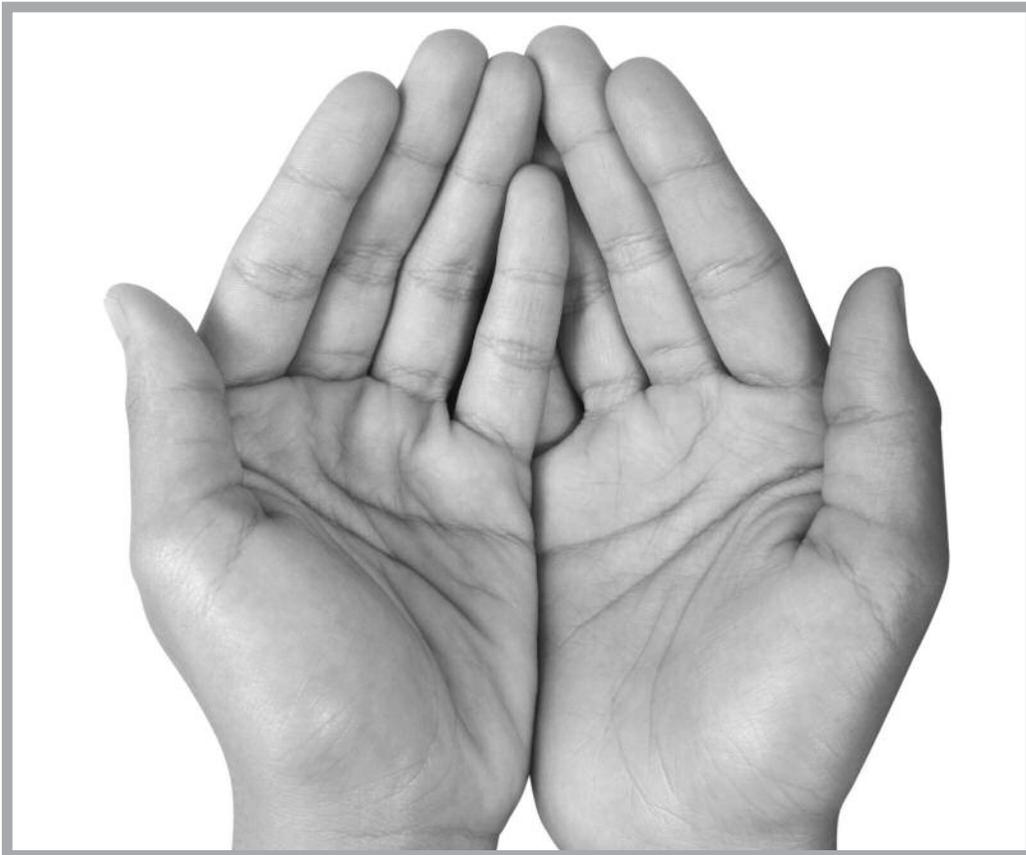


Photo © Pathathai Chungyam / Dreamstime.com

The *Book of Forms* outlines the many tasks and responsibilities of the session: supervision and oversight of the congregation, membership and pastoral care, worship, Christian education, stewardship and mission (109–113). The session is also responsible for carrying out such duties as may be directed to it by a higher court of the church (114–114.8). This includes providing records to the presbytery, completing the annual statistical report, transmitting any petitions and appeals to the presbytery, and acting on remits and referrals from the General Assembly.

All of this might seem like a daunting task. But consider what we believe – that each elder on session has been given gifts by God and those gifts have been recognized by the congregation. By working together and sharing gifts, session responsibilities are carried out.

A closer look at the major areas of congregational responsibility of elders (109–113) is provided in this section.

## Ministry and Elders

### *Living Faith*

- 7.2.1 The Lord continues his ministry  
in and through the church.  
All Christians are called  
to participate in the ministry of Christ.  
As his body on earth  
we all have gifts to use  
in the church and in the world  
to the glory of Christ, our King and Head.
- 7.2.2 Through the church God orders this ministry  
by calling some to special tasks  
in the equipping of the saints  
for the work of ministry,  
for building up the body of Christ.
- 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.
- 7.2.6 Through such ministries  
the Word is proclaimed,  
God's people are nourished and nurtured,  
supported and guided.  
In the oneness of Christ  
we seek to serve God.

# Supervision and Oversight

“It is the duty of those who are called to the eldership to meet regularly with the minister and active members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries as per section 105.2, who are also of their number, 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” (*Book of Forms* 109).

## Elders are leaders

Ruling elders play a key role in the life of the congregation. Most decisions about the life and work of the congregation are made by the session. Ruling elders therefore have a tremendous responsibility and many opportunities to do the work of Christ. With the minister and through their membership on session they work in partnership as leaders – leading the congregation in its fellowship (its ministry to one another) and in its mission (its ministry to the world).

### Servants or rulers?

Elders are rulers and servants at the same time.

Elders perform their duties with the authority of Christ and in the spirit of Christ who said, “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave to all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43–45). Because elders carry out their duties with the authority of Christ, they are rulers. Because they do this in the spirit of Christ, they are servants.

As rulers whose authority comes from Christ, elders are diligent in seeking the will of God for the congregation and in leading the congregation in the direction they believe Christ would have it go. Their task is not to defend the views of members of the congregation or to represent factions within the congregation. Elders are not spokespersons for the congregation; they are leaders who provide thoughtful supervision and oversight to encourage growth in the kingdom of God.

Elders are also servants. As servants of Jesus Christ, elders are servants of Christ’s body as expressed in the local congregation. Elders cannot govern arrogantly, nor can they ignore the will of the members. They are called to listen and to serve with the same self-sacrificing love that Christ displayed.

This balance between the servant and ruler aspects is essential in maintaining a healthy congregation. It requires that elders take time to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ and to listen carefully for God’s leading in the congregation.

## Managers or leaders?

What's the difference between managers and leaders?

Peter Coultts explores the difference between management and leadership, arguing that there is a critical difference between the two, although they do at times overlap.

The following descriptions of managers and leaders is helpful in this discussion (from Warren Bennis, *Learning to Lead: A Workbook on Becoming a Leader*, Pergasus Books/Addison Wesley, 1997, p. 9).

### Manager

administers  
maintains  
accepts reality  
focuses on systems and structures  
relies on control  
short-range view  
asks how and when  
has eye on bottom line  
initiates  
accepts status quo

### Leader

innovates  
develops  
investigates reality  
focuses on people  
inspires trust  
long-range perspective  
asks what and why  
has eye on horizon  
originates  
challenges status quo

The environment for any organization is always changing and shifting. The world is not static. The way things are done needs to be changed from time to time or there will be a disconnect between what the church is doing ("The way we have always done it") and the lived experience of the people. An example of this is seen in styles of worship and forms of Christian education.

Congregational leaders must ask themselves whether they are leaders or managers.

Leaders ask:

- What is changing in our neighbourhood? Are we being responsive?
- What is no longer working in our church the way it did 20 years ago? Why?
- In the long run, what is really important for the future of this congregation? What do we have to do to ensure this? What does our faith call us to do?
- How do we become relevant again? How do we fulfill our goals in these new times?

**Good management is essential for a congregation to function well.** The problem comes with something called "inbred management." Frederick R. Kappel, at the time he was CEO of AT&T, came up with six signs of inbred management. For him, inbred management occurred with people who were so entrenched in the habitual practices of handling the organization that they were incapable of innovation, change, or even of maintaining organizational health. Their ability to see the larger picture was hampered.

## Supervision and Oversight

Read Kappel's summary of the six signs of inbred management through the lens of your session and congregation:

1. People cling to old ways of working even when they have been confronted with a new situation.
2. They fail to define new goals with meaning and challenge.
3. Action is taken without studied reflection. Behaviour is rooted in tradition rather than need.
4. Institutionalized contentment exists: activity is secure and stable, not venture-some.
5. Old "wisdom" is passed on to new people. Older managers tend to adhere too rigidly to old ideas, to antiquated approaches and methods.
6. Low tolerance for criticism acts to stifle independent thinking.

Every organization – including every congregation – has a tendency toward these characteristics.

### Discussion

- As a session, think about the various ministries of the congregation. Ask yourselves the questions that leaders ask (above). Review the six signs of inbred management. You may wish to do this on flip chart paper.
- In what areas is your session/congregation dominated by inbred management? In what ways does your session provide leadership as described above?

**Managers** make use of resources and make sure they are in place. They make sure resources are used effectively.

**Leadership** involves visioning. It involves evaluating the life and ministry of the congregation in light of God's calling to it, asking, "Where are we called to go?"

## Leadership and congregational size

A quick glance at the tasks and responsibilities of elders in the *Book of Forms* indicates that sessions have many responsibilities related to supervision and oversight. How the session goes about its duties – how it exercises its leadership and forms relationships – depends on the size of the congregation.

In 1983, Arlin J. Rothauge wrote a booklet entitled *Sizing Up a Congregation for New Member Ministry* in which he categorized congregations according to their size. He found that the size of a congregation determined the effectiveness of various strategies. The four congregational-sized categories have been built upon and have become a useful tool for students of church life.

Consider the following types of churches. Note that all four sizes can have wonderful, healthy ministries.

**The Family Church has less than 50 people in attendance on Sundays.**

This is a small, tightly knit group; new people are usually added by birth or adoption. There is not a lot of programming and the minister is primarily involved in preaching, teaching and visiting.

In this context, the session is able to give direct attention to details – sometimes called micromanaging. Often a few strong leaders are members of session. There is often overlap between session members and the board of managers or finance committee. The session meeting might deal not just with policy and pastoral care but with all aspects of the life of the congregation. Very little is delegated to others, even to the minister.

**The Pastoral Church has about 50–150 people in attendance on Sundays.**

This makes the church a good size for fellowship, since generally the people will know one another. There are some small, functional groups like the choir, Bible study and friendship groups. The minister is the leader here and has a pastoral relationship with the entire congregation. In cases of emergency, there is a visit from the minister.

In these churches, session still provides attention to congregational detail, but the minister is seen as the leader. Often decisions are left to the minister's discretion. There are usually a number of committees that report to session. These committees also carry out session policies and the session gives them authority to make decisions within the parameters that have been determined. Consequently, session receives reports of decisions already taken rather than deliberating about them.

**The Program Church has about 150–350 people in attendance on Sundays.**

Often there are two services and not everyone knows everyone else. There are a number of groups for fellowship, and lay leadership may be a strong part of this. There can be a wide variety of programs to meet different needs. The minister is a focal part of worship leadership but shares that and spends time training and encouraging leaders for the various groups in the church. Pastoral care is largely accomplished by other staff members, paid or volunteer.

In these churches, the amount of delegation is sharply increased. The congregation has a number of groups with a good deal of autonomy. They are still under session authority and report to session. The session has a greater responsibility to express policies to be followed so that these leaders will know how to direct the activities of their groups in accordance with the overall direction of the congregation.

**The Corporate Church has more than 350 people in attendance on Sundays.**

The senior pastor has a clearly defined role, usually preaching and administration, and has limited connection to the pastoral care of the congregation, which is delegated to other staff.

The corporate church has a staff of ordained ministers and trained people led by the senior minister. The staff has responsibility for the supervision of many lay leaders who direct the activities of groups in the congregation. The session in this scenario is like the board of a corporation, which has no micromanagement function.

## Supervision and Oversight

Since session is still responsible for supervision and oversight, it must ensure that all the groups are reporting to the session directly or indirectly and that the policies it has established are followed. Periodically, the session will review the policies to see that they are in accord with the current needs and direction of the congregation.

*Differences in size affect a change in how a session operates. Family churches are very hands-on. Corporate churches operate by delegation. However, the purpose of the session is always the same; it is the way it operates that is different.*

### For discussion at session meetings or retreats

- Copy this material and distribute it to all the elders.
- Talk about these things:
  - What size congregation are we?
  - Are we in a transition between differing sizes? If so, what issues should we be paying attention to? If not, make a list of characteristics of our size of congregation.
  - What are the advantages and challenges of our size of congregation?
  - How are new members added to each size of congregation? How are they assimilated and welcomed? What does this mean for our congregation?
  - What things do we need to change in how our session functions because it does not fit with our size of congregation?
  - Looking at our congregation, what size of church do we anticipate it will be in five years? What are the implications of this?
- Engaging people beyond discussion:
  - After deciding which size of congregation you are, post a piece of chart paper, divided down the centre. On the left side, jot down roles of the minister in that size of church. On the other side, jot down roles of the session. Are there surprises? Are there changes the session would like to make?
  - Create, on large sheets of paper, a drawing of each size of church. List some characteristics of each church and session inside each church drawing. Invite people to stand beside the church that best describes your congregation. You may also invite people to move to another size of church that reflects a previous congregation where they used to attend. Ask them to share their experience of what it was like in that congregation – session, worship, Christian education, stewardship, etc.

**In 2008, there were 933 congregations in The Presbyterian Church in Canada (A&P, 2009).**

**Communicant membership: Median – 84; Average – 123**

**Weekly attendance: Median – 50; Average – 77**

**Sunday school size: Median – 12; Average – 21**

## Rethinking the annual congregational meeting

“That was the best congregational meeting I ever attended. Thank you!”

“I don’t remember ever having laughed so much at an annual meeting!”

These were unbelievable but welcome comments heard after the annual meeting at Unionville Presbyterian Church in February 2002. How did we get there? It was a journey...and well worth it.

---

### Looking back

---

Our congregation had been going through a period of reflection and change. The session was examining what we were doing as well as how and why we were doing things. One of the challenges was our annual general meeting.

Elders helped to prepare for this event, but neither the preparatory process nor the meeting itself were as enjoyable or productive as we hoped. Focusing on the “nitty gritty” of the proposed budget sometimes led to increased levels of tension, lost time and unproductive discourse. The process was not conducive to building relationships. There was no fun or laughter. The annual meeting was becoming onerous to prepare for and to sit through. Why not try a new and different model?

---

### Rethinking the annual meeting

---

We knew the words we *didn’t* want attached to the annual meeting:

- long and boring (people reading from the annual report)
- uncomfortable (controversy over minutiae)
- no fun (how much fun is truly possible at a corporate-style annual meeting focused on a line-item budget?)

We designed a new model for our annual meeting, and it looked like this:

- not after the worship service but within it
- not in the sanctuary but in the fellowship hall
- not after lunch but during lunch
- not a long line of committee conveners reporting on last year’s activities (already captured in writing) but speakers from all age categories addressing a mission or ministry for which they had passion
- not focused on line items in a budget but on pictures of our people living life together as a congregation
- not language such as “Our church school will cost \$...” but language that says “This year we will invest \$ into the church school”
- not chaired by the minister or the treasurer but by a volunteer as facilitator

## Supervision and Oversight

- not eyes cast down on a written annual report but eyes gazing up at a visual presentation of pictures, graphics and simplified explanations of next year's budget
- not just a few key leaders involved but inclusive of many, from seniors to young children
- not just sit, listen and vote but engagement by everyone
- not only gavels and the counting of votes but also music, laughter, expressions of hope and excitement for the future

The change was significant enough to prompt us to have a full "dress rehearsal" on the preceding Friday night. The elders also decided to surprise the congregation with lunch – a meal that the congregation had not been asked to prepare. Plates of sandwiches, nibble food, salads, desserts and beverages were set on tables adorned with colourful placemats.

## How it went

After the opening portion of Sunday morning worship, the minister said grace for the upcoming luncheon and the congregation was invited to follow him out of the sanctuary and into the fellowship room where lunch was ready and waiting. The result was amazing. The congregation was so surprised that everyone stayed on!



Photo © Nick Free / iStockphoto.com

Our first “new and improved” annual meeting went well. People appreciated

- the connection with the worship service (we began in worship with hymns and prayers, and the benediction concluded the meeting)
- that many people from all age ranges briefly participated and shared their vision and enthusiasm for a particular mission or ministry
- the photos about life together as a community of faith, which brought back memories of key events and activities during the preceding year
- five-minute pencil-and-paper activities that allowed people to talk and work together on a specific task at each table and then report back to the plenary; it was a helpful change of pace, gave people input to the question being asked, and sparked conversation after the meeting
- the presentation of the simplified budget and the focus on new mission and ministry opportunities for the future
- the relaxed and uplifting mood of the whole meeting

(A printed report, including the financial report, had been provided to everyone prior to the meeting.)

---

### How we do it now

---

Planning for the new year begins in the fall, when ministry teams are asked to review the past year and establish goals for the next 12 months. What stays? What gets added? What should be dropped? Groups are asked to work within a longer time-frame, establishing goals and milestones that fit within a more strategic, multi-year framework. Before Christmas, each ministry is asked to decide their next year’s activities and to have a plan with milestones (including budget requirements).

The following steps help us prepare:

- session reviews finances from the current year and approves the new budget
- a “sprint team” is formed to pull together the annual meeting, and they
  - gather the material (reports, financial tables, photographs, graphics) to be inserted into the annual report
  - post the report on the website and email it to everyone with access to the Internet
  - make sure others have a hard copy
  - ask all people to read the report prior to the meeting and note questions or comments they want to raise
  - plan the content and order of the meeting portion of the worship service
  - capture photographs of congregational events taken throughout the year and insert them into the PowerPoint presentation that guides the entire meeting
  - simplify the budget for insertion into the presentation
  - create a “road map” that details the choreography of the meeting – who does what and when, what motions must be made and voted on, and so on (this tool greatly facilitates the smooth and efficient running of the meeting)
  - identify who will plan the lunch and the setting of the tables
  - identify and confirm an “MC” for the meeting
  - identify who will plan and execute the clean-up afterwards

---

**Supervision and Oversight**


---

**Content of the meeting**

The opening worship includes a call to worship, prayer, hymn and pausing to remember those who died during the past year. Our meeting includes approving last year's reports, listening to proposals for the new year, hands-on activity where the congregation's views on some issue are solicited (table discussions, discussion and feedback), voting on the new budget, closing hymn and benediction.

A PowerPoint presentation guides the congregation efficiently through the meeting. A detailed agenda guides the MC, the key presenters and the person running the presentation through the process, ensuring that appropriate motions are raised, discussed and passed, and that nothing is forgotten.

As people are settling down at their tables (or gathering their food from a buffet table), we have a silent PowerPoint presentation of "people pictures" from the past year's activities and pictures of our mission involvement, including photos of work supported by *Presbyterians Sharing* and PWS&D.

**Presenting the financial picture**

The presentation of our financial situation for the preceding year and our budget for the new year is presented in simplified form (a narrative budget), with all line items being grouped under the relevant mission or ministry.

We anticipate our givings on a quarterly basis. We know givings are reduced in summer months, for example, and are higher at Easter and Christmas. We use data from the past five years to calculate average givings for the four quarters of the year. That way, we can say we are on target for the summer months, for example, if the July-August-September period givings are similar to the average for those months over the past five years.

This approach is linked to our stewardship efforts to place mission first, knowing the money will follow. Other stewardship efforts include an intentional program for planned giving, establishment of an endowment policy, and encouraging members to take advantage of the Pre-Authorized Remittance (PAR) program.

We provide the congregation with a pie chart illustrating the range of giving by household units. We encourage people to consider their opportunities to move up a step on the stairway of givings.

We have found our new approach to the annual congregational meeting to be inspiring. We have learned that when people participate in a meeting, when they are presented with information in a creative manner, when fellowship is balanced with the need to remain efficient and on-schedule (also very important), people become engaged in a way that helps them keep their focus on the mission and ministry of the congregation.

*Writers: Joan Masterton (elder), Gordon Timbers (minister),  
Unionville Presbyterian Church, Unionville, ON*

## Are proxy votes permitted at church meetings?

This question is often raised, especially with respect to congregational meetings. An expanded version of the question might sound something like this:

My congregation meets next Wednesday evening to decide whether or not to replace the sanctuary pews with stackable chairs. I'm going to be out of town on business that night. It is impossible for me to attend the meeting, but I am strongly opposed to this madness. May I ask my elder to cast a vote in opposition for me?

While most of us would have some sympathy for the person who is not able to attend the duly called congregational meeting, there is no provision for proxy voting within our polity.

Presbyterians believe the Spirit of God speaks to the church through the community praying, thinking and talking together. The idea of voting on the seating arrangement of the sanctuary without first participating in a prayerful discussion about the matter goes against our understanding of appropriate decision-making. Proxy voting would leave out the important principle of decisions being made only after hearing and considering the views of others. The ability for someone to change his or her mind in response to the discussion that takes place must be preserved.

As a member of one of our congregations wrote, "Proxy voting ought not to be encouraged since the mind of the Holy Spirit becomes clear at a meeting when people have a chance to respond to each other." A proxy vote is a vote cast without hearing a full range of ideas.

Further, if someone wanted to appeal a decision to a higher court and it was determined that the person was not present when the vote was taken, there is a risk that such an appeal would be deemed out of order.

Nevertheless, there are ways in which a session can ensure that the interest and support of a person who cannot, for good reason, be at a meeting can be noted. Perhaps the person could send a letter to be read, or ask another member to express an opinion on their behalf. In this way, an absent person can add to the discussion even without being able to vote on the final decision.

# The Session and Membership

The *Book of Forms* states that the session is responsible “for seeking out, preparing and admitting persons as professing members...” (110).

This includes instructing applicants, examining candidates for membership, admitting them, approving and providing for baptisms, handling transfers to and from other congregations, restoring lapsed members, and exercising discipline. And it includes hospitality and pastoral care.

## Membership matters

### Why should I become a member?

What does it mean to be a member of a congregation and of The Presbyterian Church in Canada? Is it important? What difference does it make if I become a member of the church? Elders might have to answer these questions.

The session could take some time at one of its meetings to discuss this matter.

**What’s the difference between being a member or an adherent of a congregation?** They look the same. Adherents are often as dedicated to ministry of the congregation as members; sometimes even more so.

There are times, however, in the life of the congregation when it does make a difference. Only a member may sign a call for a minister, be ordained an elder or vote for an elder. In short, a member has greater privileges and responsibilities than an adherent.

There was a time when a Presbyterian adherent was as rare as lobster traps in Saskatchewan. Virtually every teen attended classes to become Presbyterian members. Prior to 1982, the national church did not keep track of adherents. Only members were counted. Clearly the number of adherents became significant enough to warrant keeping track of them. By 1982 adherents comprised nearly 20 percent of the total number of people associated with our church. By 2006 that number climbed to 40 percent. How do we understand this trend? It is said that we live in a “non-joining” age, but there is probably more to these figures than that.

Membership is still vital to the life of our denomination and an important step of faith and commitment. Why? Principally, because the scriptures portray God as a covenant-making God. God promises to be our God and calls us into community as people of God. When we become members we confess faith in God and make vows of covenantal relationship with God. At the same time, we make vows of covenantal relationship with one another. As an example, members make a legally binding promise to pay their minister a stipend so that the minister can afford to lead and serve them.

Because we exist in a material world, we need a constitution (the *Book of Forms*) based on our theology of grace, hope, peace, joy, love, justice and so on. Members promise to obey it in an effort to live in a covenantal community with God and one another.

Members participate in a congregation's life in full covenant with others and shoulder crucial responsibilities, such as the election of elders, the calling of a minister, and being accountable to the body of Christ and to the discipline of that body.

Sometimes being a member or an adherent is compared to marriage. You can live with someone and enjoy many of the same benefits of marriage, but when two people marry, they enter into an even deeper bond of commitment to each other before God.

It is the responsibility of sessions to continue to invite and encourage adherents to enter even more fully into the covenant church.

---

### Preparing and admitting new members

---

Instruction for people wanting to become members is often done by the minister, who will interview the candidates as well. Elders are often asked to participate in this process.

Some sessions have an elder make contact with aspiring members and get to know them, to help them become part of the congregation. The next section on being a hospitable congregation provides resources on welcoming new members.

---

### Baptism

---

Approval of baptisms and provision for baptisms is the responsibility of session (*Book of Forms* 110.4). It is a good idea for the session to take time to study the meaning of baptism within the Presbyterian Church.

As a sacrament, baptism is more than a rite of dedication. It is a symbol by which we celebrate what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Presbyterians believe that in baptism we are united by the Holy Spirit with Christ and incorporated into the family of God, which is the holy, catholic church. Baptism is a sign and seal of our union with Christ and with his church.

Baptism can be celebrated in any Christian church. There is no need to be rebaptized in a Presbyterian church. Baptism may occur at any age. Generally, in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, it is the children of members and new Christians who are baptized – or adults who have never been baptized and want to take this step in their journey of faith.

In baptism, vows are made to raise the child or support the adult in the community of faith. Because baptism is seen as an act of the whole church and a sign of church membership, it always happens in the presence of a worshipping congregation – except in certain unusual circumstances.

---

 The Session and Membership
 

---



---

 Discipline
 

---

The word *discipline* is perhaps one of the more scary words that elders encounter. Many might look warily at this and wonder what it means. Discipline is a similar word to *disciple*, which basically means learner. Discipline, then, has to do with becoming disciples, and the session is charged with encouraging, educating and motivating disciples.

Discipline also deals with offences. As stated in the *Book of Forms*, “Discipline is an exercise of the spiritual authority that the Lord Jesus Christ has appointed in his church. The purposes of discipline are the maintenance of the truth, the vindication of the authority of Christ, the removal of offences, the promotion of the purity and edification of the church, and the spiritual good of offenders” (345–346).

## A welcoming congregation

Responsibility for membership and pastoral care includes providing a hospitable, welcoming environment for all members, adherents and visitors – especially visitors.

The Apostle Paul wrote these instructions for Christian living to the Roman church:

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 honour. 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**. (Romans 12:9–13)

Most of our congregations are blessed by visitors who drop in unannounced, now and then, to our worship services. There might be any number of reasons why these people enter a church building on a Sunday. Some may be in the area to visit with friends or to attend grandpa’s 90th birthday party. Others may be searching for a church home. Whatever draws them to the church, in every instance the congregation is provided with a wonderful opportunity to share the gift of Christian hospitality.

We have probably all visited churches and felt entirely ignored, except possibly for the furtive glances of curious but unwelcoming regulars. We have also visited churches where we were greeted with smiles, handshakes and warmth. We know which scenario demonstrates the sort of greeting people should expect, but we are not always sure how to demonstrate it.

We get one chance to make a first impression! People like the church and return – or they move on. How can congregations become more hospitable and offer friendship to newcomers?

The following is a series of articles about how to be a welcoming congregation.

---

## Where does hospitality begin?

---

The ministry of hospitality is built on the premise that God is a welcoming God. If visitors are going to know that God is a welcoming God, the congregation must be a welcoming people.

This is the basis of the videotape resource *Ancient-Future Worship, a model for the 21st century*, narrated by Robert Webber. This videotape resource, developed as a tool to help congregations work toward worship renewal, includes a nine-minute segment on the hospitality aspect of the Sunday morning experience. The videotape touches on the following areas where hospitality can take place.

### The parking lot

Hospitality begins in the parking lot. Before people enter the sanctuary, they can be made to feel welcome by a person designated to greet drivers and direct them to parking spaces. Even if a congregation does not have a parking lot, a friendly greeter outside the building shows how the people inside the building feel about visitors.

### The greeters

As visitors enter the church building, remember that they are coming into an unknown environment. Some may be attending church for the first time in many years, or for the first time ever. Keep in mind that they may not know how to find the sanctuary, nursery or washrooms. It is essential that greeters do whatever possible to ease the confusion and potential discomfort of entering a new place for the first time.

### The ushering

Ushers also play a vital role in the ministry of hospitality. They welcome guests warmly into the sanctuary and help them find a suitable place to sit.

### The bulletins or projections

Whether congregations use bulletins or project worship information onto a screen, these resources should be prepared with the visitor in mind. They won't know when to stand or sit. They may not know the Lord's Prayer or

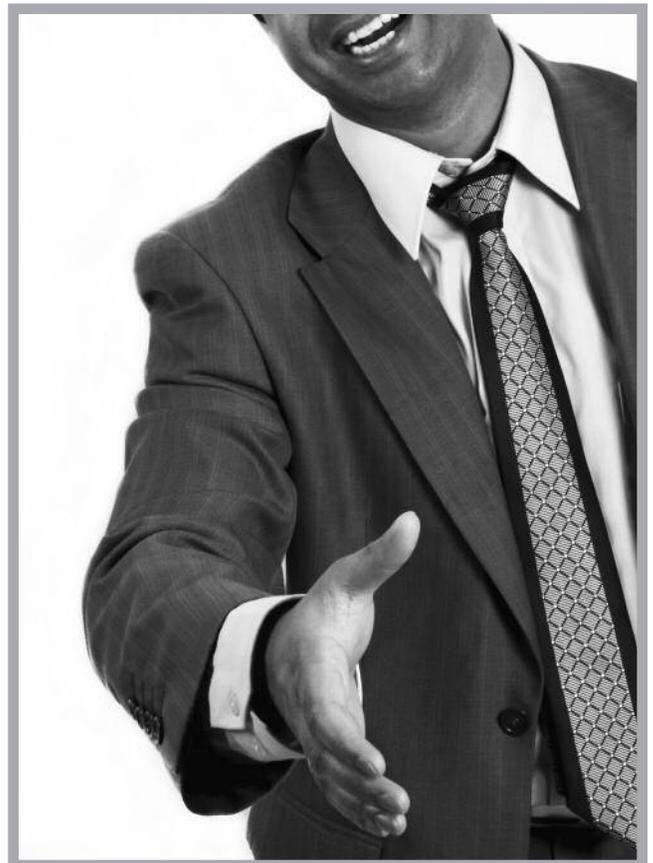


Photo © Eranda Kumarapperuma / Dreamstime.com

## The Session and Membership

Apostles' Creed from memory. They may not know what a doxology is. Guests should not have to struggle through the service.

### The sanctuary

Congregations should create a warm and inviting worship space. If worship is an important meeting between God and God's people, then the worship space ought to enhance that meeting. Colours, lights, sound systems, furnishings and banners should all be carefully used to glorify God and create a sense of harmony and community for all who worship.

### The nursery and church school

Visitors may be looking for a safe and cheerful place to leave their children during worship. A clean, attractive space coupled with competent friendly staff will set their minds at ease and further convey that this is a welcoming place. Congregations are reminded of how important it is to establish *Leading with Care* procedures for the care of children. *Leading with Care* is a policy for ensuring a climate of safety for children, youth and vulnerable adults that was adopted by The Presbyterian Church in Canada in 2005. See page 151 of this resource for more information about *Leading with Care*.

### Fellowship

Many congregations gather for refreshments and conversation after worship. People should be designated to ensure guests are warmly invited to participate, to guide them to the refreshment area, and to stay with them to chat and introduce them to others. Imagine how awkward it would be for a guest to stand alone in a *fellowship* hall, and not be part of the fellowship.

### Hospitality points to consider

1. Discuss the statement, "Our God is a welcoming God. People experience God's welcome when we are a welcoming people."
2. How would you rate, on a scale of 1 to 10, your hospitality of the following:
  - parking lot
  - greeters
  - ushers
  - bulletins or projections
  - sanctuary
  - nursery and church school
  - fellowship
3. What steps need to be taken to improve your "people hospitality"?
4. What steps need to be taken to improve your "space hospitality"?

Note: Congregations may wish to borrow or buy this video to explore the ministry of hospitality in more depth.

---

## Including new people in your congregation

---

Most church members believe they have a friendly church! In many cases this is a myth. It is hard work for newcomers to become connected in a congregation. Some people make one or two attempts, then give up and walk away.

The tendency to exclude people is seldom intentional. It happens because churches don't take the time to think through their patterns of inclusion. How can we do a better job of including new people?<sup>1</sup>

We need to intentionally expand the care system of the congregation.

### Step 1

**Put together a "Welcoming Committee" or "Newcomers Committee."**<sup>2</sup> Who should be on it? People with characteristics like these: somewhat extroverted, socially involved, self-confident, committed, a global perspective, well-informed.

### Step 2

**Prepare welcome bags/kits.** It is important to be ready for visitors and guests. Gather together a few print resources about your congregation – a brief history, a list of programs and ministries, a list of important phone numbers, and an outline of special services held throughout the year. Prepare a children's bag/kit as well. Put in puzzles, stories, bookmarks and an outline of children's programming.

### Step 3

**Spot newcomers and speak to them.** This may seem like an obvious thing – but many visitors report that they attend worship and although some people may nod and say "Good morning," no one speaks to them. In small and medium sized churches the welcoming committee will find spotting newcomers a relatively easy task. A member or members can wait near the entrance and greet newcomers.

**Following worship,** approach the newcomer and engage in friendly conversation. (Many greeters use the "five minute rule," speaking only to people they don't know for the first five minutes.) If greeters are unsure whether or not a person is new, simply say, "Are you a visitor to our congregation or is it just that I don't know you?" It is very important to make this type of personal contact on the first visit and, if possible, to introduce the newcomer to someone with whom they may have something in common.

If visitors are willing, invite them to fill out a newcomer's card so the minister can follow up on their visit. Simply say, "Are you interested in filling out a visitor's card so we have the opportunity to introduce you to our church?" It may be that they will say, "No, thanks, I'm just shopping around," but others may welcome further

---

1 Some ideas in this model were adapted from *Evangelism in the Small Church*, by James Cushman (Vital Faith Resources, 2004).

2 Call this committee whatever suits your congregation. You could also call it "St. Andrew's Welcome Wagon."

---

## The Session and Membership

---

contact. It is quite effective for a layperson to follow up. After all, everyone expects the minister to do this, but a layperson who gives up his or her time and is enthusiastic about the church will have an even greater effect.

### Step 4

The most important thing to consider around inclusion is **communication flow**. As a committee, do the following:

- a. List on paper the names of all families.
- b. Group people according to families, extended families and close friends.
- c. In each of the groupings, circle the names of the key communicators.
- d. Go through your original list in (a) and write down the names of people who are not part of ongoing communication flow within a group identified under (b). (Most congregations find that almost one-quarter of the membership is excluded from the information flow.)
- e. Decide how the people identified in (d) can be included into someone's communication group.
- f. When new people enter the church, put them into someone's communication group *immediately*.
- g. When anything about the church needs to be communicated, make a phone call or send an email to the key communicators and ask them to let their family and friends know.

### Step 5

Include new people by giving them an **orientation to the history, tradition, values and life of the congregation**. Designate someone in the church as the oral historian.

Make this an event full of storytelling, laughter and food. It should include a tour of the building, talking about the pictures, symbols and changes that have happened over the years. This puts new people in touch with the important oral traditions and values of the congregation.

### Step 6

If possible, **include newcomers in a program or ministry** as soon as possible. Ask them, "How would you like to be involved in the life of this church? What interests you?" Give them a list of optional ways in which they could be involved. It is possible that some may say, "I just want to attend worship." Respect their wishes, but you might ask if they would be willing to pray for others during the week.

### Step 7

The most difficult point – and probably the last point of inclusion – is to **involve new people in the decision-making and power structure of the congregation**. The transfer of authority to a new person occurs slowly and often only after newcomers have proven their love for and loyalty to the church. The welcoming committee can assist in this process by helping newcomers to ease into lesser positions of authority and reminding them that trust will grow the longer they are in the congregation.

---

## A visitor's wish list

---

How does your church rate at welcoming guests?

The following article, written by Mary Legner, is based on her experience and her husband's as they looked for a church home when they were relocated to a new place for a year's stay. They tried a number of churches before they found one where they were greeted warmly and made to feel welcome.

### **Wish #1: Greet me warmly at the door**

It can't be emphasized strongly enough that greeters are responsible for a visitor's first impression. They can be the determining factor in whether or not newcomers will return. Too many churches have greeters who are not endowed with the gift of hospitality. Greeters need to meet people with a sincere smile and a firm hand clasp. They need to be able to call members by name and show genuine interest in newcomers.

### **Wish #2: Don't make me suffer through a time of greeting during the service**

Standing and shaking hands with church members can be painful to newcomers. It's agonizing to watch others chatting and hugging while I am reaching out to people I don't know and who often don't even look me in the eyes as they hurry past to talk to an old friend. My preference is for the congregation to greet one another before or after the service, and have a place where newcomers can go for orientation after the service. This would be a nice time to meet the pastor or other church leaders and be served refreshments.

### **Wish #3: Give me clear information**

Instructions in the bulletin say to go to the Garden Room after the service, but they don't tell me where the Garden Room is! That makes me feel confused. Abbreviations I don't understand make me feel like an outsider. People who make up bulletins or who are giving announcements should always keep in mind that a visitor might be in attendance who isn't familiar with specific meeting places and doesn't know who Jack or Mike happen to be.

### **Wish #4: Acknowledge the fact that I was there**

A note in the mail would be nice. A phone call would be even better. It's okay to put my name on a newsletter mailing list, but don't send an announcement telling me that I'm supposed to bring cookies next week.

### **Wish #5: Invite me to a meal**

Oh, how I long for the fellowship of sharing a meal with Christians! To be invited out after the service for lunch or even a cup of coffee would be a balm to a weary soul. I know of a church that has a carry-in meal every week after the service. Visitors are invited to stay. What a lovely thing to do! I know of other churches where the members eat out after the service. That's good, too, if visitors are invited along. I even had friends who intentionally invited church visitors to their home for lunch after the service. What a blessing they must have been to the lonely. I wish I could have met people like them during our year away.

## The Session and Membership

The question that needs to be asked is, "How can churches reach the world when they aren't even reaching people who come through their doors?" There is something terribly wrong when visitors feel as though they have to break through barriers to get to the inner circle. Most of us think our churches are friendly, but we don't see ourselves through a visitor's eyes. We are often so preoccupied with greeting our friends or finding that "someone" we need to talk with, we don't give a thought to how we appear to a stranger. My experience over the past year has taught me an important lesson I won't forget. When we return to our home church, I'll be reaching out to visitors every week, and I'll be encouraging others to do the same.

– Mary Legner

## Intentional hospitality – a different kind of elder district

It is one thing to welcome people successfully into our church buildings, but Christian hospitality need not stop there. A congregation in southern Ontario with a Sunday attendance of approximately 100 worshippers devised a plan that intentionally extends a Christian welcome to visitors even after they have gone home.

When Herb Gale ministered at St. James Presbyterian Church in Stouffville, Ontario, a new kind of elder district was born. Herb noticed that Gary, one of his gregarious elders, had both a passion and gift for greeting, and engaging in conversation, visitors to the congregation. He also noticed that the congregation had no intentional way of encouraging visitors to consider making St. James their church home. After pondering the possibilities, the session agreed to free Gary from his traditional elder district commitments so he could devote his time, energy and gifts toward a ministry of hospitality that followed up those who were searching for a place to seek and serve God.

### Step 1

Either before or after worship, Gary attempts to contact all those visiting on a Sunday morning. Depending on how much visitors are ready to share, Gary will learn their names and the nature of the visit, that is, whether the people are passing through on holiday or if they are looking for a place to worship regularly. Gary gives each guest a pen that notes the congregation's name, address, telephone number and motto: "Sharing God's Love." He always encourages guests to visit again.

### Step 2

Gary keeps track of how often the visitors come out for worship or other congregational events. When he notices a visitor has appeared on three or four occasions, he will offer to make a home visit to share more about the history and ministries of the congregation. Some accept the offer. Some do not.

## Is our worship service welcoming?

Worship practices	Rate:	Yes	No	Sometimes
1. Do the worship leaders also welcome newcomers?				
2. Are the rituals (e.g., carrying of Bible, lighting of candles) done with dignity and care?				
3. Do the worship leaders give gentle and clear explanations of what is being done and why?				
4. Are the melodies for singing clearly played and perhaps led by a song leader?				
5. Are the notes for singing available for everyone?				
6. Is there a sense of worship as “public space” rather than private coziness?				
7. Are all memorized responses and songs printed in the bulletin so newcomers can follow?				
8. Will new children know what to do at the “time for children” in the worship service?				
9. Is the worship child/youth friendly? Can children see? Is there a child’s bulletin? Do the children and youth participate in some aspects of worship? Are illustrations about children and youth used in the sermon? Are children included in the sacraments? Are the responses, hymns and choruses used in church school also used in worship?				
10. If there are questions answered with “no” or “sometimes,” what can be done about them?				

### Step 3

If the guests welcome Gary into their homes, Gary offers to bring a videotape that highlights events from the past and present congregation as a way of introducing something of the spirit and direction of St. James. He also distributes a copy of a recent church newsletter and a small pamphlet that contains pictures of members of the congregation along with brief quotations about what St. James means to them.

---

**The Session and Membership**


---

**Step 4**

Gary continues to mentor these people by telephone or casual meetings until one of two things happen. Either the visitors become regular in their attendance and express an interest in becoming more deeply involved in the life and ministry of the congregation, or their interest wanes and they indicate their search for a church home will continue elsewhere. Those who become involved in the congregation have their names and contact information added to the church directory.

**Step 5**

Once visitors are reasonably well integrated into the congregation, they are removed from Gary's district and added to the traditional district of another elder. Gary usually tries to arrange a meeting of the people he has been caring for and the new elder so that he can introduce them to each other.

With routines and schedules the way they are, Gary finds it increasingly difficult to arrange visits with visiting individuals and families. Nevertheless, he strives to keep in close touch with them. In light of the spirit of *Leading with Care* (see p. 151 in this resource for more information), congregations might want to consider appointing a male and a female elder to this ministry. Gary admits that there are circumstances in which it would be more appropriate to have a female elder visiting newcomers.

Gary provides an innovative and helpful method of transforming a visitor into an accepted and valued member of the congregation.

**Hospitality points to consider**

1. What follow-up does your congregation offer visitors?
2. What steps could be taken to be more intentional about encouraging visitors to become part of the ministry of Christ in your congregation?
3. Are there elders in your congregation who have the gifts needed to reach out to visitors the way Gary has? If so, what would need to be done to free that elder for this ministry?

---

**Welcoming children and youth**


---

In 2002, Dorothy Henderson completed a large survey of 240 young adults who grew up in mainline (mainly Presbyterian) churches. Most of these young adults were still active in their congregations at the time. The following is a portion of what they had to say to elders. It provides important information about what congregations can do to make children and youth feel welcome and included.

**1. The young adults said, "Church is a habit...a good habit."**

Like all other practices in life, attending to one's religious life can be a meaningful habit. There seems to be a direct link between regularity of attendance as children and continuance of attendance as young adults. Further, most of the respondents to the survey expressed appreciation for the values associated with regular worship. As Carol Wehrheim points out, "gathering with other church members to worship and pray is one way that you say by your actions that the life of your



Photo © TraciJS / iStockphoto.com

congregation is important to you and your family. You allot your family time to be a part of it and to support others through your presence" (*Giving Together: A Stewardship Guide for Families*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, p. 30). The young adults say it this way:

"Combined with my upbringing, going to church led me to a great interest in spirituality." (Male, age 22)

"Sometimes going to church was a chore, but in hindsight, it was an important part of my life. I'm glad it happened." (Male, age 22)

"The things I learned, I held on to later." (Male, age 24)

### Discussion

- What can you do as elders and ministers to encourage regular church attendance?
- In his book *Make Room for the Boom...or Bust* (Fleming Revell, 1997), author Gary McIntosh maintains that young parents come or return to the church for many reasons:
  - They want to provide values and programs for their children.
  - They have a desire for stability and nostalgia.
  - As they grow older, they become more accepting of institutional life of all kinds, including the church.
  - They have a desire to belong, be accepted and have an identity.
  - They are disillusioned with aspects of culture and want enduring and lasting values.
  - They are interested in spiritual things, especially new expressions of spirituality.
  - They are insecure about the future, frightened and confused.

If these reasons are true, what do they tell you about making your church more inviting to young families?

---

 The Session and Membership
 

---

## 2. The young adults said, "Please...do something with worship."

Of particular interest in this survey is the impatience that young adults expressed around worship. They didn't much care for their worship experiences as children and, even though some of them express comfort in currently participating in the familiar patterns of worship, they longed for variety and flexibility. In fact, they indicated that they would "vote with their feet," and simply go to other churches to have this need satisfied.

The solution seems simple. An alternative worship needs to happen. Often children, youth and young adults are eager to be part of the planning and leading of alternative worship services. If a congregation does not have sufficient resources to do this itself, it is a great opportunity for congregations to do it ecumenically. It has been the experience of leaders in the Young Children and Worship program that children love and appreciate worship and can participate fully when adjustments are made to make worship more accessible. In regular corporate worship, worship bags, children's bulletins, explanations and stories can all help to make worship more accessible to children.<sup>3</sup>

### Discussion

- Why have churches been so reluctant to involve children in worship? (Only 24 percent of the 240 respondents remembered being in church for the whole service between ages 4 and 12.)
- In the mid-70s, William Abernethy produced a creative book entitled *A New Look at Sunday Morning*. In that book, Abernethy argues that *all people*, regardless of age or stage, need learning opportunities, worship and community opportunities on Sunday morning. He advocated a one-hour 45-minute Sunday morning with 10 minutes to gather and hear the theme of the day, 35 minutes in age-appropriate learning environments, 15 minutes to break for refreshments and community, and 45 minutes to gather for worship. In the final 45 minutes, people bring aspects of their learning to present as their offering. It is a wonderful and creative vision. Why did this vision for an integrated Sunday morning never seem to "catch on"?
- If young adults (and probably children and youth) are crying out for more contemporary styles of worship, why is it not being provided? Is this something that the young people themselves can have a major role in designing and leading?

---

<sup>3</sup> An excellent resource is *Forbid Them Not*, Years A, B and C, by Carolyn Brown (Abingdon Press, 1991, 1994). Brown uses the lectionary passages to give an exegesis of the scriptures from the child's point of view, suggests sermon resources and appropriate hymns, offers a children's bulletin, and suggests simple movement that is appropriate for the day.

# The Session and Pastoral Care

“The session shall assign the names of all members and adherents to the elders who shall keep a list of 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” (*Book of Forms* 109.4).

“The session is responsible for...the pastoral care of all persons within the fellowship of the congregation” (*Book of Forms* 110).

## The district

The elder’s district is the foundation for pastoral care in most congregations of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Elders are charged with cultivating a personal relationship with the members and adherents in their district through visiting, counselling and encouragement in the Christian life.

So how is this done? We are all different.

Relationships take work – one has to be intentional about it. If the relationship has been developed, then, when things get tough, people will know the elder cares. The elder may be the conduit through which support, healing and encouragement will come.

Home visits are great – you get a chance to meet people in their home environment, learn from them, and meet each member of the family. They will show you photos and share their stories. You will easily learn some of their interests, both within and outside of the church. Soon you may also learn something about their trials and struggles. And you will find out how they feel about the church and its programs, and how they want to contribute.

Just letting people know they matter to you –

Saying hi in the church

Or meeting at the local coffee shop,

Tracking milestones and

Sending cards on anniversaries.

One elder showed up with M&Ms for the children.

Another gathered several of her people – for discussions about church life and to build relationships.

Yet another invited people into his home for a social evening.

## The Session and Pastoral Care

One church had a barbecue at which all elders hosted their districts, potluck style.

It was fun!

And they got to know one another!

And they shared Christian fellowship!

And the community of Christ was strengthened.

This is what the elder's district is all about!

*Adapted from an article by Frank Breisch*

## The elder's visit – getting started

### Prepare yourself

"Christianity is caught, not taught" goes an old saying. A number of people probably helped you to realize that you were chosen by God and that you have been equipped to care for God's people. Think of one or two people who influenced your faith. Many often tell the story of their first Sunday school teacher, of a youth leader or of a pastor who helped them identify their God-given gifts.

We often learn through another person that God loves us. You are like that too. People in your congregation think of you as a friend in Christ. It's not what you say, but what you are. You probably get in touch with people in your district when they are ill, when they have a special anniversary, when a new baby is born, when a young person is confirmed, when a couple is married, when a family member dies.

### Informal contacts

- If you are a new elder, begin your relationship with your families by introducing yourself through a personal note.
- In a binder, write up a page on each family. Record birthdays, workplace, birthplace, schools, hobbies, interests. Ask the church office and minister for non-confidential information.
- As you would with a friend, telephone on a regular basis.
- Invite families to your home or to the church for a simple sandwich lunch. Even if people do not come, they will be pleased to be asked.
- Send cards on special occasions.
- Ask the minister or church office to let you know when one of your people is facing surgery or when they have suffered bereavement.
- When informal contacts have been well established, more formal home visits are not so difficult.

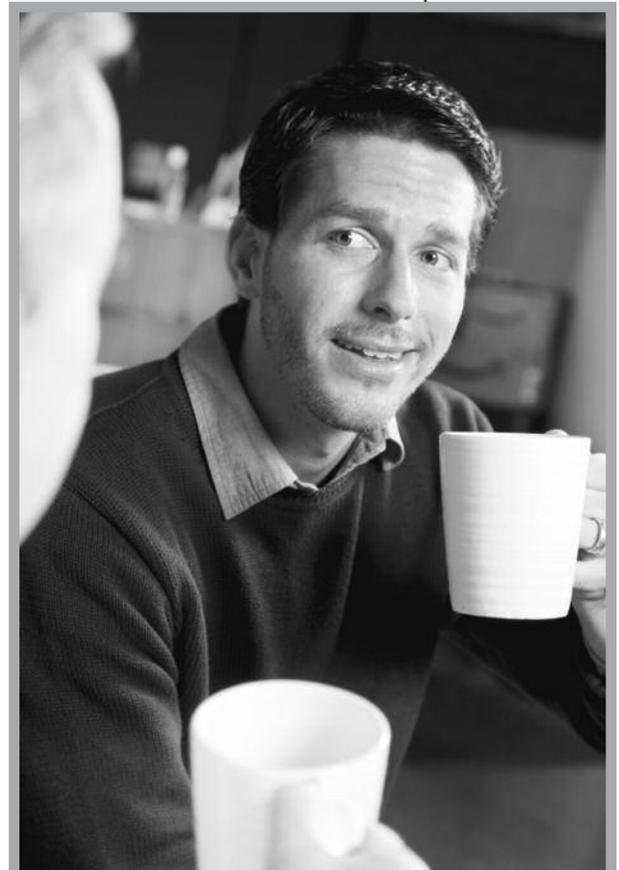


Photo © Steve Debenport / iStockphoto.com

## Visitation program

Some sessions have regular visitation programs, perhaps in the fall and spring. Others deliver communion cards on a quarterly basis and visit at that time. Some congregations are divided into geographical districts by family, while others assign elders to groups that have common interests (youth, young working people, those in mid-career, mothers who work outside the home, elderly, homebound, and so on).

Visiting is a learned skill that is developed with practice. No one ever learned to swim by reading a book on the subject. It is in the actual experience of visiting that one becomes increasingly effective. A new elder should not only be introduced to the theory of visiting but also to the practice of visiting by accompanying someone (minister or another elder) who is more experienced.

The most positive visitations are those where the elder goes with good news about the congregation. Ideally, this information should be captured on paper so that it can be left in the home. Small or large, urban or rural, all congregations have good news to share. Declining membership and budget can be discussed in the context of the congregation's life and ministry.

## A plan for a home visit

### The purpose of the elder's visit

The purpose of the elder's visit is twofold. It should cultivate a relationship with the members and adherents entrusted to the elder's care. As friendship with the elder develops, it becomes easier for people to discuss their problems and to raise their questions about matters of faith.

The elder also visits as a representative of the session and its pastoral concern for people and their continuous growth in relationship to Christ and his church. The visit, therefore, is an opportunity to describe what the church has to offer by way of spiritual growth and opportunities for service. The elder's visit is intended to build bridges with members of the congregation, and by extension, between the congregation and the community it serves.

### Effective listening

Good listening communicates an attitude of openness to the other person. Listening is a skill we need to build. It fosters trust. It pays attention to words, the ways in which they are used, and the body language of the person. It looks for meaning behind the words.

### Gaining understanding

- Listen carefully and thoughtfully (use minimal encouragements such as okay, hmmm, yes).
- Ask clarifying questions (how would you feel about that; is this the way you see things going).
- Reflect back on the feelings that seem to underlie the comments (that must have made you incredibly sad; how frustrating).
- Rephrase or paraphrase what was said (so you are thinking about...; let me see if I have this right).

### 1. Preparation

- Identify the purpose of the visit.
- Learn all you can about the family beforehand.
- Bring a page of information or a church brochure to leave with

## The Session and Pastoral Care

people; good news about the church is always helpful in setting a positive tone for your visit.

- Pray that the Holy Spirit will guide you and give you wisdom and love for the person.
- Telephone for an appointment to ensure a welcome. This is not always necessary, but it is wise.

## 2. In the home

- Meet all the family members present and show genuine interest in their lives – school, work, hobbies and interests. Be sure to talk to the children and youth present.
- Take time for conversation and getting acquainted.
- If you are passing by, say so, and have one item to share. You can then have a short “porch chat” if the person is busy or embarrassed about being unprepared.

## 3. Be a good listener

- A good listener is sensitive not only to what is being said, but also to the way it is being said – the tone of voice, the facial expression, the body language. To lead a conversation and to be an effective listener takes practice and time.

## 4. Remember the purpose of the visit

- You are there as a bridge between people and the church; you are a reminder of things spiritual. You are also an encouragement for others to be faithful Christians. Be prepared to share your own faith in a natural way.

## 5. Don't overstay your welcome

- Leave when you sense that the visit should end. You may want to say something about when you will see the person or family again.

## 6. What about prayer?

- Elders often worry that prayer may invade the privacy of others. You might say, “I’d like to say a short prayer. Do you mind?” It should be a natural and fitting conclusion to the visit. A simple prayer might contain a thank you for the visit and a blessing on the household and each of its members.

## 7. Following up the visit

- Take a few minutes after the visit to make some notes about information that should be passed on to the minister, church secretary or Christian education leaders. Why not buy a three-ring binder and keep your records in handy form?

### Phrases that help to build a trusting relationship

- Tell me about it.
- I'd like to hear about it.
- Tell me more.
- I'd be interested in your point of view.
- Would you like to talk about it?
- Let's hear what you have to say.
- Tell me the whole story.
- Sounds like you've got something to say about this.
- This seems important to you. Let's discuss it.

## Elder's log

The information in this log helps elders to remember specific concerns of people in their districts. This information is confidential. Keep it safe.

Name of family/person \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Email (if desired) \_\_\_\_\_

Focus of visit	Date of visit	Time of visit
(e.g., delivery of communion cards, special congregational emphasis, crisis, pastoral care)		

Special needs and/or illnesses

Are there concerns about irregular worship attendance?

Are there people (adults/youth) who want to transfer membership and/or join communicant's class?

**The Session and Pastoral Care**

List personal life changes (e.g., moving to a new house, changing jobs, youngest child leaving home)

Concerns and issues raised during the visit of which the minister should be aware

Have you asked people about their desire to contribute to the worship, service and education of your congregation? To whom should this information be passed?

List concerns that you, as elder, may have about your visit with this family/person (e.g., you may feel that this person is better visited by another elder)



## Staying connected with children and youth

*"I want the church to be part of the important times in my life."*  
(a frequent response from a survey of young adults)

In 2002, Dorothy Henderson completed a survey of 240 young adults who grew up in mainline (mainly Presbyterian) churches. Most of these young adults were active in their congregation. The above quotation was a message they wanted passed on to elders. The young adults wanted the key milestones of their lives noted in some way by the church. Dorothy elaborates:

**Ah! Here's how elders can really shine.** As you do your regular pastoral care, remember that milestones are important. These include

- baptism
- birthdays
- starting school
- starting high school
- getting a driver's license
- confirmation
- graduating from high school
- beginning college or university or a first job
- turning 18, 19 or 21, whatever symbolizes "becoming an adult"
- graduating from college or university
- buying a first car or house
- getting the first "real" job

If, in the course of one person's life, the elder is able to connect in a meaningful way to these times, amazing things can happen. The young person would, undoubtedly, continue to feel connected to his or her faith community.

Sometimes elders and ministers feel that the pastoral care of their people is a heavy task and just one more thing to do in a busy life. But pastoral care need not be heavy or "extra." When our son, Dan, was a teenager, it was often challenging to get him out of bed on Sunday morning to attend worship with us. We persisted, though, often using creative bribes – Dan loved going to a coffee shop with us after church and that worked well. We all enjoyed it. At the coffee shop we talked about things that normally never came up. Invariably, we talked about what had happened at church. I was amazed that Dan often brought up the topic of what the minister had said to him as he greeted him at the door. It was usually nothing much, in my or my husband's opinion, but was a light-hearted teasing. "If you get any taller, we'll have to cut a hole in the top of the door frame," or "Were you wide awake today, or did you fall asleep during my sermon?" The thing that amazed me was how important those little interactions were to Dan and how important he felt to be noticed and included by his minister. Children and youth are connected to their minister and church by what seems like a tenuous thread, but it is, nevertheless, a very strong thread.

Staying connected intentionally is such an important pastoral task that I developed a pastoral care check list. (See next page.)

### Discussion

- As an elder or minister, what are your regular practices that remind your "sheep" that you are thinking of them at important times? List ways that these practices might be increased to include some of the items listed above.

### A milestones checklist for elders

Name:	
Contact info:	
Milestones	Action taken/Date done
Birth	
Baptism	
Birthday	
Starting school	
Starting high school	
Getting a driver's license	
Confirmation	
Graduating from high school	
Becoming an "adult" – 18, 19 or 21	
Graduating from college or university	
Buying a first car or house	
Getting the first "real" job	
Other...	

(Copy this page for each child/youth/young adult in your pastoral care district.)

## Spirituality and pastoral care

The role of elders as spiritual leaders is crucial in pastoral care.

Spirituality is often understood as an inward journey. Through prayer, awareness and study, one discovers how to walk with God and how God is present in this world.

Pastoral care is often understood as an outward activity. A pastoral caregiver offers a listening ear, thoughtful reflections and gentle acceptance.

What, then, do these two subjects have in common? Everything.

Good pastoral care comes from good spiritual care. How you care for someone will depend on how you feel God cares for them, and how you understand the way in which God cares for you. A heightened sense of one's spirituality increases the depth in which one engages in pastoral care.

How can you make sure that you are successfully combining these two practices, so that ultimately you are a spiritual caregiver?

- When you are praying, remember the names of the people in your district. Or when you are reading scripture, insert your name or the name of someone you are caring for. Example: *The Lord is Kathy's shepherd, she shall not want... Answer Mike when he calls O God. You gave him room when he was in distress.* Be gracious to him and hear his prayer. This might be a way for you to increase your awareness of how God is walking with you and those you care for.
- When visiting, make room for the Holy Spirit. Don't be uncomfortable with silences, unanswerable questions or emotional moments. Through these experiences, you and the person you are visiting can become aware of how God is present in your togetherness. When we are aware of God's presence, life finds meaning and healing occurs.

These are not necessarily easy activities to do when we are pressed for time or unsure of ourselves, but remember that the God who created you continues to work with you and through you.

*Written by Derek J. Macleod*

### Pastoral care

Pastoral care is about sharing God's love.

It is assuring each other of God's presence in our lives.

It is offering healing, forgiveness, encouragement.

We belong to God!

Pastoral care is for all ages.

It is about relationships –  
knowing names, knowing ages,  
knowing milestones, remembering stories.

Pastoral care is sending a care package.

Saying a prayer, sharing a scripture.

Supporting a need.

Pastoral care:

Sharing yourself –

Sharing God's love –

Sharing God's hope.

We belong to God!

## Prayers for elders (written by elders)

### **Before the visit** (for the elder)

*Read Philippians 4:6–7*

Dear Lord, I am nervous.  
Please fill me with your Holy Spirit and guide me.  
Help me to love this (family/person) and enjoy the visit.  
Help me to minister to them in Jesus' name. Amen.

### **First time visit**

Lord, we thank you for the opportunity  
to get to know each other better  
and discuss the work of your church.  
We ask your blessing on this house.  
Keep all members of this family safe  
in your loving care; in Jesus name. Amen.

### **Thanksgiving**

Dear Lord, thank you for the many blessings you have given to us.  
Thank you for listening to our prayers  
and being with us in the different situations we face each day.  
Thank you for what you have done for us. Amen.

### **Intercession**

Our God who is wisdom and care,  
we ask you to help us with the situation (at work, at home).  
We ask for your guidance and help  
as we seek to learn how to deal wisely with the situation. Amen.

### **Seeking God's will**

Dear Lord, we ask that you will show us your will for our life.  
We acknowledge to you, Lord, that we cannot live without your guidance  
and we ask you to lead us where you want us to go. Amen.

### **Prayer with, or for, the dying**

Thank you, God, for the many blessings you have given us.  
Thank you for the gift of your son Jesus.  
Lord, we ask for your gentleness as we remember things we have done wrong.  
We know we have neglected to do some important things,  
and we thank you for the knowledge that we are forgiven through Jesus.  
We ask for your blessing and your guidance.  
Be here with us, and guide us through this difficult time.  
Lord, we commit our lives into your hands and thank you for your care. Amen.

### **Prayer with a family after a death**

Thank you, God, for the life of \_\_\_\_\_.

Thank you for the many blessings we have received through (him/her).

We ask for your comfort and peace for those who are left behind.

We thank you for the assurance that \_\_\_\_\_ is free from all pain and suffering and is resting in the peace of your presence. Amen.

### **Hospital patient**

Healing God, we thank you for your presence with us.

Place your healing touch upon \_\_\_\_\_.

We pray that during this time of illness (he/she) will receive good care and treatment and recover soon.

We pray that the pain will be lessened and that you will comfort and encourage this family. Amen.

---

## **More prayers for elders**

---

### **Before visitation**

Gracious Lord, I pray that you will be with me and with those I visit today.

May I talk with them and listen in a way that is pleasing to you.

Through your Spirit, may I encourage them in the faith.

Help me today to be a good disciple for you.

In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

### **At a time of illness**

God of all comfort, be with \_\_\_\_\_ as (he/she) struggles with illness.

Uphold (him/her) in this time of need.

Send your strength to sustain your disciple at this difficult time.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Healer of all healers, be with \_\_\_\_\_ as (he/she) prepares for a hospital stay.

May you be with loved ones as they watch and wait.

We pray that you will make your presence known throughout this time. Amen.

### **For health**

Gracious God, we thank you for \_\_\_\_\_'s return from hospital.

We pray that you will be continually with your child as (he/she) continues to recover.

Through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen.

### **For the dying**

Merciful God, we pray that peace may be with \_\_\_\_\_ as (he/she) spends these last hours with us.

Give all of us your strength and understanding of eternal life as you draw your loved one near.

Help us to accept this separation

and to send your servant on (his/her) way with love. Amen.

---

**The Session and Pastoral Care**

---

Almighty God, we offer prayers for \_\_\_\_\_ and (his/her) family.  
Help them in this difficult time.  
May they have the assurance that \_\_\_\_\_ will know no more pain and suffering.  
Help us all to understand that \_\_\_\_\_ will have peace and joy with you.  
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

**For families**

Almighty and Everlasting God, we give thanks today for this family.  
We thank you for their love for and support of one another.  
We pray that your blessing will be upon this household.  
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

God our Redeemer, we thank you for the gift of our lives.  
We pray today for your continual guidance.  
We ask that you will be with those in this family who are sick and troubled.  
Today we remember \_\_\_\_\_.  
We pray this in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.

**Loneliness**

God of all comfort, we offer prayers today for \_\_\_\_\_  
who is feeling alone and discouraged.  
Let your light shine into (his/her) heart as an uplifting presence.  
May \_\_\_\_\_ be reassured of your love and of your everlasting arms.  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

God of all strength, help \_\_\_\_\_ to know that you walk with us.  
Make your unseen presence real to your disciple.  
Remind us that we belong to you and to each other.  
Help people in this congregation to provide what \_\_\_\_\_ needs  
to feel part of the Christian community.  
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

**After visitation**

Almighty God, thank you for being with me today.  
Let me not forget what I have heard and learned,  
and help me find ways to meet new needs of your people.  
I feel your presence every day.  
Please guide and strengthen me as I continue my work as your disciple.  
I pray this prayer through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen.

*Prayer is one of the ways we love one another. Pray for those in your district.*

## Scripture suggestions for pastoral visiting

### **In times of need**

Psalm 73:26b  
Romans 8:28

### **When someone is afraid**

Psalm 46:1  
Psalm 121:7–8  
Luke 2:10

### **When someone is discouraged**

Psalm 61:1–2  
Isaiah 26:3  
Isaiah 40:31  
John 8:12

### **When someone needs hope and comfort**

Psalm 91:9–11  
Matthew 18:12–14  
Psalm 23  
Psalm 34:6, 18  
John 3:16

### **When facing sickness**

Psalm 6:2  
Psalm 23:4  
Psalm 77  
3 John 2  
Romans 15:13

(Adapted from *Prayer Guide for  
Presbyterian Elders*, The Presbyterian  
Church in Canada, 1983)

### **When someone feels rejected**

Psalm 27:10  
John 16:33  
Colossians 1:11  
Hebrews 12:3

### **When facing grief**

John 11:25–26  
Romans 8:28  
Romans 8:38–39  
1 Thessalonians 4:13–14

### **Thanksgiving and support**

1 Peter 1:3–4  
2 Corinthians 13:13

### **Forgiveness**

Matthew 18:21–22  
Luke 7:36–48

### **In times of transition**

Proverbs 3:5–6



Photo © iStockphoto.com

## Pastoral care through the lifecycle

In my distress I called upon the Lord;  
to my God I cried for help.  
From the temple the Lord heard my voice,  
and my cry reached God's ears.  
(Psalm 18:6)

Pastoral care applies to people of *all ages* – and it is not just for people in crisis. It is the tender care of all the people entrusted to you in your congregation. The following pages look at pastoral care through the lifecycle.

It is tempting to boil down pastoral care to “the job of the minister” or to what happens when we “do the rounds with the communion cards.” But pastoral care includes a tender oversight for people of all ages – members and adherents. This care often reaches to the extended family, too. At its finest, pastoral care is sharing the warm heart of God.

After you read these short articles, you may use them in some of the following ways:

- Plan and conduct an elder’s retreat around pastoral care. (You may want to invite others in the congregation who do pastoral care or who are interested in pastoral care in the future.)
- Use each article in this section as a discussion and planning focus at session meetings.
- Use the articles as a prayer focus. Distribute them, one article at a time, at session meetings, and ask each person to pray in thanksgiving and intercession.

### Pastoral care is

- sharing and expressing God’s love in ways that say, “You are God’s beloved child”
- assuring each person that God is present in his or her life
- offering healing, forgiveness and encouragement
- being connected to a church community that cares
- being assured that we belong to a bigger picture – God’s universe

## 1. Pastoral care for children

Recently, children in a church group were asked to identify things that worried or bothered them, or made them angry. The list of problems they produced was overwhelming. It included, "not being liked, moving away from my friends, divorce, somebody dying, stealing and cheating at school, being lonely, war and fighting all the time, God not liking me, being mad at my parents, my parents being mad at me." The list made us realize that we would have to break through the popular culture's idyllic and sentimental portrayal of childhood as carefree and sunny.

### **We asked the children what churches can do to provide pastoral care.**

When the children were asked to identify their worries, they were also asked what churches could do. Here's what the children said: "Listen to us more. Talk less. Be honest in answering questions. Pay more attention to children. Don't take sides if there is a fight."

A six-year-old wearily told the adult who was interviewing her that she didn't understand why people at church didn't know her name and didn't stop to talk to her at coffee hour after worship. "After all," she said, "I made decorations for Christmas and people didn't say thank you." Most of the children expressed similar feelings about being ignored or not taken seriously by the churches from which they came.

An amazing insight! Elders can improve pastoral care of children just by noticing them and talking with them. And it will cost no budget money! It just takes some consciousness raising and an intention to include.

### **We asked churches what they would like to do to provide pastoral care.**

Here are some of their responses:

- Remember that children need a variety of nurturing relationships in their lives. Their parents can't do it alone.
- Organize events that bring children and adults together – picnics, winter chili picnics, potluck dinners with activities, games nights.
- Learn the names of all the children in the church. Talk to them at church and in the community.
- Make worship and the building "child-friendly."
- Include children in pastoral visits. Ask for them by name when you arrive at the home.
- Remember them in a time of crisis. At the time of death, for instance, ask them what they liked about their grandmother, grandfather, etc. Ask them to draw a picture of the loved one and slip it in the coffin. Assure them of God's presence.

### **As a session:**

- Make a list of things that your congregation could do to provide pastoral care for children.
- Discuss and choose a few to begin with.
- Talk about steps you will take to make this happen.

Although not written from a Christian perspective, the book *How to Talk to Your Kids About Really Important Things*, by Charles Schaefer and Theresa Foy DiGeronimo (Jossey-Bass, 1994), is excellent and covers many contemporary topics. The book *God, Kids, & Us*, by Janet Marshall Eibner and Susan Graham Walker (Morehouse, 1996), has an excellent chapter on pastoral care of children.

## 2. Pastoral care for youth

"I wish there were someone in the church who could speak to my son. He's very angry at his father and at me because of the divorce. I can feel it every time he comes near me. He needs someone to be on his side, to talk to him about what's going on. And there's no one in my family who can do it. Everyone's taken sides!"

"I know she is my granddaughter, but we have just drifted apart. I don't think I'm that important in her life. All she does, when she is not at school, is talk on the phone with her friends, sleep or watch TV. Last week she got a nose ring and that really bothered me. I just don't know what to say to her anymore."

Two years ago, our Presbyterian Youth in Mission (YIM) sponsored a trip to Nicaragua. At the training weekend, one of the adult advisors went to the airport to pick up a young man from Saskatchewan and was surprised to meet a teen wearing army fatigues, long chains draped from his pockets, army boots, earrings and a Mohawk haircut. As the weekend went on, this young man was eloquent about his need to be accepted for who he was, not how he looked. It was a lesson to all of us. Young people are often shy and frequently not nearly as verbally gifted as this young man. It is a time of experimentation and breaking away from family and church patterns, but youth still say, "Love me. Accept me. Enjoy me. Give me guidance. Walk with me from time to time."

### Things to talk about together as elders:

- List the names of all the teens who are significant in your life. List things about them that you enjoy. List things that make you uneasy.
- List ways that you can reach out to these same youth. The list may range from giving money for a community youth program to praying for that teen each day.
- Ask yourselves as a session, "How youth-friendly is our congregation?" If it is not very youth-friendly, ask, "What is stopping us from making it youth-friendly? How would things have to change?"

In March 2001, the general secretary of the Presbyterian-Reformed Church in Cuba visited the national church offices of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. At a staff reception held in his honour, Dr. Carlos Camps told of the unusual situation they have in their churches in Cuba. Because Christianity was not encouraged or allowed until recently, the churches now consist of older people with a memory for Christianity and young children and youth with little or no Christian memory. This is not unlike many of our Presbyterian churches in Canada.

### As a session, discuss:

- Is our congregation like this? How can people with a long Christian memory share with others who have none? Surprisingly, Dr. Camps suggested that the most important thing to do in this situation is for the elders to listen to the youth. Do you agree?

The book *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry*, by Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster (Upper Room, 1998), offers guidance and support for those who seek to mentor and guide youth. If you feel out of touch with teen culture, pick up the book *Understanding Today's Youth Culture*, by Walt Mueller (Tyndale House, 1999). It gives good insight into the culture of today's youth.

### 3. Pastoral care for students away from home

Congregations are responsible for the pastoral care of all their members, even when they leave home to attend school in another location.

While college or university is challenging and exciting, it can often be lonely. In the stress of mid-term exams and end-term papers students wonder if anyone is thinking of them.

The following was suggested by Janet DeWolfe, who was at the time minister at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Petrolia, Ontario.

At times when students may be stressed or missing their family or hometown friends (mid-term or final exams, Thanksgiving or Advent), assemble and send some of the following items in a decorated shoebox:

- a copy of the congregational newsletter
- a copy of the hometown paper
- crossword puzzles
- homemade cookies (packed in a plastic container)
- peanuts
- popcorn
- granola bars
- chewing gum
- jelly beans (attach a jelly bean prayer)
- hot apple drink (packaged)
- hot chocolate (packaged)
- Cup-a-Soup
- macaroni and cheese
- canned pudding
- toothbrush and toothpaste
- tissue, face soap, shampoo
- pens and pencils
- a container of sand from a local beach
- at least one personal letter written by someone in the congregation who shared past experience and connection with the student

Assure the students that you will be delighted to see them in church when they are home. Encourage them to worship with a congregation in their university/college town.

Some members of the congregation may prepare the box while others may donate money to provide the contents. Elders may work with younger teens on this project.

**As a session, discuss:**

- Can you do this for students away from home in your congregation?
- Whom can you identify to do this?

## 4. Pastoral care for young adults

Young adults in your congregation are varied – some are single, some are married with children, some are living with others but not married. Some are professionals or wanna-be professionals, some are trades people, many are struggling at McJobs (the trade word for minimum wage jobs). Most people define young adults as those who are between the ages of 18 and 30.

In 2000–2001, our church focused on the Year of Children, Youth and Young Adults. During that time I [Dorothy Henderson] often invited adults to compare their childhood to that of children today. They did the same for their life as adolescents and young adults. We concluded, over and over, that the biggest change has been in the area of young adult life. Many of us who are in our 40s, 50s and 60s say that, as young adults, we did these things – we knew what we wanted to do in life and trained for it, bought our first car, got married, bought a house, had children, joined the church, joined community clubs. For many young adults today, the reality is very different.

### How, then, can we support young adults in our congregations?

- Expect a big variation. “Young adults” are not a uniform group. Expect to meet them and respond to them on individual levels.
- Be interested in their lives. Young adults today do not easily “buy in” to institutional life. Be understanding of that. If young adults are to become engaged in church life, they will want and need to see that it has relevance to



their life. Want to find out about their life? Say to a young adult, "I'd love to take you out to dinner. Why don't you take me where you usually hang out? Hey, I'm adventurous. Just take me where you usually go." You may be pleasantly surprised at how eager they are to share their hang-out spot with you, and you will learn a lot about the milieu in which they function.

- Expect that young adults are peer-oriented. Despite their differences, young adults love to get together with others their age. And often, this is around food.
- Many young adults – but not all of them – return to the church when they have a child. This is an important moment in their life. Note it carefully and give them as much support as possible.
- Young adults are full of adventure. They want to travel the world. They want to win the golf tournament. They want to study in Australia. Encourage that wonderful spirit. Can you provide opportunities in your community for other young adults to come to you to do a service project? Can you support your own young adults in their quest for adventure? For the young adults who are delighted to stay at home, can you provide social times/young adult Bible study/young parent study?
- If young adults in your congregation have children, do all you can to offer parental support. Offer a child-rearing course. Offer a weekend-away service. Give Bible storybooks. Offer good Sunday school. Welcome babies, toddlers and children in worship.

**As a session:**

- List specific young adults in your church family. What do you know about them? What can you do to help them stay connected with God and the church? Why have so many churches given up on young adults?
- It used to be said that young adults will "come back" when they have children. Has that been the case in your community? If not, why?

## 5. Pastoral care for middle adults

In many ways, the middle adult years are the most difficult for many in our current society. People in these years have teenagers at home and young adults they are helping to get established, carry heavy responsibility at work, and have parents they are supporting in their senior years. Middle age has been called “the sandwich generation.”

For many of us as elders, we are the “sandwich generation,” caring for children, grandchildren and parents. Middle adults also carry heavy responsibility for church programming, community service, and financial support – both for our church and for our growing and grown adult children.

### A checklist of how congregations might provide pastoral care for middle adults

Check off pastoral care ideas that might work in your congregation:

- At least once a year, provide a restful but stimulating and energizing weekend for middle adults. Recruit leadership from outside the congregation so participants will not have leadership responsibility.
- Poll the middle adults in your congregation to find out the best time for meetings. Many middle-aged adults are pulled in all directions by time commitments and they appreciate being asked when meetings would work best for them. (Without small child commitments, some middle adults appreciate early morning meetings. Others, where geography permits, like brown-bag lunch meetings.)
- Since middle adults are often the ones most likely to be offering pastoral care, do a training program or event at least once a year. Even if they are not elders, middle adults will appreciate learning new ways to care for their parents, their young adult children, their small grandchildren.
- For middle adults who are providing pastoral care for others in the congregation, ask in which form they would like to visit – personal visits, telephone visits, writing cards or notes, sending email messages. (Some busy middle adults may hesitate to do pastoral care because they think it must all be done by personal visits, which may take an entire evening.)
- Once a year, host an appreciation dinner or lunch for the people who do pastoral care in your congregation. Pastoral care is a quiet, behind-the-scenes ministry and sometimes people wonder if anyone notices or appreciates their efforts. Give each person a small gift – a flower, a personal thank you card, a mug with a heart on it.

#### As a session:

- List ideas for pastoral care for middle adults that would work well in your congregation.
- What steps do you need to take to put some of these ideas into action?

---

## 6. Pastoral care for the sick

---

### Nine guidelines for carefulness

Illness and recovery from surgery is always difficult – especially in our long Canadian winters. If you are responsible for pastoral care for sick people, here are helpful guidelines.

1. Try to obtain accurate information about the person's sickness or surgery before visiting. This will help you gauge what to do. For instance, visiting a senior with a bad cold is quite different from visiting a young man with terminal cancer.
2. Before you visit, evaluate the needs of the ill person and his or her family. Is the person receptive to a visit? If so, how often? Is a phone call or card more appropriate? (Not all ill people appreciate a visitor.) A family member or close friend is most likely to know the personal circumstances and likes and dislikes of the ill person. Unwanted help, no matter how well-meaning, adds stress to a patient's life.
3. Even if the person does not want a personal visit, try other forms of communication. Recently, when I was undergoing chemotherapy, I often felt nauseated and tired. A weekly card from someone who had also gone through chemotherapy always lifted my spirits.
4. If the ill person does not want or need a personal visit, other family members may. Invite family to talk by asking a general opening question like "How are things going with you during your mother's illness?"
5. If someone in your congregation has a background in health care or if they have been through a similar illness, that person usually makes an ideal visitor. Ill people like to know that others have survived or seen people survive. It is important, though, to refrain from giving medical advice.
6. Encourage the ill person to think ahead to something positive. Illness and isolation can be very discouraging. I recall, after the birth of our third child, thinking that I would never recover from fatigue and the worrisome head colds that plagued our older children. When someone from the church visited, she said, "We can't wait until the new baby is ready to come to church." That statement – so simple – gave me such hope and anticipation. I knew that my fatigue and discouragement would pass and soon I would join others at church. Even if the illness is more serious, there is always something to be hopeful about. Help the visited person feel that hope.
7. Offer to do errands for the ill person. Offer to clean the house or do the laundry. Offer to drive the person to the doctor or medical appointment.
8. Be sensitive about the length of visits. Some ill people like the distraction of engaging conversation, but others prefer short, frequent visits.
9. Offer to pray with the ill person, asking for God's healing presence.

#### As a session:

- Copy this article, then cut the guidelines into strips.
- Ask group members to choose a strip and read it aloud to others.
- Pause after each strip and ask questions such as these: Are there examples like this in our congregation? Does this remind you of a situation in your life? How can our congregation offer a healing presence in a situation such as this?

## 7. Pastoral care with the elderly

### Ten guidelines for tenderness

1. Some elderly people love a long, chatty visit. Others find that tiring. Watch for clues. If, after a good conversation, you stir to go and the elderly person begins another topic of conversation, this is probably a good clue that a longer visit is not only acceptable but welcome.
2. When you are visiting, remember that the content of the conversation is often less important than the human contact. Be reassuring and touch a hand gently. This will both comfort and improve the quality of life for those struggling with confusion and dementia. In the last week when my mother was dying from Alzheimer's disease, I spent most of my week sitting by her bed with my hand resting on her arm. Two days before she died, I came down with a dreadful gastro-intestinal flu and had to be away from her bedside. My brothers and sisters sat vigil. When I returned, my sister rushed to tell me that they believed Mom was dying. I hurried to her bedside, put my hand on her arm and was privileged to be there when she went to be with God. Touch is more important than we believe.
3. When visiting, look at photos of the person's family. This can be reassuring and pleasurable. If the person is incapacitated in body only, this will help them feel as if they are still part of the family circle. If the person suffers from Alzheimer's or a stroke, it will help them stay connected even if their mental capacities are diminished.



Photo © Dnuro / iStockphoto.com

4. Read aloud. Read from newspapers, magazines, short stories and poetry.
5. When you visit, take along a short video which may be of interest to the person. My father, for instance, was very fond of *The Sound of Music* and Julie Andrews. When he had a stroke, he was not able to watch the whole movie, but he thoroughly enjoyed parts of it.
6. Tidy the person's personal space. When I visited my mother in her Alzheimer's ward, I always spent five or ten minutes watering and fertilizing her plants. I dusted her windowsill and tidied her bedside table. She seemed reassured by these small gestures.
7. If the person is able, enjoy small walks with a purpose. Go to the kitchen together and make tea. Walk to the garden and look at the petunias. Walk to a sunny porch and enjoy the warmth. Walk to the back deck and make a snowball.
8. Give a little personal care. Even though my mother had Alzheimer's disease, she loved to have her hair combed. Even though my father had a stroke, he loved to have his hands caressed with cream. Once, when I was visiting my mother at her "day away" program, I was amazed at how everyone in the Alzheimer's unit enjoyed having their hair groomed, their moustaches trimmed, lipstick and face cream applied. All of us want to feel attractive and cared for.
9. Acknowledge, but do not give in to, despair. Terry, a home care worker, said that Bernice always said to her each day, "I want to die. What do I have to live for?" Terry listened to this day after day and finally she said, "Bernice. Not today. We have too much to do today." Bernice was shocked by the response, but it was a turning point for her. She began to work together with Terry to provide a better living condition for herself. More importantly, she began to look beyond herself to other people's needs.
10. Pray for each elderly person you visit. Remember them as young and vital. In your eyes they may seem diminished, but in their mind they are a child... a youth... a young adult... a middle-aged person. Enjoy them for what they have been as well as what they are today. Pray. And ask God to tenderly care for them.

**As a session:**

(Prior to using this article, one or two elders might look through magazines or photo albums for pictures of elderly people – walking, visiting, holding a child, crying, laughing.)

- Take turns reading the ten guidelines for tenderness.
- Ask people to pick a picture and explain why they chose it. (Many people will say that it reminds them of a beloved family member or neighbour.)
- Discuss specific ways in which your congregation can improve pastoral care with the elderly.

# The Session and Worship

The Book of Forms (111) places responsibility for worship with session. It also clearly differentiates the roles and responsibilities of ruling elders and of ministers regarding worship. This is dealt with in this resource under “The Session and the Minister” (p. 154).

The following pages will help elders understand how worship is shaped in the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition and how worship reflects the year cycle.

## Fourfold order of worship

From its beginning, the Christian church has called its people to meet together on the Lord’s Day to worship God. Worship gives Christians an opportunity to praise, listen and respond to God.

Most congregations organize their worship into four parts – gathering, listening, thanking and going – as follows:

### 1. Called to worship

Through scripture, hymns and prayers of praise, the community is **called to worship** together before God. In the Reformed tradition this also includes a **prayer of confession** of sin and an **assurance of pardon**. This may be followed by the passing of **the peace**, which is an act of unity and reconciliation in the name of Christ.

### 2. The word proclaimed

The living word is proclaimed through the reading of the scriptures and the preaching of the gospel. A **prayer of illumination** may precede the readings or the sermon.

The **scripture readings** usually include the Old Testament (the Hebrew scriptures) and the New Testament. The reading or singing of a Psalm is an appropriate response to the reading from the Old Testament. The New Testament readings often include both the epistles and the gospels.

**The sermon:** Sound preaching has long been a strong tradition in Reformed churches. Rooted in scripture, faithful preaching confronts the people with the judging-saving word and bears witness to God’s continuing activity in the church and the world.

### 3. Response to the word

The people respond to the word they have just heard through song, confession of faith and/or prayer. A **creed** such as the Apostles’ Creed, or a statement from *Living Faith*, may be said in unison. **Prayers of the people** are included in this section – both intercession and thanksgiving. The **sacrament of baptism** may be celebrated as part of the response. **The offering** or the presentation of gifts is an active, important part of the response, as people give to God out of the blessings they have first received from God.

#### 4. The dismissal

The dismissal includes a **charge**, based on scripture, and a challenge to the people to go out and live the gospel, followed by a **benediction** or blessing as they are sent forth. A **postlude** continues the outward movement. **Amens** are sung or said as a whole congregation.

Adapted from *The Book of Common Worship*, which was built upon earlier similar publications and approved by the 117th General Assembly, 1991.

*The Book of Common Worship* is “but one step in the slow and continuing process of giving shape to liturgies which aid the people of God in worship of their creator and redeemer. As with its predecessors, texts are drawn from the ancient church, the Scriptures, the liturgies of the Reformation era as well as the texts that are emerging in the liturgical renewal of the latter part of the twentieth century.” It “is offered to the Church as a tool to aid the people in the worship of God.”

– Introduction, *The Book of Common Worship*

## The church year cycle

The church year is divided into seasons that follow the story of the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension, and reign of our Lord Jesus Christ. This cycle is referred to as a liturgical calendar. Scripture readings following this cycle are referred to as lectionary readings.

### The church year cycle begins with Advent

#### Advent

For Christians, the Christian year begins, not on January 1, but with Advent – four Sundays before Christmas. Advent is the time when Christians prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus. We recall those who waited and prepared for a promised Christ child: the prophet Isaiah; Mary, his mother; and John the Baptist. We also think of God’s promises that are yet to be revealed under the reign of Christ in “the age to come.” We prepare with worship, prayer, singing, Bible study, fellowship and service to others. Many congregations use an Advent wreath, lighting one candle each Sunday in Advent.

#### Christmas Eve

Christmas Eve services are held in most churches, telling the story of Jesus’ birth and its meaning for this world. As we welcome the birth of Jesus, we welcome God’s light breaking into the world’s darkness. We light a Christ candle in the centre of the Advent wreath as a sign of Christ’s birth – Christ coming into the world. Worshipers often light their own candles, signifying that each is now a bearer of the light that comes into the world at Christmas.

---

**The Session and Worship**


---

**Christmas Day**

Christmas Day is, for Christians, a day of celebrating that the Messiah was born to the Virgin Mary. Christmas is a celebration of God joining us in a small, vulnerable child. This is a thing of great mystery – we ponder, why did God come to us as a newborn child?

**Christmas Season**

During the “12 days of Christmas” we reflect on the mystery of Christmas and the Light that has entered the world.

**Epiphany**

For Christians in the Western tradition, Epiphany begins on January 6 – on the twelfth day after Christmas. The focus is on the magi (traditionally celebrating various races of humanity) and the universality of the gospel. The season of Epiphany leads us to the Sunday called “Transfiguration.”

**Transfiguration**

Scripture records that, after a ministry of sermons, stories and conversation, Jesus was transfigured on a mountain before his disciples. He appeared in dazzling whiteness with two heavenly figures – Moses and Elijah. This is a mystery to be contemplated. The miracle is not that Jesus changed but that the disciples saw clearly the glory and majesty of Christ.

**Lent**

Our baptism is a symbolic dying and rising with Christ. In Lent, we turn with Christ toward these events in his life. Along the way, the Spirit gives us opportunity to redirect and refocus our lives, and more fully realize our baptismal identity.

**Palm/Passion Sunday**

Holy week is framed by glory – the glory of Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem and the glory offered by God in the resurrected Christ. But the glory offered by people waving their palm branches soon changes to a road of suffering and sorrow. The coming week is a roller coaster of deep emotion and dramatic events as we follow Christ along this road.

**Maundy Thursday**

The name comes from the Latin *mandatum novum* (“new commandment” John 13:34) – from the story of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet, carrying the message of radical servanthood. Some congregations have a foot washing at their Maundy Thursday service. Very often they celebrate the Lord’s Supper, commemorating the Last Supper Christ had with his disciples and the commandment to love one another.

**Good Friday**

On this day, we remember the death of Christ for the sake of the world. Church services often include readings and meditations on the seven last words of Jesus. Though we know that Jesus will be raised from the dead, this is a day to remember that new life comes at great cost and by way of the cross.

### **Easter Day**

The celebration of the resurrection of Christ is the oldest and greatest feast of the Christian church. He is alive! God has spoken the last word on death – and that word is LIFE. The joy of resurrection life permeates the Easter service. The resurrected Christ reminds his followers and seeks them out to tell them the good news. All creation can live again through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Alleluia!

### **Easter Season**

Easter falls on the first Sunday after the full moon following the vernal equinox – March 21. The Easter season lasts for seven weeks after Easter and leads us to Pentecost, the gift of God’s Holy Spirit, on the 50th day. The Easter season is a time to reflect on the story of Jesus’ life in the gospels. It is also a good time to venture into something new in mission – living out the story of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### **Pentecost Day**

Pentecost crowns the great 50 days of Eastertide. At Pentecost, Christ’s body, the church, is born by the power of the Holy Spirit and equipped for service and witness. The story (Acts 2) of the Holy Spirit descending on the people in the form of something like tongues of fire is powerful and dramatic. As a result, a community is formed that is empowered to love and serve in ways beyond their imaginings.

### **Pentecost Season**

This season, between Pentecost Sunday and Advent, is commonly known as Ordinary Time. The original meaning of this Ordinary Time seems not to have the meaning of mundane or common. Instead, it meant “counted time” – the time counted between Pentecost and Advent. This is a time for growth, a time to reflect on how to live under God’s spirit, a time to focus on mission.

### **Trinity Sunday**

On this Sunday, we explore and celebrate the mystery of God in three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Trinity is so compelling as an expression of divine identity that it has become the common reference point for all Christians. When we invoke the name of the Trinity, we honour both the mystery of God that we never fully understand, as well as the person of God we may come to know intimately.

### **Reign of Christ Sunday**

The cycle that completes the church year centres on Christ as both the *Alpha* and *Omega*, the beginning and the end. The reign of Christ over all things is affirmed, a reign both just and compassionate. To trust in a sovereign Christ is to look for signs of his reign in everything in our lives, the big and the small. This Sunday falls on the last Sunday after Pentecost, and is a fitting crown to the church year. The following Sunday we begin again at the beginning of the cycle – Advent.

Selections taken from the brochure “Telling Time in the Church Year Cycle.”

This very helpful brochure may be downloaded from the PCC website for use in congregations ([presbyterian.ca/download/1154](http://presbyterian.ca/download/1154)).

## Sundays in the church year

1st Sunday of Advent (L)	Fourth Sunday before December 25 (first Sunday of church year)
2nd Sunday of Advent (L)	Third Sunday before December 25
3rd Sunday of Advent (L)	Second Sunday before December 25
4th Sunday of Advent (L)	Sunday preceding December 25
Planned Giving Sunday (S)	Any Sunday in the year <sup>1</sup> (Ascension Sunday)
Theological Colleges Sunday (S)	Any Sunday in the year <sup>2</sup>
Epiphany (L)	First Sunday in January
Baptism of the Lord (L)	Second Sunday in January
Transfiguration Sunday (L)	Sunday preceding Ash Wednesday
PWS&D Sunday (M)	First Sunday in February <sup>3</sup>
Passion/Palm Sunday (L)	Sunday preceding Easter Sunday
Easter Sunday (L)	First Sunday after the first 14th day of the moon that is on or after the ecclesiastical vernal equinox
Mission Awareness Sunday (M)	Last Sunday in April <sup>4</sup>
Ascension Sunday (L)	Fifth Sunday after Easter Sunday
Pentecost Sunday (L)	Seventh Sunday after Easter Sunday
Christian Family Sunday (C)	Second Sunday in May
Trinity Sunday (L)	First Sunday after Pentecost
Healing & Reconciliation Sunday (M)	Sunday preceding May 26, which is National Day of Healing & Reconciliation <sup>5</sup>
General Assembly Sunday (C)	First Sunday in June
Aboriginal Sunday (M)	Sunday preceding June 21 <sup>6</sup>
Presbyterians Sharing Sunday (M)	Last Sunday in September <sup>7</sup>
World Communion Sunday (C)	First Sunday in October
Thanksgiving Sunday (C)	Second Sunday in October
Reformation Sunday (C)	Sunday preceding October 31
Remembrance Day Sunday (C)	Sunday preceding November 11
World AIDS Sunday (C)	Sunday preceding December 1
Reign of Christ Sunday (L)	Sunday preceding first Sunday in Advent (last Sunday of church year)

L – Liturgical

M – Mandated by General Assembly

C – Common usage

S – Suggested

1 133rd General Assembly (2007)

2 134th General Assembly (2008)

3 123rd General Assembly (1997)

4 125th General Assembly (1999)

5 132nd General Assembly (2006)

6 130th General Assembly (2004)

7 123rd General Assembly (1997)

# The Session and Christian Education

In our Canadian Presbyterian tradition, the *Book of Forms* is very clear.

“The session is responsible for providing for the program of Christian education for persons of all ages in order that they may be confronted by the gospel, may grow in faith, participate in the life of the Christian community, and be active witnesses to Christ in the world. The session is responsible for the administration, oversight, support and evaluation of the total Christian education program of the congregation within the confessed doctrine of the church as set forth in the preamble to the ordination questions” (*Book of Forms* 112, 112.1).

It is important for sessions to take this seriously, since many sessions leave Christian education decisions to Sunday school teachers. Paying attention to Christian education communicates to everyone that the church cares deeply about what is being taught in your congregation.



Photo © Monkey Business Images / Dreamstime.com

## A checklist for elders

Here is a checklist to assist elders in this aspect of the congregation's ministry. (If some don't apply to you, just ignore them.)

If some of the boxes cannot be checked but you think that the ideas need to be implemented, have some conversation about how to move toward this goal.

1. We provide educational opportunities for all ages.	
2. The children, youth and adults in our congregation use educational material that has been approved by our denomination. (See <i>Curriculum Chart 2009–2010</i> .)	
3. We provide an adequate budget for the support of Christian education programs, and this budget is reviewed yearly.	
4. The offerings that children and youth bring to Sunday school and youth programs are used for mission and outreach, not to purchase their educational material.	
5. As a session, we assume responsibility for the recruitment and appointment of teachers.	
6. We use the <i>Leading with Care</i> risk assessment tool to determine the risk levels of various ministries. (See <i>Leading with Care</i> , p. 21.)	
7. We ensure that all teachers/leaders comply with safety requirements, including police records checks, as described in <i>Leading with Care: A Policy for Ensuring a Climate of Safety for Children, Youth and Vulnerable Adults in The Presbyterian Church in Canada</i> .	
8. At the beginning of the program year, we have a commissioning litany for teachers and leaders during worship.	
9. We work hard to provide family educational opportunities, to see what our congregation does as a supplement to the Christian nurture provided by parents.	
10. We provide training opportunities for all our teachers and leaders. <sup>4</sup>	
11. Our educational programs are holistic. We provide opportunities to grow in knowledge (understand the faith) as well as opportunities to serve (live the faith). Our goal is to have a living faith that seeks understanding.	
12. At least once a year we honour our teachers and educational leaders.	
13. As elders, we make an effort to get to know the children by name and encourage them ourselves.	
14. We do an annual review and evaluation of our educational programs.	

<sup>4</sup> The Presbyterian Church in Canada offers two excellent training programs – TLC (Teacher/Leader Courses), at a minimal cost, and *Opening Doors to Discipleship*, a free online program.

## Some things to discuss as elders

- Read this quote from *The Active Life*, by Parker Palmer (Jossey-Bass, 1999).

I feel sorry for teachers who are required to spell out precise “learning objectives” long before a class begins so that they can measure their own “effectiveness.” I feel sorry for their students, too. Education dominated by preconceived images of what must be learned can hardly be educational. Authentic teaching and learning requires a live encounter with the unexpected. An element of suspense and surprise, an evocation of that which we did not know until it happened. If these elements are not present, we may be training or indoctrinating students, but we are not educating them. In any arena of action – rearing children, counseling people, repairing machines, writing books – right action depends on yielding our images of particular outcomes to the organic realities of ourselves, the other, and the adventure of action itself.

What advantages do churches have in regard to teaching?

What is the difference between training or indoctrinating and educating?

- Tell others about a positive learning experience you have had in the church – as a child, youth or adult.
- For years there was a large banner hanging in the central hall at the PCC national office. It read, “The Presbyterian Church in Canada: a thinking church with a tender heart.” If you were to create an educational motto for your congregation, what would it be?
- Have some fun making a top-ten list! As a session, list the ten most important things that people learn at church. Post this list where others can enjoy it.

## Two ways to learn: Teacher/Leader Courses and *Opening Doors to Discipleship*

Part of the responsibility of elders is to ensure that the teachers and leaders of the congregation have opportunities to learn and grow. Our denomination offers two main training programs – TLC (Teacher/Leader Courses) and *Opening Doors to Discipleship*.

---

### Teacher/Leader Courses (TLC)

---

The goal of TLC is to educate and nurture teachers, leaders and parents in The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

#### What is TLC?

- TLC is a series of one-day workshops offered by experienced facilitators who know our church.

## The Session and Christian Education



### What is important in TLC?

- TLC is a Canada-wide, flexible program. Courses may happen anywhere in Canada.
- Teaching and leading is a ministry. Many people have gifts for this ministry and these gifts may be enhanced with training.
- The focus of TLC is on demonstration, practice and reflection.
- TLC expresses a deep commitment to excellence in the teaching ministry of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.
- TLC is committed to addressing both small and large educational ministries.
- Participants may register to begin working on a Teacher/Leader Certificate by completing courses offered by TLC.

### Who can participate in TLC?

The following groups will find TLC courses tailored to their specific needs:

- church school teachers and administrators
- youth leaders
- Christian education committee members
- clergy
- parents
- special event leaders
- people needing specific help or people wanting to encourage spiritual growth

### How does TLC work?

TLC programs are organized by congregations, presbytery committees, or any other group of people interested in providing training and encouragement for people involved in nurturing faith.

The local organizers of a TLC event choose workshops from an extensive list of available workshops, provide hospitality and gather at least 20 participants interested in learning. A TLC Advisory Team of the national church helps the organizers identify leadership and provides honoraria for workshop leaders. The workshop

leaders provide information and experiences that help the group to explore the chosen topics. Participants share their questions, their insights and their own experiences, enriching the event for everyone.

### **Where and when are the courses offered?**

TLC events can take place anywhere in Canada. Smaller communities may find it helpful to invite ecumenical neighbours in order to meet the goal of 20 participants. TLC events can occur anytime, but most groups find that a Saturday program works best.

### **Is there a cost?**

Hosts set a modest fee for their own event. Many organizing groups charge a fee of \$10, which offsets the cost of lunch and snacks. Workshops leaders (plus their travel) are paid out of the national TLC budget.

### **What TLC courses are available?**

There are over 50 workshop topics available to congregations, covering matters of planning and administration and skills development. A list of these is available on the church website ([presbyterian.ca/ministry/training/tlc](http://presbyterian.ca/ministry/training/tlc)).

---

## **Opening Doors to Discipleship**

---

*Opening Doors to Discipleship* is a series of four online courses in the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition to help teachers and leaders equip themselves to be faithful teachers and leaders.

### **The courses are:**

- Course A: Teaching Skills
- Course B: Bible Background
- Course C: Presbyterian/Reformed Faith
- Course D: Discipleship

Each course has 12 sessions, which should, ideally, be done with a Learning Group from the congregation. The Learning Group would consist of the minister, teachers, interested congregational members, parents or friends.

The courses address questions such as these:

- How can I tell a story and use activities in such a gripping way that my students long to be disciples of Christ?
- How can I communicate the broad sweep of biblical stories so that learners yearn to enter them?
- How can I speak with passion and enthusiasm about the particular “flavour” of Christianity which we identify as Presbyterian/Reformed?

To enrol in the courses and for more information, see the church website ([presbyterian.ca/resources/online/2785](http://presbyterian.ca/resources/online/2785)). Or you may link directly to the course website at [odtd.net](http://odtd.net).

# The Session and Stewardship

The session's responsibility for stewardship is laid out in the *Book of Forms*.

"The session is responsible for all aspects of stewardship and mission, both spiritual and material, within the congregation" (113).

This responsibility is then addressed in a number of subsections, including the following:

"The session will keep before the congregation the life and work of the church around the world, encouraging participation in that work through prayer, service and gifts" (113.1).

"The session will seek to ensure that the congregation in its commission to spread the gospel among all persons is contributing according to its ability, both for the maintenance of its own witness and ministry to the community and for the mission of the whole church" (113.5).

"The session is responsible for all decisions relating to stewardship, including how and when the financial needs of the church at all levels are to be presented to the congregation so that the programs of life and mission may be supported adequately" (113.6).

The interrelationship between our stewardship and our mission is evident in the above statements. The two exist together – one feeds the other; one grows out of the other. The above statements also clearly place the responsibility for the financial support of the church's life and mission with the session.

The articles in this section are intended to help the session as it provides oversight and direction for the congregation in its financial stewardship and as it nurtures a spirit of gratitude and generosity in its members.

**"The congregations who do the best in church finances have a rich, full, abiding compassion for mission. They are motivated by a theology of service, not a theology of survival. Their compelling, driving spirit is one of giving, serving, loving mission."**

**– Kennon Callahan,  
*Effective Church Finances***

## Marks of a generous congregation

### 1. Stewardship education is about nurturing a SPIRIT OF GRATITUDE AND GENEROSITY

The words of the psalmist, "What return can I make to the Lord for all that the Lord has given me?" (Psalm 116), encapsulate two fundamental aspects of stewardship:

- **Gratitude:** Thankfulness is at the heart of the Christian journey. To know God is to be thankful. It is to know at the outset that everything comes from God – everything, even the breath we breathe. Stewardship education leads people to a deeper recognition that "The earth is the Lord's and all that is therein."
- **Generosity:** We need to give, not primarily because the church needs money, but because we are made in the image of God, the great Giver. We reach our fullest potential as we learn to give. It is a recurring message throughout the Bible, that in giving we are blessed. Stewardship education helps people to understand giving as an expression of faith and helps them to joyfully share the many things they have freely received.

Giving in the church so easily becomes a matter of duty and obligation. Not that duty and obligation are necessarily bad, but when they are divorced from joy and a recognition of God's blessings, we miss the mark. When all the stewardship talk focuses on paying the congregation's bills, the central aspect of stewardship is sidestepped. Our *stewardship* (what we *do*) comes out of our identity as *stewards* (who and whose we *are*).

The following famous quotation sums it up well:  
 "Stewardship is everything I do  
 after I say I believe."

**Ask yourselves:** Do our stewardship initiatives lead people to a sense of gratitude and generosity? Do we do year-round stewardship education or do we only talk about stewardship when we fear there will not be enough money to pay the bills? Are people being helped to grow in their faith through giving?

**"Generosity is the virtue that emerges as the antidote for money's destructive grip on our lives and spirits. Generosity emerges from gratitude."**

– J. Hudnut-Beumler,  
*Generous Saints*

### 2. The importance of MISSION in giving

It has been said that money follows mission. Kennon Callahan, in *Giving and Stewardship in an Effective Church* (Jossey-Bass, 1992, p. 4), writes about two kinds of congregations that never have enough money:

- Dying and declining congregations never have enough money, because they have forgotten mission. "When the focus of meeting after meeting is primarily on getting enough money to balance the budget, people's generous impulses wither."

---

## The Session and Stewardship

---

- Congregations involved in mission never have enough money. “These congregations are giving away more money than they have. They are always living on the edge of their resources.”

When a ministry that people care about is created, they will support it generously with their prayers, their actions and their money.

**Ask yourselves:** Is our congregation involved in mission? Do we have a vision and an enthusiasm to share the love of Jesus with others, in word and in action? Do we provide opportunities for people to get involved in mission – in our congregation, in our community, and further afield in Canada and globally?

---

### 3. The importance of COMMUNITY in giving

---

Much of the church’s raising of money is an appeal to loyalty and commitment. An older generation understands words such as loyalty and commitment, but younger people and people new to the church may not feel loyal or committed. When seeking a new church, the denominational “brand” will not be so important; instead people will ask what the church has to offer. If they see a vibrant, caring community, if they see a church that will make a difference in their lives, a church that will offer the services they are looking for (e.g., children’s program, music, etc.), they are more likely to participate fully. People give where they feel connected.

**Ask yourselves:** Who lives in our community? Families with young children? Seniors? Business people? Farmers? How are they included in the life of our congregation? Do we have events that draw us together as a family?

---

### 4. The importance of SELF-ESTEEM in giving

---

Congregations that feel good about themselves will have an easier time getting people involved with their time and money – and their enthusiasm. When we recognize our value and gifts (as individuals and as congregations), we feel proud of what we have to offer. We are courageous and are not shy to reach out and share with others. Congregations that spend a lot of time bickering or thinking only about themselves have forgotten that their value comes from God. And they have forgotten their purpose. Typically, conflicted congregations are not successful in doing stewardship initiatives.

Related to the above is the importance of positive motivation when asking for money or people’s time and abilities. Being clobbered over the head and made to feel guilty (e.g., “you should...you ought to”) are not good motivators, and probably work in the negative. Inviting people to participate and share in a grand Christian adventure is more engaging.

“Once we discover that we’ve been created to give, that our very nature lies in giving, we’ll begin to feel the real joy and freedom God has intended.”

– Stewards by Design 1999

**Ask yourselves:** What metaphor describes our congregation? Does this provoke positive or negative images? What could we do to develop good self-esteem in the congregation (e.g., in worship services, prayer meetings, church ministries and activities)? Do we celebrate the good things that happen in the church? Do we thank people for their gifts of time and money?

## 5. The importance of COMMUNICATION in giving

Frequent, clear communication about the financial needs of the congregation is very important. Don't assume that people know what is needed to run the church. Unless they sit on the board and pay the bills, they may not have given it much thought. Provide regular, consistent feedback about the financial needs. Be transparent about how the money is spent. Make connections between the money and the ministries it makes possible.

**Ask yourselves:** Do we provide regular financial reports in the church bulletin and the newsletter? Do we send out quarterly statements of giving to each household, along with an expression of thanks and a few sentences about some new things the congregation has undertaken in the past few months? Do people know how their money is being used in ministry? Have we considered doing a narrative budget?

**How does our session fulfill its commitment to oversee all aspects of stewardship and mission, as outlined in the *Book of Forms*, Section 113?**

*Written by Annemarie Klassen*

## The M word – talking about money

It's one thing we want to avoid at all cost – talking about money. Comments such as those in the sidebar, even when said jokingly, reflect an underlying anxiety about money.

The unease around money is evident in a number of ways – people stay at home on stewardship Sunday; ministers are fearful to preach about money; discussions about lifestyle choices are considered personal, private matters; the envelope secretary's records are classified "top secret." Even offering envelopes are very carefully placed upside down into the offering plate so nobody will see what is given.

And our giving is often not very joyful. Robert Wood Lynn, an American Presbyterian preacher, theologian and researcher, observes that the giving of money in the church is often a "mournful recital of statistics; the lament centres on the gap

**When asked what a particular person wanted from a stewardship workshop, she answered, "I want something that doesn't feel like going to the dentist."**

**One minister marked the years to retirement by the number of stewardship sermons he had yet to preach – three sermons, three years.**

## The Session and Stewardship

Photo © Dreamstime.com



between what Protestants can and should give, and what they actually contribute.”

Lynn says that talking about money in the church is a taboo, and taboos have power. By not talking about money, we unwittingly give it power; and because we don't talk about it, we do not know how much power it does have in our lives.

And yet Jesus talked about our relationship to money and possessions more than anything else except the kingdom of God. Somehow for Jesus this topic was at the heart of the spiritual journey. Jesus understood the power of money to mimic God in a person's heart. He taught that if money has our allegiance, God will not have it.

#### Jesus' words ring in our ears...

...where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

...it is more blessed to give than to receive.

...the widow who gave two coins gave more than all the others.

Helping people to make connections between faith and money can be an opportunity for personal and congregational spiritual growth. It can help people recognize the fears and anxieties that operate in their daily lives. It can also lead to an acknowledgement of God's many blessings, and freedom from the tyranny of the consumerism that pervades our culture.

Generous giving does not happen automatically. It is learned. Personal stories of people who are learning to give generously or who are struggling with how to live faithfully in a consumerist society can be an encouragement and motivator for others. When we refuse to talk about money, we deny these opportunities for growth.

**“Stewardship has tremendous power – it changes the way we live – it will lead to conversion when theology is connected with everyday life.”**

**– Bishop Robert Morneau**

**In your congregation, provide avenues for discussions about faith and money:**

- through small group Bible studies where participants can freely discuss lifestyle choices, intergenerational transfer of money, ethical investing and other related topics;
- through teaching and sharing in church school, communicants' classes, new members' classes, parenting groups;
- through year-round preaching in which these issues are addressed – not just stewardship Sunday;
- **at session meetings:** Since the session is to take a leadership role in stewardship, begin by having elders share their stories of faith and giving at the beginning of a session meeting. The following short exercises may be used for this purpose.

---

### A study about giving

---

**The parable of the rich fool**

And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." (Luke 12:15–21)

**The widow's offering**

He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on." (Luke 21:1–4)

**Discuss:**

- The farmer and the widow were both rich and poor. In what ways were they both rich and poor at the same time?
- When you hear the word *giving*, what experiences or people from your lifetime come to mind?
- Why do you think people give of their time and money? What motivates them?

---

### Sharing stories of faith and money

---

Select a few questions. Divide into pairs and discuss. Come together as a group to see whether there are common themes in your stories.

- What is your earliest recollection of using your own money to give to others or the church?

---

**The Session and Stewardship**


---

- Who are the people or what are the experiences that have influenced you most in giving to the church?
  - a. parents
  - b. mentor or friend
  - c. sermon
  - d. involvement on a church committee
  - e. counting the offering
  - f. a life experience
  - g. other
- What factors motivate you to give to the church? (rank the top three)
  - a. the purpose for which it will be used
  - b. to help achieve the budget
  - c. the economic times
  - d. gratitude
  - e. your personal financial circumstances
  - f. your personal conviction of God's will
  - g. other
- How do you decide how much you will give to the church?
- Share one thing your congregation has done in stewardship that was a positive experience for you.

*Written by Annemarie Klassen*

## Fluctuating offerings

### Feast and famine

Pharaoh was haunted by a strange dream. He was standing on the shores of the ancient Nile River. With a rippling and splashing of its waters, seven robust cows emerged and began to graze contentedly on nearby lush grasses. Then the water churned again, but this time seven sickly, skeletal cows slogged onto the shore and devoured the healthy ones. As you will recall, it was Joseph, a Hebrew slave held in one of Pharaoh's dungeons, who deciphered the dream as a warning that Egypt would experience seven years of feast followed by seven years of famine (Genesis 41).

Many of our congregations experience a similar cycle of feast and famine. I'm not referring to cattle or corn but to the offerings people generously contribute Sunday by Sunday. In most congregations, the offering total varies from week to week and month to month. Over the course of a year there are probably months during which the offerings are traditionally more robust than average. Similarly, there are probably months during which the offerings are traditionally more lean than average. Congregations that have implemented a PAR program (pre-authorized remittance) have found these monthly hills and gullies significantly smoothed out, but many of us still experience feast and famine periods.

It is because this feast and famine cycle is so common in congregations that Kennon Callahan, in his book *Effective Church Finances* (Jossey-Bass, 1992), offers practical advice about a realistic way to encourage support for the budget throughout the year.

## Periodic giving goals

Some congregations have few, if any, giving goals set before them. These are likely congregations in which cash is a “four-letter word,” so once the budget is adopted at the annual meeting, the congregation seldom, if ever, learns about faithful, financial stewardship. Jesus told stories about a rich young man and a lost coin. He addressed issues like serving God and mammon and paying taxes to Caesar. He socialized with tax collectors. Ministers and elders should feel confident to talk about money, too. “The session is responsible for all aspects of stewardship and mission, both spiritual and material, within the congregation” (*Book of Forms* 113).

Other congregations are quite good at keeping the financial needs for ministry before the congregation in the form of quarterly or monthly updates. This is important, but Callahan points out that the updates are often presented in an unintentionally discouraging format. Imagine that a congregation adopts a budget of \$120,000 and then the total is simply divided by 12 so that the congregation is challenged to contribute \$10,000 a month or \$30,000 per quarter. Since offerings are seldom received at the same rate, this kind of monthly or quarterly offering expectation can be unrealistic or disheartening. If \$10,000 is “requested” in July and only \$2,000 is received because the majority of the congregation is on vacation, it appears as if the financial support is falling seriously behind when, in reality, it might be keeping pace with the usual annual pattern.

As an alternative, Callahan suggests establishing periodic giving goals. A giving goal is how much the congregation will realistically give during a particular time-frame, keeping in mind that few people can give the same amount each week or month.

Callahan suggests selecting your giving goal for each month based on your congregation’s giving pattern. For instance, average offerings over the past three years might look something like this:

Jan \$5,000   Feb \$5,500   Mar \$5,700   Apr \$7,000   May \$5,500   Jun \$4,800  
Jul \$2,200   Aug \$3,600   Sep \$4,500   Oct \$5,200   Nov \$5,500   Dec \$15,000

These figures would be used to establish realistic monthly giving goals for the current year. You will note that far less is expected during the summer than at the end of the year in this case.

One way to publish the giving goal for each month in a bulletin or newsletter is as follows:

- ◆ Our giving goal for *March* was \_\_\_\_\_.
- ◆ Contributions given in *March* were \_\_\_\_\_.

You may want to make a weekly or biweekly giving goal note in the announcements, like this:

- ◆ Our giving goal for *April* is \_\_\_\_\_.
- ◆ Contributions so *far* in *April* are \_\_\_\_\_.

---

**The Session and Stewardship**


---

Callahan suggests that year-to-date summaries of giving goals are most effectively shared in the following months:

- April or March: During the weeks leading up to Easter
- June: Or *before* people go on vacation
- September: As the fall program moves forward
- December: As Christmas approaches and before the year has concluded

Of course, each congregation would need to think of the seasonal timing that best suits its rhythms and context.

No discussion on offerings is complete without keeping in mind that congregations also need to have a clear, biblically based vision for ministry set before them. The stronger the vision, the more generous people tend to be. As Callahan also states, such a vision must be comprised of smaller goals that are specific and measurable, are realistic and achievable, have solid time frames, complement each other, and grow the congregation forward.

Ultimately, this method of presenting financial needs will help your congregation have a more accurate assessment of how the current giving compares with past years and what ought to be realistically expected at any point during the current year. It may also afford more appropriate and frequent opportunities for the leadership to give thanks for the gracious giving of your congregation.

Used with permission of Dr. Kennon Callahan.

## Watch your language – talking about money

Have you ever been told to watch your language? Such a command may have been followed by the threat, “I’ll wash your mouth out with soap!” Images of some poor child foaming at the mouth for uttering a vulgar word or two come to mind, but most of us have never actually witnessed the punishment meted out. This article is not a Miss Manners column on what constitutes polite language, but an exploration into the sort of language that could be used when discussing financial support in a congregation. Finding a helpful method and appropriate time to discuss finances with a congregation is important; finding the right words might be just as important.

In chapter eight of his book *Effective Church Finances* (Jossey-Bass, 1992), Kennon Callahan argues that financial communication to the congregation should be prepared from the perspective of the giver rather than from the perspective of the treasurer, board of managers, or finance and maintenance committee. This is because treasurers and other financial people are likely inclined to use technical terms. They may refer to money received as receipts, revenues or income.

Callahan suggests something else. He writes, “Help people to know by the words you use, the perspective you have, and the theology you hold that you are focusing on the congregation’s giving, not the finance committee’s income and receipts.”

Callahan focuses on the congregation's giving. He calls financial targets "Giving Goals." He calls financial updates "Giving Reports." In a written report, he would use a heading such as "Contributions this past month" or "Given this past month" instead of "receipts." In fact, Callahan strongly urges those in charge of finances to avoid words like "received" or "receipts" that put the emphasis on the board or committee that handles funds.

For example, a treasurer might announce to the congregation, "The board of managers' income goal for January was \$5,000. We are delighted to announce that we not only reached that goal but surpassed it, raising \$5,500." According to Callahan, that would be like a coach saying to the team, "I am happy to announce, as coach, that I won the game." It would be much more effective if a treasurer announced something like, "Our giving goal for January was \$5,000. We are grateful that the congregation surpassed this target and gave \$5,500 this month. This is a caring and generous congregation. Well done!"

**"On the first day of every week,  
each of you is to put aside and  
save whatever extra you earn..."**

**– 1 Corinthians 16:2**

Callahan adds, "An important point to note here: people do not quit giving when we get ahead on our giving goal, but people do hold back in their giving when someone else takes credit for what they are doing. All reports need to recognize the offerings are generously donated by the congregation. The congregation needs to be thanked regularly for what they have done well."

Callahan also recommends that money received from other sources, such as investments or GST rebates, should be listed separately. This recognizes and honours the stewardship of the people who financially support the ministry of Christ in a community of faith.

Similarly, instead of referring to debits, expenses or disbursements, it might be more constructive to communicate money spent in terms of gifts invested. A financial presentation might sound like this: "This year we have invested \$2,000 in the Christian education of the children of our congregation, \$3,000 in Christian camping, \$4,000 in the work of Presbyterian World Service & Development," and so on. This language conveys clearly that it is the congregation that is actively supporting and empowering ministry through gifts.

Whether or not a congregation refers to "giving goals" or how we "invest" the gifts of the congregation, it is important to communicate clearly where the offerings are being used and how they are fulfilling our discipleship by ministering to the needs of the congregation, the community in which the congregation is located, and the world beyond. As often as possible, we ought to talk about the people who are helped by the money we give. Pictures are worth a thousand words. Congregations with PowerPoint capabilities can prepare wonderful presentations on the ministries being supported. People tend to respond well when needs are known and positive differences are being made. Or as Callahan puts it, "People give money to a winning cause, not a sinking ship."

Used with permission of Dr. Kennon Callahan.

# The Session and Mission

The responsibility of session regarding mission is laid out in the *Book of Forms*.

“The session is responsible for all aspects of stewardship and mission, both spiritual and material, within the congregation” (113).

“The session will keep before the congregation the life and work of the church around the world, encouraging participation in that work through prayer, service and gifts” (113.1).

“The session is responsible for seeing that the congregation develops and maintains programs of mission and outreach both related to its immediate community and beyond” (113.2).

“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” (113.6.1).

*The church exists to be and to do God’s mission in the world – this is its purpose for being.* It cannot opt in and out, as if this is a choice to be made. Without mission, the church is dead.

In the Presbyterian way of doing things, as stated in the *Book of Forms*, the session is responsible for *all* aspects of mission in the congregation. This is a huge task for elders. Some elders might ask, **“What exactly is mission, anyway?”**

## Mission statements of The Presbyterian Church in Canada

### Our Mission

#### *Living Faith, 9*

- 9.1.1 As God sent Christ to us,  
So Christ sends us into the world.  
We are here to proclaim Christ in word and deed.
  
- 9.1.2 Mission is evangelism,  
the offer of salvation to all people  
in the power of the Holy Spirit,  
to be received through faith in Christ.  
It asks people to repent of their sins,  
to trust Christ,  
to be baptized,  
and to enter a life honouring Jesus as Lord.

- 9.1.3 Mission is service,  
a call to help people in need and  
to permeate all of life with the compassion of God.

---

## Mission Statement of The Presbyterian Church in Canada

---

### Who are we?

*Disciples of Christ*

*Empowered by the Spirit*

*Glorifying God and*

*Rejoicing in Service*

### What do we do?

Relying on the power of the Holy Spirit, we proclaim the love and good news of Jesus Christ through our words and actions.

As a Reformed church, we rely on the truth and inspiration of scriptures for God's guidance into the future – a future that we approach with wonder and anticipation, knowing God is with us.

As worshipping communities joyfully celebrating the sacraments, we are supported, strengthened and equipped to share the love of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

### How do we do this?

- Our mission, in a world where many do not know the gospel, is to tell the biblical story in ever new and creative ways.
- Our mission, in a world wounded by sin, is to point to the redemptive work of Christ and the life-changing presence of the Spirit.
- Our mission, in a world burdened with anxiety and apprehension, is to provide a place of sanctuary, tranquility and renewal in the name of the One who said, "I will give you rest."
- Our mission, in a world where many are oppressed, excluded or ignored, is to call for personal righteousness, justice and reconciliation in the church and in the world and to hear, respect and cherish all God's children.
- Our mission, in a world of limited resources, is to use God's gifts wisely and fairly for the good of all.
- Our mission, in a world of many nations, peoples, denominations and faiths, is to learn from one another and work together for the healing of the nations.

In all times and seasons, we give glory to the God of all creation, to Jesus Christ the Son, and to the Holy Spirit by whose presence all are blessed.

Adopted by the 121st General Assembly, 1995, *Acts and Proceedings*, pp. 201–202

## The Session and Mission

## Mission is about partnership

Today's understanding of mission is about relationships. Early in the last century we would regard ourselves as a "sender" nation, sending our resources and faith out to others. In the last half century this has changed. Today we see ourselves as partners with others. We talk about mutuality and reciprocity – about "us" instead of "we/they." Relationship is important, because it is only in relationship that we are fully human.

The following mission principles are helpful in understanding this approach to mission.

### Mission is...

- **Holistic** – Mission is meant for the whole person, the whole community and the whole creation. It includes witness, service, healing and development. It addresses all facets of life.
- **Evangelistic** – Mission shares the good news of Jesus Christ, knowing that the full truth of the gospel story is always greater than our limited knowledge, and that illumination and transformation come only through the power of the Holy Spirit.
- **Advocacy** – Mission seeks justice, peace and righteousness. It is prophetic criticism, the calling to task of societies and cultures that do not protect and preserve life.
- **Inclusive** – Mission includes everyone – people of all races, backgrounds, ages, classes, genders, faiths, etc.
- **Respectful of culture, faith and context** – Mission recognizes the capacity to respond to the gospel within the framework of one's own situation; Christ is at home in any culture – the gospel alone transforms a culture.
- **Dialogical** – Mission demands a spirit of learning and humility as partners listen to one another.
- **Ecumenical** – Mission involves working together for the unity of the Christian church in order to strengthen the witness to the whole world of the love of God.
- **Relational** – Mission means being in relationship. Mission partnership is a covenant relationship between people – often of diverse backgrounds – who are together striving to bring about God's realm of justice and peace.

Education for Mission draft discussion paper "Guidelines for Mission Involvement"

For the congregation, there are three dimensions of mission and ministry – the local community, Canada, and the world.

A 2003 mission survey of congregations of The Presbyterian Church in Canada indicates that Presbyterian congregations are very involved in an incredible variety and quantity of mission and outreach activities!

On the local level, they are involved in every manner of mission and outreach: food banks, Meals on Wheels and Out of the Cold programs, after-school programs, community Bible studies, moms' programs, hospital and seniors' visitation programs,

## What do we believe about mission?

Mission is God's work. This work – centred in the gospel of Jesus Christ and made real through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit – has been given to the church by God, for the sake of the world God loves.

We think of this work as having four cornerstones – evangelism, nurture of the people of God, service in the world, and the struggle for justice.

We believe that this work happens everywhere – in our places of work and play, in our congregations, in our neighbourhoods, in our country and in our world.

We believe that involvement in mission is a privilege and a responsibility for every Christian. Such involvement requires understanding, love, prayer and action. It requires the capacity to give and to receive.

– Education for Mission draft discussion paper “Guidelines for Mission Involvement”

philosophy cafes where people come to discuss questions about faith and life, hosting of refugees, children's breakfast clubs, and so on and so on.

Congregations are also involved in programs farther away, across Canada and in other countries. Women knit pneumonia vests, youth and adults go on overseas mission trips, congregations establish twinning relationships with congregations across the country or overseas. Congregations also share in the work of the denomination through prayer, education and financial support.

In many, many ways congregations are proclaiming Christ in word and deed by telling the story of the love of Jesus and by serving others.

Active mission lies at the heart of the church and it is what makes the church a lively, exciting organism that spreads God's love in this world.

### At a session meeting:

1. Divide the session into a few smaller groups and give each group one of the above statements about mission (with copies for everybody). Have each group read its statement and discuss: “How does this reading connect or compare with my understanding of mission?”
2. Bring the groups together and on flip chart paper, itemize all the mission activities of your congregation.
3. Have each group share how their statement of mission speaks to the mission that is being carried on in the congregation. How does the statement of mission enlighten what is being done? Is the mission work of the congregation balanced – that is, are you proclaiming Christ in word *and* deed? What might be changed so that the mission of your congregation will be more effective or truer to what God intends for you?

## Christian principles of mission giving

### The great collection (2 Corinthians 8–9)

#### A Bible study for a meeting of session

This portion of scripture is a fundraising appeal on behalf of the broader church. Here Paul is administering a collection for the mother church in Jerusalem – a church that is in need of financial help due to a severe famine. Paul appeals to the Corinthian church to give generously, and makes reference to the Macedonian churches who have given joyfully and liberally, out of their extreme poverty. Corinth, by comparison, was a great trading centre, rich and prosperous.

In his appeal, Paul sets out a theology of stewardship and giving that has become a hallmark of Christian giving. This could be a helpful place to begin as the session looks at how it will provide leadership with regards to *Presbyterians Sharing* and PWS&D.

#### Divide the session into five groups.

Give each group one of the following scripture references to read: 2 Corinthians 8:1–7, 8:8–15, 8:16–24, 9:1–6, 9:7–15. Ask them, in just a few minutes, to list all the principles of giving found in their particular portion.

Bring the groups together and write each group's principles of giving on a flip chart.

With these giving principles in mind, read the two chapters from 2 Corinthians again and think about how they could be applied to *Presbyterians Sharing* and PWS&D.

#### Keep in mind:

- the interconnectedness of the congregations in Macedonia, Corinth and Jerusalem
- the money that will be sent far away from the local congregation
- the disparities between the congregations – economic differences, ethnic/racial/language differences (Jewish, Greek, Hellenistic Jews)
- the role of Paul and Titus, the administrators of the collection
- the spirit in which the money is requested and given
- the benefits of giving, both for the giver and the receiver

## What's the difference between *Presbyterians Sharing* and Presbyterian World Service & Development (PWS&D)?

Congregations within the Presbyterian Church do not exist on their own but are part of a bigger body, linked by presbyteries and synods, extending across Canada. Through the mission work of the broader church they are linked with people and partners in Canada and overseas. These linkages are important for congregations to develop and maintain. This happens through prayer, education and financial support for *Presbyterians Sharing* and PWS&D – two mission arms of our church.

The session is responsible for raising awareness and understanding in congregations about *Presbyterians Sharing* and PWS&D. **But what is the difference between these two?** This is one of the most frequently asked questions in congregations. So what is the difference?

### *Presbyterians Sharing*

*Presbyterians Sharing* is the name of the national church fund that supports the overall mission and ministry of The Presbyterian Church in Canada – except for development and emergency relief, which are funded through gifts to PWS&D.

Why the name *Presbyterians Sharing*? Because Presbyterians are sharing in the cost of a wide range of ministries:

- the meeting of the General Assembly and its committees; support for sessions, presbyteries and synods (General Assembly Office);
- mission staff in many countries around the world (International Ministries);
- partnerships with churches around the world (International Ministries);
- inner city, native, refugee, urban, remote, francophone and chaplaincy ministries in Canada; the development of new congregations (Canada Ministries);
- support for congregations in faith education, worship, evangelism, stewardship and mission education; youth ministries (Stewardship and Education for Mission);
- justice work in congregations and with ecumenical groups (Justice Ministries);
- support for congregations in seeking ministers; support for clergy and professional church workers (Ministry and Church Vocations);
- training of ministers (Theological Colleges);
- support for the national church offices, including financial services and oversight of the church's pension plan and benefits (Support Services).

Another name for *Presbyterians Sharing* is the General Assembly budget. It makes possible our existence as a church denomination in Canada. It enables us to do mission and ministry in Canada and around the world.

Congregational support for *Presbyterians Sharing* is based on suggested allocations ("fair share" guidelines), which are distributed to congregations through the presbyteries. Congregations accept an allocation according to their ability and send in their gifts on a monthly or quarterly basis.

## Presbyterian World Service & Development

Presbyterian World Service & Development is the national church fund that supports development and relief, and refugee sponsorship programs of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Working with overseas church and community partners and ecumenical bodies, PWS&D responds to human need in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe.

- PWS&D supports overseas partners working in health, education, agriculture and income generation programs.
- PWS&D helps overseas partners respond quickly and efficiently to emergencies and relief situations. PWS&D assists these partners by issuing appeals to congregations and providing funding for relief programs.
- PWS&D issues appeals for national declared states of emergency in Canada.
- PWS&D administers the refugee sponsorship program between the church and the federal government.
- PWS&D engages congregations through educational materials on these worldwide concerns.
- PWS&D supports ecumenical coalitions on international developmental issues.

PWS&D raises its own funds directly from individuals and congregations and through matching government grants. PWS&D does not receive funds from *Presbyterians Sharing*, although some of the office expenses related to administration are covered through *Presbyterians Sharing*.

International Ministries and PWS&D work closely together. PWS&D does not employ overseas staff. It often happens, though, that International Ministries mission personnel, funded through *Presbyterians Sharing*, work with PWS&D partners.

This information is available in a brochure called "*Presbyterians Sharing and PWS&D: What's the Difference?*" from Stewardship and Education for Mission or the church website ([presbyterian.ca/download/1257](http://presbyterian.ca/download/1257)).



Photo by Paul Jeffrey / ACT

## Atlantic Mission Society and Women's Missionary Society

The Presbyterian Church in Canada has two active mission societies – Atlantic Mission Society (AMS) and Women's Missionary Society (WMS). As the names suggest, the AMS has groups in congregations in the Synod of the Atlantic Provinces (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island). The Women's Missionary Society has groups in congregations from Quebec to British Columbia.

Both societies have constitutions and executives. As well as meeting in local groups, they meet regionally in presbyterials and synodicals.

Both societies raise awareness in our congregations of the mission work of The Presbyterian Church in Canada through prayer, study, mission travel and speaking engagements. They actively raise funds for mission work that they support directly as well as for *Presbyterians Sharing* and PWS&D.

## Commonly asked questions about *Presbyterians Sharing*

"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" (*Book of Forms* 113.6.1).

### **What is *Presbyterians Sharing*?**

*Presbyterians Sharing* is the name of the budget of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. *Presbyterians Sharing* ensures that we have money to meet our mission goals in Canada and around the world.

*Presbyterians Sharing* is a unified budget. That means that one budget funds a wide variety of programs and ministries of the church. This includes the work of the Life and Mission Agency and its departments – International Ministries, Canada Ministries, Justice Ministries, Ministry and Church Vocations, Communications. It also includes the work of the General Assembly, Financial Support Services and the theological colleges in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver.

What does this mean? It means that Presbyterians are sharing in a wide range of ministries – mission staff in many countries around the world; inner city, native, refugee, urban, remote, and chaplaincy ministries in Canada; new church developments; support for congregations in faith education, worship, evangelism, stewardship, mission education; youth ministries; justice and ecumenical work; training of ministers. It means that the denomination's national office is supported so programs

---

**The Session and Mission**


---

and services can be coordinated and unified. It means that the church continues to do God's work in the world.

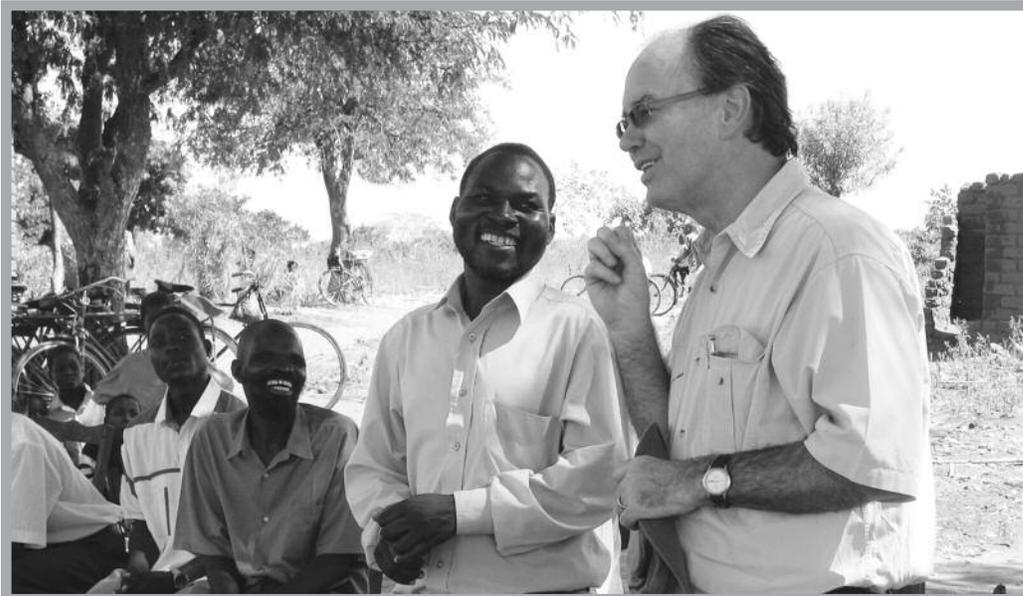
This budget is voted on annually by the commissioners to General Assembly, who are the representatives of congregations and presbyteries from across Canada.

### **Why can't we just give our money to a mission project of our choice and have it credited to *Presbyterians Sharing*?**

If everyone supported only the project of their choice, the less glamorous, less advertised budget items would have difficulty receiving enough support. Yet they may be of equal or even greater importance, or they may be essential to the smooth functioning of the mission and ministries and organization of our church. A pooled fund means that everybody contributes to all parts of the budget. *Presbyterians Sharing* is a pooled fund designed to support the entire body, so that it may faithfully fulfill its God-given mandate to proclaim Christ in word and deed (see *Our Mission, Living Faith*, 9.1).

### **What if we want to give to specific projects or ministries outside of *Presbyterians Sharing* and PWS&D?**

*Gifts of Change* (formerly called *Something Extra*) is a way to designate money to specific projects. *Gifts of Change* is a resource booklet that contains a range of projects. These projects are selected by Canada Ministries, International Ministries and PWS&D in consultation with our mission partners. Whether church building or theological resources in Africa, or materials for self-sustainable development in Central America, or food and recreational equipment for an inner-city ministry in Canada – these concrete projects help support our partners in Canada and around the world. Many congregations do creative mission education using *Gifts of Change*, and find it a great way to raise enthusiasm and participation in mission work.





### How does a congregation know what it should give?

#### Suggested allocations

Each congregation is given a suggested allocation. The allocation is simply a *fair share* guide, based on the dollar base of the congregation. The dollar base is money raised by the congregation for all congregational purposes in a given year, *minus* funds collected for *Presbyterians Sharing*, other mission givings, or money used for debt repayment (principal and interest). These figures are taken from the statistical report, which is received from each congregation annually. A formula, on a graduated scale, is then applied to the resulting dollar base.

In the fall, presbyteries receive the total allocation for their presbytery for the coming year, with the breakdown for each congregation. It is the responsibility of presbytery to review the suggested congregational allocations, taking into account the particular situation of each congregation and making adjustments as necessary. The goal of such adjustments should be that the presbytery meets its total allocation.

The presbytery then passes the suggested and/or adjusted allocation to each congregation.

#### Accepted allocations

It is the session's responsibility to inform the congregation of the suggested allocation and to report the amount accepted by the congregation back to presbytery (*Book of Forms*, 113.6.1).

The congregation decides, usually at its annual meeting, what allocation it will accept. The accepted allocation is reported back to presbytery immediately after the congregation's annual meeting.

When the presbytery has gathered the accepted allocations from all its congregations, it reports these back to the stewardship office of the national church.

---

 The Session and Mission
 

---

### So how do we decide what allocation we should accept?

Allocations are not assessments; that is, they are not mandatory. Here are some guidelines that our church has suggested over the years:

- Congregations are urged to accept or meet their allocations; they may even accept a higher figure than that set by presbytery.
- Congregations may work at growth in giving. It has been the policy of some presbyteries to encourage congregations that are giving at their suggested level not to let their givings drop *even when their suggested allocation drops in a given year*.
- If a congregation is far short of its suggested allocation, it is encouraged to make a plan that will help it to grow toward that allocation. Positive growth, even in incremental steps over time, motivates congregations and affirms that they are moving in the right direction.
- **Stewardship is at the heart of the matter.** While suggested allocations are a general guide for *fair share* giving, they do not speak to the heart of what stewardship is about. Congregations are asked to give joyfully and with prayer the amount they wish to give, in response to God's gracious blessings and in the spirit of Paul in his fundraising appeal to the Corinthian church: "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:7–8).

### When we accept an allocation, does that mean we guarantee that it will be fulfilled? Should it be part of our annual budget?

Those congregations that consistently meet or even exceed their commitment typically include their accepted allocation in their annual budget, with the intention that it will be fulfilled. By including it in the overall congregational budget, everybody participates. These congregations may or may not have a separate line for *Presbyterians Sharing* on their offering envelope. Many find it helpful to keep the line on the envelope as a weekly reminder of their participation in the work of the broader church.

All monies designated to *Presbyterians Sharing* must be remitted within the year of designation, even if the congregation has exceeded the accepted amount.

**Mission education is a key element.** It is important for all congregations – even those that guarantee an allocation – to provide ongoing education for members so that they know how their money is being used, so that they will pray with understanding for the ministries of the church, and so that a sense of connectedness with the broader church will be fostered.

### **When and how often should our donations to *Presbyterians Sharing* be remitted?**

Since the budgetary needs are current – that is, the money received in a given year is required for that specific year – congregations are encouraged to send in their gifts on a regular basis. An increasing number of congregations have chosen to honour the recommendation of the 1992 General Assembly and submit their gifts on a monthly basis. Others submit quarterly, and a few submit annually (however, this is not encouraged). The Presbyterian Church in Canada receives approximately 25 percent of its budget for a given year after December 15, and 17 percent is received between January 1 and January 15 of the following year. This means that there is a lag between when the money is needed and when it is received.

### **What happens if we do not send in our suggested allocation?**

If a congregation's allocation is not met, the impact on the *Presbyterians Sharing* budget depends on how well the remainder of congregations meet their allocations. The budget is spent in faith that the monies will be received. Clearly, if many congregations fail to accept their allocation or ignore it entirely, this has a negative impact on the ability of the church to maintain existing programs or to develop new ministries.

### **Why should we give to *Presbyterians Sharing* when we have difficulty meeting our own budget? Congregations have many very real needs of their own. Stipends must be paid, buildings need to be maintained, and local ministries require funds as well. Shouldn't we look after our own needs first?**

First of all, why give to mission and ministry beyond our walls? The principle of proportional giving – whether a tithe or some other percent of our income – is a biblical principle. It applies not only to individuals but also to communities of faith. Congregations that have a concern beyond their own survival and their own programs, however important and necessary, will find that their own ministries grow as they also reach out beyond themselves.

Secondly, The Presbyterian Church in Canada is a connectional church. This means that we covenant to support each other and to work together. Each year at General Assembly we approve the church's ministries and the budget required to achieve them.

Finally, if one congregation falls far short of its fair share, this places a greater responsibility on other congregations, who are often struggling as well, to make up the difference. Having stated these reasons for giving, there are times and circumstances when a congregation has to decrease its givings, at least for a time.

## Raising awareness of *Presbyterians Sharing* – How do we get started?

### The session could appoint a few people with responsibility for this ministry

- Who? Enthusiastic, visionary people with representation from session.
- Point person: one of these people could be the point person to receive educational materials from Stewardship and Education for Mission at the national church office.
- Begin each meeting with a brief study about mission and stewardship.
- Discuss budgetary needs and how the committee's work will be funded.

### Make a plan

#### Short term

- Choose a few things to do immediately, for example, short articles in the newsletter, a Moment for Mission, bulletin inserts, regular prayer support in worship.

#### Long term – make a plan for the year

- What do you want to accomplish in the next year?
- What are your targets for giving?
- How many people do you want to involve?

#### A year-round approach might look like this:

- Every Sunday: a moment in worship – a mission capsule, a prayer during the offering, a snapshot in the bulletin
- Every month: a specific focus on a particular ministry funded through *Presbyterians Sharing*
- Every quarter: a new display in the narthex; an article in the church newsletter
- In the spring: a mission study; a visit from a missionary (as available)
- In the fall: *Presbyterians Sharing* Sunday; a mission fest

**Develop a cohesive approach to mission.** In your year-round plan, include the work of PWS&D, the WMS/AMS and local initiatives. If other groups have responsibility for these areas of work, consult with them and work together as much as possible. Take note of the following designated Sunday opportunities for mission awareness and education:

- PWS&D Sunday (first Sunday in February)
- Mission Awareness Sunday (WMS/AMS – last Sunday in April)
- *Presbyterians Sharing* Sunday (last Sunday in September)

## General suggestions for mission funding

**Involve all the people in congregation** – children, youth, adults.

**Be encouraging with clear and realistic expectations** – People live forward or downward according to what is expected.

**Provide a variety of ways for people to give:**

- special offerings
- special times, such as Christmas
- special offering boxes
- regular weekly giving
- a quarterly focus
- pre-authorized remittances through the bank (PAR)

**Use a wide variety of communication tools.**

**Repeat the message** – use the same picture more than once, tell the same facts over again. It is said that people retain about 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see, and 50% of what they see and hear.

**Celebrate; be encouraging; be positive.**

**Include The Presbyterian Church in Canada and its ministries regularly in your church prayers.**

**Work with the stewardship committee or whoever has responsibility for mission funding**

- Review the *suggested* allocation; make recommendations to the session regarding what allocation the congregation will accept.
- Some congregations choose three mission projects to pray for, educate about, support financially:
  - at the local level
  - in Canada – *Presbyterians Sharing* (through Canada Ministries)
  - globally – *Presbyterians Sharing* (through International Ministries) and PWS&D
- Raise mission awareness through a *Gifts of Change* project (*Gifts of Change* is a booklet that provides congregations the opportunity to provide financial support for specific projects identified by our church partners in Canada and internationally.)

## Section 3

# Electing and Ordaining New Elders

- Electing New Elders
- Ordination and Authority
- Admitting Previously Ordained Elders
- Term Service for Elders



Photo © Robert Lerich / Dreamstime.com

# Electing New Elders

“Election to the eldership is the call of God, through the congregation, for service in Christ’s Church. Since the eldership is a spiritual office concerned with the rule and pastoral oversight of the congregation, only suitable men and women should be considered. They should be committed Christians, in regular attendance at public worship, persons of sound judgment and upright character, and either knowledgeable or prepared to learn of the government of the church” (*Book of Forms* 132).

Elders are ordained. This means that they are recognized by the congregation as having a divine call. Ordination comes from the same root word as “order.” A person who is ordained is set within a certain order – that of elder.

In The Presbyterian Church in Canada, ordination is for life and elders serve in the office for life, although not necessarily in the courts. Elders may resign from work in the court system at any time, or be removed from office if they cease to be helpful in their work. The General Assembly of 1997 approved the introduction of term service for elders. Since then, term service has been adopted by many congregations. In this case, while elders are still ordained for life, they serve in six-year terms that may be renewed by reelection. In the case of term eldership, one-third of the session is elected every two years.

The process for electing elders is found in the *Book of Forms*, section 132.

Electing new elders is the responsibility of session. New elders are added to a session when the session determines that more leaders are needed for the spiritual wellbeing of the congregation. It is not a popularity contest, neither is it a reward for years of service in the church. Rather, election to eldership must be grounded in the understanding that God gives gifts for ministry, and for some that is the gift of leadership.

The right to elect elders is vested in the professing members of the congregation. The members of the congregation are asked to nominate people for this position – people who are appreciated for their spiritual gifts, wisdom and leadership skills. How is one to discern whom to nominate? The following is how one congregational member (Dorothy Henderson) went about doing this.

---

## Whom should I nominate?

---

Recently, our congregation decided to add new elders to the session. As a member, I received a list of all members in the congregation and was invited to nominate several people.

God calls people to eldership. Part of that process is that others see gifts of leadership in people in the congregation. But how was I to choose? I knew that elders must be professing members of the congregation. I knew that they should have gifts for this service. But how was I to decide from a long list of 608 members, many of whom I did not know? Even if I belonged to a congregation with 150 members, how

---

**Electing New Elders**


---

would I decide who had gifts to be an elder? Here's what I did. If you think this is a helpful process, feel free to use it.

**Step one:** I read the *Book of Forms*, our Presbyterian guideline for how-to and procedures. In sections 105–113, the qualifications and the duties and responsibilities for elders are outlined.

**Step two:** On a sheet of paper, I grouped and categorized the gifts that are collectively needed on a session. These I called "Gifts for the ministry of eldership."

**Step three:** With my congregational list in one hand and my list of gifts from Step 2 in the other, I went down the congregational list. I paused by each person I knew and, if I saw in that person any of the gifts listed on my sheet, I put a check beside the name.

*I was not looking for "the perfect elder." I was looking for people who, by the end of the process, had a cluster of checks by their name, a cluster of gifts. These I nominated.*

Note: Contrary to the term *elder*, this office is not confined to the elderly, and many congregations have benefitted from calling younger members. In turn, younger people have benefitted from serving as elders.

### **Gifts for the ministry of eldership, from the *Book of Forms***

- A person of good character who is an example to others of how to live in their "speech, conduct, love, faith and purity" (106:1).
- A person who is free to meet regularly. (Although I thought one woman in our congregation was a good candidate, I did not put a check beside her name for this item because I know she currently cares for both her elderly mother and grandchild. Regular meetings would be impossible for her.) (109)
- A person who is able to see the "big picture" of life in the church. This person can look beyond the details of individual programs and issues and see an overview of the congregation. This person can answer, "What is best for the whole congregation?" (109.1)
- A person who has concern for the property and facilities that the church owns or in which people gather for worship (109.2).
- A person who is good at discerning the character of other people, who understands systems and how they work, who has a good knowledge of leadership styles and when they are needed for specific tasks (109.3).
- A person who enjoys administration because it helps in the smooth operation of a congregation (109.4, 109.5, 110.5, 110.7, 112.1).

- A person who is comfortable and natural in sharing his or her faith (109.4, 112.2).
- A person who is grounded in and respectful of the Reformed faith, tradition and government, even though he or she may not have grown up in that tradition (110, 112.7).
- A person who has gifts for teaching others about the Christian faith and the Presbyterian tradition (110.1, 112.5).
- A person who appreciates, understands and enjoys the sacraments – baptism and communion – and is willing to take part in the rituals of the church (110.4, 111.1).
- A person who is trustworthy and can hold confidences (110.6, 110.8).
- A person who relates well to people of all ages, is a good listener, can ask clarifying questions and offer support (110.2, 110.8, 112.6).
- A person who is open to God’s Spirit leading the church in new ways and new directions (111.1).
- A person who is skilled or gifted at personnel matters and in building good teams (111.2, 112.3).
- A person who cares for the beauty and order of worship (111).
- A person who has knowledge about and is engaged in activity in the local community (113).
- A person with a strong sense of financial stewardship and deep commitment to responsible financial management (113.2, 113.5, 113.6).
- A person with a strong sense of the global mission of the Christian church (113.1, 113.6.1).

# Ordination and Authority

At ordination, four questions are asked the ordinands that have to do with

1. the doctrine of the Trinity
2. agreeing to the subordinate standards of the church
3. accepting and agreeing to participate in the government of the church by its courts
4. promising to perform all duties in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ

The last point regarding grace is worth drawing attention to. All members of the courts are human beings – fragile at times and sometimes fumbling in the dark, looking for God rather than seeing clearly. It is a great consolation that, in the work elders do, they have the grace of Christ and are called to extend it to others as well.

The preamble to the ordination vows begins with the words: “All ministries of the Church proceed from and are sustained by the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is our Prophet, Priest and King, the Minister of the covenant of grace.” The work of an elder comes from Christ – the good news is that it is also sustained by Christ.

Elders serve under the authority of “Jesus, the only King and Head of the Church.” This is why the church is not a democracy. Elders are not elected to represent a constituency. They do not answer to the congregation but to Christ, and do so under the authority of the higher courts of the church.

So the system of courts allows people to participate in the decision-making of the church and the life of the church.

Elders are free to vote as they see fit. They are elected to seek the will of God and to guide the church in a way that is scriptural. Under the session there is opportunity for congregational meetings and votes, but it is the session that leads, serves and governs the church.

## Questions for ordination to eldership

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



### The laying on of hands

Having committed to the four questions of ordination, the service of ordination asks for God's blessing on the people being ordained with prayers and the laying on of hands.

Ministry and eldership are hands at work. Christ was often using his hands – to heal, to comfort, to console, to teach. Arms spread out on the cross.

Elders extend their arms a lot in ministry. Perhaps that is why it is so touching that ordination is by laying on of hands. Charles Fensham, teacher at Knox College, Toronto, says that one way to think of this is that those hands are there to help you. You are not alone. Leadership is not up to you. You are part of something greater.

It is wise in any ministry to be aware of this – to come to know the resources at one's disposal, to nurture relationships with each other. This will be powerful in the work an elder does.

A complete description of the subordinate standards and the election and ordination of elders may be found in section 132 of the *Book of Forms*, in *Eldership in Today's Church* by Stephen Hayes (pp. 15–18), and on the church website ([presbyterian.ca](http://presbyterian.ca)).

# Admitting Previously Ordained Elders

Sometimes people elected to the session are already ordained. They may have been ordained in a previous congregation or, if your congregation employs term service for elders, they would have been ordained when first elected and could be in the position of being elected again. Presbyterians believe once ordained, always ordained; therefore, these elders are not re-ordained when they are re-elected.

When a session decides that it needs to add more elders to its number, previously ordained elders should not automatically be admitted to the session. The congregation still needs to engage in an election and discernment process that identifies individuals as being Christians equipped with gifts needed to “share with the minister in the leadership, pastoral care, and oversight of the congregation” at a certain time in the history of the congregation. We re-elect, but we do not re-ordain.

*The Book of Common Worship* includes a chapter called “Ruling Elders – A Service of Ordination.” As the title suggests, this is a service designed to ordain new elders as part of the procedure of admitting them to the session; however, it can easily be adapted to admit previously ordained elders as well.

**Responsive scriptures** – unchanged

**Apostles’ Creed** – unchanged

**Narration of steps** – as appropriate

**Preamble** – unchanged

**Vows** – It is appropriate for previously ordained elders to renew their vows by answering the four standard questions listed here, just as ministers renew their vows each time they are called.

**Congregational vows** – unchanged

**Ordination prayer** – Instead of a prayer of ordination, a prayer seeking God’s continued blessing upon those elected could be offered. Naturally, the prayer of ordination would also be used if others elected at the same time have not been ordained.

**Declaration** – For previously ordained elders, the declaration should be adapted to leave out the words “declare you to have been ordained.” The declaration would then state, “In the name of Jesus Christ, the only King and Head of the church, and by the authority invested in me by the Presbytery of (name of presbytery), I now admit you to the session of this congregation...”

**Right hand of fellowship** – unchanged

# Term Service for Elders

---

## What about term service?

---

As already noted, the General Assembly of 1997 approved the option for congregations to adopt term eldership.

In 2006, Don Muir surveyed a number of congregations that had opted for term eldership to find out how it was working in their congregations. These are some of the things that were reported.

### Advantages of term eldership

- Many of the congregations indicated that term service encourages people who are not prepared for life service to offer their God-given gifts for leadership and to bring fresh enthusiasm and new ideas to session.
- Term eldership can provide a graceful exit for those who feel they need a break.
- As elders leave the session, they can give their experience, knowledge and skills to other ministries of the church.
- Election and ordination of elders on a regular basis can become an important part of the life of the congregation. It can be an opportunity to remember what it means to be called by God. Older members of session can benefit from the chance to renew their understanding of ministry on a regular basis.

### Drawbacks of term eldership

- Among the drawbacks noted was the time it takes to hold elections biennially and then to train new elders.
- Some sessions noted that there are disappointments as gifted members leave when their term is done.
- Some sessions found that they simply prefer life terms.

Term service can work in small or large congregations, but it is not suitable for all. Whether or not it is suitable for your congregation is a matter of discernment. Session is called to make its own decision on the matter in consultation with the congregation. If the session decides to go to term eldership, it is to notify the presbytery and receive its permission. Since presbytery is responsible for the good order and care of churches in its bounds, it may in some situations question the advisability of term eldership. Generally, presbyteries respect the wisdom and process applied by session in arriving at this decision.

## Section 4

# The Care and Training of Elders

- Eldership and Lifelong Learning
- Growing as an Elder
- Taking Care of Yourself Through Prayer
- Talking About Your Faith

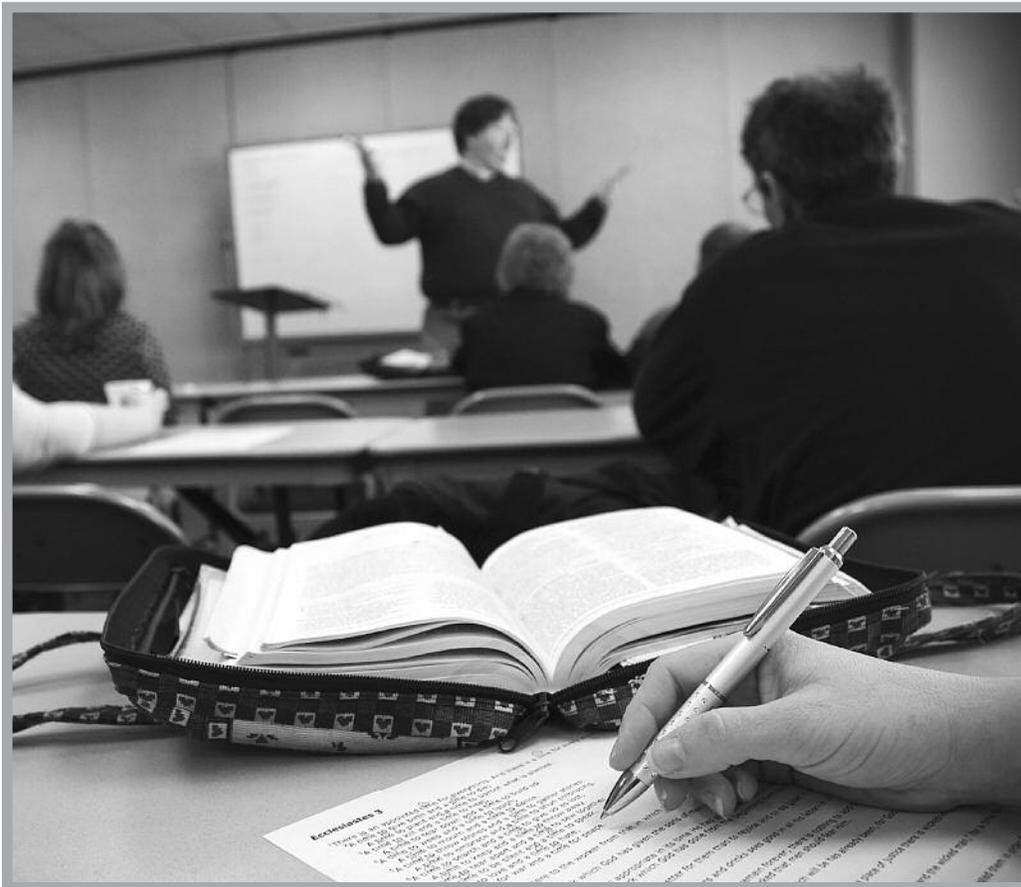


Photo © Nazarethman / iStockphoto.com

# Eldership and Lifelong Learning

Ordination to ruling eldership in The Presbyterian Church in Canada is a lifelong commitment to a call to ministry in and with the church. Whether serving as term elders, experiencing periods as inactive elders, or attending session meetings monthly for 20 years, all elders are always elders.

This ordination for life means that elders have responsibility for developing their skills, learning more about their ministry and growing in the faith. Elders need to be lifelong learners. Lifelong learning assumes that we all continue to learn new things over the years, whether this is through formal training, reading, discussions with others, experience, or picking up new information and ideas from a variety of sources. Lifelong learning at its best includes some intentional self-directed learning, in which adults identify an area where they need to gather information or learn new skills and initiate this learning on their own. Self-directed learning can take the form of reading in a particular area, finding a mentor or a group to discuss ideas and practice skills, or trying a new activity and reflecting on the experience.

There are a number of ways in which elders and sessions can pursue lifelong learning and continuing education.

## 1. Add an educational component to your session meeting

Take 20 minutes to half an hour to learn together each month.

- Read and discuss an article from this resource.
- Choose a book that relates to your ministry and discuss one chapter each month.
- Brainstorm a list of topics that your session wants to learn more about and choose one to study each month. Have each elder take one of the topics, do some research and make a presentation to the session.

## 2. Hold or attend a workshop, conference or retreat

Take specific time out to learn together and engage in training and skill development.

- **Workshops** – Decide on an area of ministry where your session needs improvement. Find someone who has expertise in that area to lead an evening or weekend workshop for you. Follow up by deciding how to use your new knowledge or skills.
- **Retreats** – Consider going on a session retreat once a year. This time together could have three purposes: to plan for the coming year, to engage in skill development in a particular area such as pastoral care, and to grow in faith together through worship, prayer and Bible study.
- **Conferences** – Take advantage of conference opportunities in your presbytery or synod. If there are no plans for a conference, work with a presbytery or synod congregational life committee to plan one.

## Eldership and Lifelong Learning

**3. Take a course**

Choose a topic that you would like to study and find a course that meets your needs. As many elders are unable to travel to study, distance learning opportunities, such as *Opening Doors to Discipleship*, are becoming more common (for more information about these courses, see page 84 of this resource). Distance learning can involve a correspondence course, a teleconference or an online course. Consider taking the course with two or three elders from your session. This way, you can discuss the materials together and do a workshop or presentation for your session when the course is finished.

The ministry of the ruling elder is vital to the health and development of congregations, its members and the wider community. Taking seriously the need for and opportunities to be found in lifelong learning will enable elders to better fulfill their vocations.

*Written by Erin Crisfield*

**Ideas for regular, ongoing training for session members**

(Use this elders' resource for many of these topics)

- Discuss important aspects of congregational life in the year ahead and design a bulletin insert to express these aspects to the rest of the congregation.
- Review the programs of your congregation.
- Evaluate (or re-evaluate) what structures or committees are necessary for the good functioning of the congregation.
- Study the role of laity in congregations. A good resource is "The Ministry of the Laity," which can be obtained from Ministry and Church Vocations of the national church office or the church website.
- Review the *Book of Forms* (sections 105–138), which describes the task of the church and the duties and responsibilities of the elders and session.
- Use books, exercises or videos to attend to the spiritual life of elders.
- Provide a workshop to equip elders in specific tasks: visiting, praying, pastoral crises.
- Build community cohesion among elders by using interactive Bible studies. The book *Interactive Bible Studies*, by Lyman Coleman (Serendipity, 1997), has excellent Bible studies on relationships, caring, spiritual formation, beliefs and discipleship.
- Conduct a Bible study on church leadership. Use both Old and New Testaments. Here are some suggestions: Exodus 3:1 – 4:20; Ruth 1; Judges 4:1–10; Acts 14:19–28; 1 Timothy 3:1–13; 1 Peter 5:1–7.

- Provide an update on things that are important to the whole denomination (good sources of information are PC Pak, *Presbyterian Record*, PCC website).
- Have a discussion about why we give to *Presbyterians Sharing* and PWS&D. Provide information about these ministries (video and print resources are available from church office).
- Review the history of our denomination and our form of government.

**Adult learners learn more and learn better when**

- they are engaged in learning, rather than talked at
- they are invited to use as many of their senses as possible in the learning process

# Growing as an Elder

## Learn more about your faith

The spiritual gifts of elders are recognized by God through a congregation. It is important that each ruling elder spend time listening to God to gain an understanding of the spiritual gifts that he or she possesses. It is also important to grow in faith and the knowledge of the Bible.

Consider

- joining a Bible study group in your church or neighbourhood
- sitting in on communicants' classes
- using a daily devotional and reflecting on the commentary
- reading the Bible regularly

## Know your congregation

It is important that elders are well informed about the many aspects of the congregation.

- Who are the leaders of all of the groups?
- What has the minister been preaching about?
- What news about members – glad and sad – do you need to convey to the congregation, or to the minister?
- Do you know the past story of the congregation? This is particularly helpful when visiting older members who have belonged to the congregation for many years.
- What changes have occurred in the life of the congregation in the past year?

## Learn about the wider church

- Find out about General Assembly issues and denominational news (see the *Presbyterian Record*, *The Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly* – there will be a copy in the church office).
- Attend a presbytery meeting with the representative elder.
- Watch for media coverage of religious issues in the newspaper or on television.

## Get to know each other on session

- Think about the members of the session to which you belong. Take a moment to think about your fellow elders. Close your eyes and visualize each of them. Did you miss anybody at the last meeting? Are you uncertain about some of their names?
- Ask yourself, even if you know all their names, how well you know them as people. Do you know their life situations, joys and enthusiasms, difficulties and sorrows? Do you understand why they behave in this way or that way? Without this kind of knowledge, our work to lead the congregation together is impaired.

- Do you know what your fellow elders feel about their eldership? Do they enjoy it? Do some feel overburdened? Are any taking on more work than they should for their own good, for their family's good, for the congregation's good?
- Do some feel inadequate in bereavement situations, where they know there is a need to put their faith into words? Without this knowledge of one another, how can we care for each other; how can we be "church" to each other?
- Are all of the elders on your session cared for by another elder? An elder and his or her family ought to have an elder other than one who is a member of the family. Every elder's family can benefit from the caring ministry of another elder who is less emotionally involved.
- Create a scrapbook of items about the elders of your church. Interview elders and ask them about their calling to eldership and, if they have been elders for some time, how their understanding of eldership has changed over time. Compile a list of "firsts" – first female elder, first youth elder, and so on.

### Are you overburdened?

We hear a great deal about "burnout" these days. Examples of burnout among educators, teachers, doctors, clergy are in the press and in our conversations. What about elder burnout?

Many elders say that they give far more than one night a week to their duties as elders. In a given month, they may attend a session meeting, a session executive meeting, a presbytery meeting, act as liaison person to the board of managers, attend presbytery, participate in search committee deliberations, pay a visit to a family in their district, represent the congregation at a Bible Society dinner, prepare a special announcement to the congregation, and more. As session members, we have decisions to make about priorities.

A session will want to think about how to make use of the talents and personalities of its elders. It is important to get the right person to take on a job, and to persuade the wrong person to relinquish a position. This may be difficult in small congregations where a smaller number of elders fulfill all of the responsibilities outlined in the *Book of Forms*. Congregations with very few elders may want to consider bringing in a few assessor elders from one or more congregations within the presbytery.

It is, however, not necessary (or even advisable) for elders to fill all the posts in the congregation, but it is their job to see that these positions are filled. An effective system of "talent-spotting" will seek out members in the congregation who will develop their abilities and use them in the life of the church.

Both large and small sessions can benefit from rotation and time limits. Rotation spreads the tasks evenly and fixed time limits relieve fears of having been given the job for life! These principles may mean that an elder will assume responsibility for a number of years, but hold different positions.

Adapted from *Caring for God's People: Handbook for Elders and Ministers on Pastoral Care*, by Stewart Matthew and Ken Lawson (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1989, 1995).

# Taking Care of Yourself Through Prayer

As an elder, you are called upon to care for a number of families. Each family is different and the members are of different ages. They have different needs. Before you can care for others, you need to care for yourself. Think of the times when Jesus took short periods of time away from his ministry. He found this necessary in order to carry on with his task.

In the church, we always emphasize the importance of praying for the people entrusted to our care. Equally important is being able to pray for yourself.

Prayer is not just asking for things, even if what you are asking for are good things for other people. Prayer is about being open to God, who meets you where you are and at whatever stage you are in your faith journey. You have been chosen by God as a spiritual leader within the congregation. Being open to God is finding a way to help you to be aware of God's presence with you.

In his book *Levels of Communication*, John Powell talks about the different levels of prayer.

**Level 5** – Many people pray prayers learned in early life – “now I lay me down to sleep,” or The Lord's Prayer.

**Level 4** – Some people pray the prayers of other people – using various books of prayers.

**Level 3** – Some people compose their own prayers, either by expressing thoughts as they occur or by using prayers that conform to certain theological ideas and with a certain pattern and language.

**Level 2** – A deeper level of prayer is engaged in when the expression of feelings is most important – praise, thanksgiving, joy, anger, sadness, fear. Many of the Psalms are good examples of this level of prayer.

**Level 1** – According to John Powell, the deepest level of prayer is where words are seen as less necessary. It is prayer in which we rest in the presence of God. To engage in this level of prayer, a person needs to be at peace – to be still in the knowledge of God.

Prayer is a great resource. It is an opening of a door for God to give you what you need. God wants us to ask for what we need. That includes what you, as an elder, need as you go about your pastoral care.

Prayer is enlightening and refreshing – enlightening as we come to hear what God's spirit is saying, and refreshing as we commit ourselves and our concerns into God's care.

Adapted from *Caring for God's People: Handbook for Elders and Ministers on Pastoral Care*, by Stewart Matthew and Ken Lawson (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1989, 1995).

# Talking About Your Faith

Faith-sharing is an important part of an elder's calling, yet many elders say they find it difficult to talk about what they believe. Some are afraid that they may be asked questions about the Christian faith or the Bible that they will be unable to answer.

Faith is not shared with words alone. Your faith will be conveyed in other ways as well, as you demonstrate the acceptance, love and forgiveness of the gospel. You do not have to give intricate theological answers. You can reasonably ask for time to prepare an answer.

Yet it is important to learn to talk about one's faith – to express one's beliefs and even one's questions about the faith. Think of your session as a family of faith. Elders share values and faith within their own family circles; this can be extended to the session or the church family.

Take time as a session to talk about your faith. The following two exercises are designed to be used in your session meeting, or with small groups within the congregation. The session may use them for a congregational training event on evangelism. These have been adapted from articles written by Courtney Morris.

---

## What is authentic God talk, anyway?

---

What is authentic God talk? How can Christians talk about God and faith outside the walls of the church? How do we avoid alienating others or being excluded from a friendship when we say the "God" word?

Often telling others about God has been seen as a way to sell religion, as a way to make a sales pitch, as something we have to do or that we have to prove. Instead, we need to rethink how we understand the sharing of our faith. People do not want to be sold religion, but they may want to be welcomed into a relationship, to be offered the opportunity to experience life in a new way. This way of offering companionship to others is the way of Jesus and, according to Brian McLaren, author of *More Ready Than You Realize* (Zondervan, 2002), it is a more authentic way to evangelize – that is, to share the good news of the gospel as you have experienced it.

Think of Jesus. His methods of discourse were effective – they drew people toward him, caused people to abandon an old way of life to follow him. Jesus' approach to evangelism offers direction for our own conversations. In his verbal interactions, he was

- short on sermons, long on conversations
- short on answers, long on questions
- short on abstractions and propositions, long on stories and parables
- short on telling you what to think, long on challenging you to think for yourself
- short on condemning the irreligious, long on confronting the religious (McLaren, p. 17)

Jesus' interactions were invitations, opportunities to teach and build relationships, and a way to activate people's imaginations. Use Jesus' ways to guide your God talk.

## Talking About Your Faith

Photo © iStockphoto.com



### Step 1: Take time for conversations

When we become aware of God in our everyday experiences, our eyes and ears are opened to the needs around us. In unexpected situations, we realize that people desire to engage in authentic conversations. Frequently people initiate conversation with me and express their natural curiosity about God and faith. Whether it is at a party, on a train ride, or at your child's sports practice or event, there are endless occasions to share faith experiences with others. People are often eager to gain a listening ear and have many questions to ask.

Many of Jesus' interactions were part of his everyday relations in common places where people lived out their lives: in homes, by the well, in fishing boats, or at parties such as weddings. Consider the story of the hemorrhaging woman (Mark 5:21–34). In a busy crowd on a busy day, Jesus was aware of the lightest touch on his cloak of an ill woman. He took the time to stop, to talk to this woman, to witness her faith and to heal her.

#### Discussion:

Share with the other elders experiences in your life when unexpected opportunities arose to share your faith with others.

### Step 2: Selling or giving?

Evangelism is not something to sell, so we should not approach it as if we want something from the listener. Nor do we mark our success on whether we have persuaded someone to agree with us, to believe what we believe, to see the world how we see it.

Think of your words in conversation as a gift with no strings attached, expecting nothing in return. This requires trust on our part. We speak the words and leave the results to God and the other person to resolve.

Jesus often presented an invitation by saying, "Come..." He made the invitation, and then left the rest to God and the other. The next time you find yourself in a situation to share your faith and talk about God, avoid telling the other and instead try asking, try giving, try inviting.

**Discussion:**

Think critically about the last time you shared your faith with another. What was your agenda? Talk about how you can ensure that your words are ones of invitation instead of persuasion.

**Step 3: Storytelling**

Throughout the gospels, Jesus spends much of his time talking about God through the art of storytelling. Stories have amazing power in our lives. Think of when a minister uses an anecdote in the sermon. It makes the message come alive in a new way. Stories in daily conversations possess the same power. They allow us to become vulnerable in ways that help us to open our hearts to God and our minds to new possibilities.

**Discussion:**

Recall when someone shared a personal story with you. How did it affect you? What drew you in or caused you to turn away? In pairs or groups of three, discuss the effects of storytelling in your faith journey.

**Step 4: Challenge people to think for themselves**

Conversations with others will not always be warm and fuzzy. When talking about God and a new way of life, it is more likely that our words will involve challenge. It is not our role to tell people what to think and to give them the answers. On the contrary, our message will be more effective when we challenge others to think for themselves. Then their lives will become transformed.

Jesus did not tell people what to do or how to think, but through conversation engaged them to think for themselves and formulate their own approach to faith. He avoided judging those who were not yet following him, but attempted to meet them in their own space. Recall his interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1–42). He avoided condemnation, but made comments that caused the woman to think for herself and ask questions and come to a new truth.

**Discussion:**

Give each other this challenge: this week, in your conversations, instead of trying to provide answers, practice asking more questions, allowing others time to formulate their thoughts. Good listening is a gift from God to others and part of helpful God talk.

The root of the word “evangelize” is from the Greek word *evangelos*, meaning “bringing the good news.” Evangelizing is about sharing God, who has brought us great joy, with all those we encounter, so that they can experience this same joy. Our desire to evangelize should mimic the deep yearning proclaimed by the apostles Peter and John when they said, “We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20).

## The power of everyday conversation

As Presbyterians, we are good at preaching about our faith during worship or writing about it in academic circles, but when it comes to talking about it in our everyday lives, we avoid it. We tend to choose evangelism through actions rather than through words.

Part of your role as elder is to be committed to the spiritual growth of your congregations, which includes ensuring that your members are given the tools to express their faith verbally. After reading a couple of books about participating in evangelism through conversation, I'd like to pass on some recommendations based on these two books – *More Ready Than You Realize* by Brian D. McLaren (Zondervan, 2002) and *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* by Thomas G. Long (Jossey-Bass, 2004).

First, try talking about God amongst yourselves in a session meeting. The following exercises will help you break free of old tendencies and start to build new ways of talking about your faith and sharing the gospel with others.

### Step 1: Evangelism icebreaker

Even within our church communities or homes, we have a hard time talking about God and what we believe. When we are given the words in worship it seems easy, but outside of this structured atmosphere it is difficult for many of us to share our faith, perhaps because it is personal or we aren't sure that we know exactly what we believe. As leaders in our congregations, we need to model for the members of our church how to express faith verbally.

Try this old Quaker activity as a way to initiate interaction in small groups on a basic but heartfelt level. The questions are basic but provide a way for people to move from introductory information about themselves toward getting acquainted with each other on a deeper level, and then to being able to make a theological statement about God. Begin by trying these Quaker questions with your session, then move on to small groups in the congregation, and then even to try them with friends outside the church. Before you know it, you will realize that talking about God is not so intimidating after all. With these few short questions, the words will just come pouring out.

#### Four Quaker questions:

1. Where did you live as a child and what were the winters like?
2. How was your home heated?
3. What was the centre of warmth in your life as a child?
4. When did God become a warm being for you and how did this happen?

For more Quaker questions, go to "Family Table Talk" at [presbyterian.ca/download/508](http://presbyterian.ca/download/508).

## Step 2: Connecting Sunday to the rest of the week

Our ability to put faith into words outside of the sanctuary depends largely on our seeing the connections between Sunday morning and the rest of the week. We need to stop saying that “we are getting back to the real world” when we leave church and continue our week on Monday mornings. If the only connection we make between Sunday worship and the rest of the week is that Sunday is where we get our batteries fuelled to endure the remainder of the week, then we are missing something! Worship should do more than inspire us for the rest of the week; it should transform us into looking at every day and every interaction in a new way. The relationship between Sunday morning and Monday morning is not one of sequence but one of depth. Sunday discloses what is true about every day and should reveal to us where God is present and at work in every aspect of life.

### Discussion:

How do you see the rest of your week connecting to Sunday worship? Talk about examples or stories from your week

## Step 3: Responding to “God chatter”

Spend some time listening to the chatter in your everyday life amongst your neighbours, family members, co-workers, fellow commuters, and other guests at a party you are attending. If you keep your ears open to what people say about God, you are likely to realize that a lot of “God chatter” or religious white noise exists. In this, there is a lack of depth in content of what is being spoken about God. God is often misrepresented. However, our casual use of God in everyday phrases, such as “God willing” or “with God on our side,” demonstrates humanity’s hunger for an encounter with the living God and the need for authentic speech about God.

When people find out what I do – Christian ministry – it has been my experience that instead of rejecting me, people are often curious and want to engage in honest conversation. They often want to know how I came to choose such a direction in my life. It is at this point that I am reminded of the advice of the apostle Peter, who taught: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15–16). I have learned that I am more ready than I think to share the gospel with others, and that most people I encounter on a daily basis are just as ready to hear it.

### Discussion:

Talk about a time when someone experienced curiosity about your involvement in church. How did you respond?

In the coming week, make note of situations outside the church when you hear people mention God. What part of their life were they connecting God to? Were they referring to God in a positive light?

## Section 5

# The Session at Work

- What Happens at a Session Meeting?
- Decision-Making and Evaluating
- Policies



Photo © Tatyana Ognitzko / Dreamstime.com

# What Happens at a Session Meeting?

“It is the duty of those who are called to the eldership to meet regularly with the minister...for the purpose of establishing good order and providing for the pastoral care of the congregation” (*Book of Forms* 109).

The session consists of the teaching elder (minister of Word and Sacrament), active members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries in the congregation, and ruling elders. It is in this forum that elders meet to provide prayerful care and oversight of the congregation. The session typically meets on a monthly basis.

## **Moderator**

The minister (of Word and Sacrament) moderates the session meeting. If there are two or more ministers, they may take turns moderating. If a congregation is without a minister, then the presbytery will appoint another minister to be interim moderator until a new minister is called.

## **A quorum**

For the session to meet, there must be a quorum of the moderator and 25 percent of the ruling elders, or two ruling elders, whichever is greater.

## **Accountability**

While called by the congregation, the minister is actually responsible to the presbytery that inducts her or him into the work of the congregation. Elders are elected by the members of the congregation. This is seen as a call from God through God’s people. Ordination into the eldership is a solemn event. Elders promise to submit to the courts of the church at all levels as part of their ordination vows. They carry out their duties in accordance with the scriptures and the *Book of Forms*.

## **The session meeting takes place in the context of worship**

The session meeting opens with scripture, prayer and a meditation or Bible study. Many elders say that this devotional/educational part of the meeting helps guide them in their ministry as elders.

The session prays and works together to ensure that pastoral care, worship, Christian education, stewardship (material and spiritual) and mission are carried out effectively within the congregation. It seeks out and admits members and makes arrangements for baptisms. Some sessions order their agenda so that a different aspect of the congregation’s life is a focus at each meeting, allowing for more in-depth discussion.

---

**What Happens at a Session Meeting?**

---

**Within the session, the work of the elders falls into three general areas: discussion, decision and delegation. Declaration follows.**

---

## 1. Discussion

---

Discussion arises from committee reports, congregational problems, concerns raised, and suggestions from the minister, elders or others. In discussion, elders have complete freedom to express their opinions. The *Book of Forms* gives guidelines for those moderating the discussion and for crafting motions, etc.

### **The motion**

According to the *Book of Forms*, discussions should begin with a motion (section 39). This is especially important in larger sessions, because it enables the moderator to keep the discussion focused on the matters at hand and minimizes extraneous discussion. Smaller congregations sometimes discuss an issue first and then compose a motion to summarize the decision. Clear rules for discussion and debate are set forth in the *Book of Forms*, sections 33–64. These sections should be studied and understood by all elders.

### **Speak to the moderator**

Whatever the size of the session, it is important for members to speak only to the moderator. Even when responding to a comment by another elder, the reply must be directed to the moderator. This reduces the chances of differences of opinion becoming imbued with emotional, personal or inappropriate responses, and is more likely to keep the discussion focused on the topic being discussed.

### **Free and open discussion**

It is important that every elder has the freedom to speak his or her mind without fear of becoming a pariah within the session or having his or her words repeated outside the session. Presbyterians govern their congregation by a group rather than by an individual, because they believe that greater wisdom is found in group decisions. But that wisdom only comes to expression when there is a full and free exchange of differing opinions, information, understanding and perspectives. Full, free, unhampered discussion enables the session to seek carefully the will of God for the congregation.

### **A closed court and confidentiality**

The session is the only court where discussion is closed. Occasionally visitors may be invited for a portion of the meeting, but for the most part this is a closed court. Session never votes when visitors are present. Confidentiality and respect are key here. No elder has the right to go outside the session meeting and tell others what somebody said about an issue. This allows for freedom of expression within the session meeting.

### The minutes

The clerk of session takes the minutes. These are not circulated or posted. Rather, they are read by the clerk at the beginning of each meeting. The *Book of Forms* provides guidelines for how to keep the minutes. They are legal documents that record decisions and actions of the session. They may be needed at a future time.

Sessions may provide a summary of the minutes to the congregation. This summary should only include decisions made, but not identify the movers and seconders of motions nor the list of those in attendance since it is the session as a whole that takes responsibility for its work.

---

## 2. Decision

---

The purpose of discussion is decision. Decisions are recorded by the clerk in the minutes.

Decision-making is not always an easy thing, but it is a key component of leadership. It is risky business at times and we all differ in our approach to how we go about this. Some like to make quick decisions and get on with things. Others want to take time, not close off options too quickly. Both extremes must be avoided. Session is called to carefully process and discern, but it also should not avoid implementing things. Postponing decisions indefinitely is not helpful.



Photo © Tract5 / Stockphoto.com

---

## What Happens at a Session Meeting?

---

The *Book of Forms* provides no guidelines for voting or what the deciding percentage should be. Although two-thirds majority is required for some important matters, it is assumed a simple majority vote is sufficient in most cases as long as the sincere concerns of a small minority are not being consistently overridden. Reaching a consensus is an ideal approach but it cannot be the rule for passing motions since that allows a minority to hold the majority from making decisions.

Once a decision is made, it becomes the decision of the entire session! This is where being a member of session is important. It was the session, not the individuals, who made the decision and all are bound to it. No one member can speak out and say they were not in support of it.

If one member wants to be relieved of responsibility for a decision of the court, that elder may have his or her dissent recorded. This must be done as soon as the decision is announced. The dissenter need not speak in favour of the decision, but may not speak against it or campaign against the session's decision. The dissenter may, however, appeal to a higher court and ask that the session decision be overturned. That is a right that cannot be denied, but unless the session decision is overturned, all elders must live with it. By doing so, the elder fulfills the ordination vow not to take a divisive course.

---

### 3. Delegation

---

The decision must now become an action – no decision is complete until it has been delegated to someone responsible for carrying it out.

Practically, many motions will be carried forward by the clerk, who will communicate with committees of session, write letters, etc. Others will be taken on by the minister. The clerk is responsible to inform people of the work that has been assigned to them, but the session itself must state clearly who is responsible for carrying out the session's decision.

---

### 4. Declaration

---

Once discussion has led to a decision that has been delegated to an individual or group to implement, then it needs to be declared to the congregation. Communication is important. While the session is a closed court, it is bound to be in relationship with the congregation, listening to concerns and communicating session's own actions and concerns back. Decisions made should be shared using bulletins, newsletters, announcement time, elder's visits and so on. Failure to communicate and explain session decisions can lead to confusion, distrust and conflict in a congregation. The importance of communication can never be underestimated.

#### **Discuss:**

Has your session ever been criticized for being too secretive? What are some of the ways you could communicate more clearly and frequently with the congregation?

# Decision-Making and Evaluating

## Six Thinking Hats: making good decisions at your session meeting

Have you ever left a meeting asking, “What did the others *really* think or feel?” Or have you ever heard, “I feel this is a warm and friendly church,” but there is little evidence to back that up. Making decisions in session can be complex and difficult. *Six Thinking Hats*, by Edward De Bono (Little, Brown and Company, 1985, 1999), reminds us that thinking is a skill and can be improved.

In a meeting, you will not want to over-structure the use of a system such as this, but it is helpful to have some procedures that ensure a wide usage of the different types of thinking required to make good decisions.

### How to use this article

#### Option 1:

Have minister(s) and elders read it, then agree to have the moderator or chairperson be the “blue hat” for one particular issue. Have the six coloured hats and their brief descriptions available (see p. 137) so people can be reminded of what each stands for, or, if your session is adventurous, have six coloured hats on a central table with the hat band giving the brief descriptions for the meaning of each hat.

#### Option 2:

Have one member of session read the article (or perhaps even the book) and make a presentation to session. Use the process in an “easy” decision, such as whether or not to hold an elder’s retreat. Talk together about whether it was a helpful process and how often it might be used.

#### Some issues that may be helpful to discuss with the *Six Thinking Hats*:

- term service for elders
- programs for your congregation
- pastoral care procedures
- how to involve new people in leadership
- whether or not to hire a new staff person
- whether to do a mission trip or pave the parking lot, etc.

## Why would you use the *Six Thinking Hats* in a session meeting?

- The biggest enemy to clear thinking is complexity. Using the *Six Thinking Hats* breaks down a complex issue into manageable parts.
- It can be playful and fun. Who says decision-making should be deadly serious?
- Instead of having all kinds of thinking going on at the same time, the hats allow us to focus on one particular type of thinking at a time.
- It ensures that one type of thinking doesn't dominate all discussions.
- It allows for the different thinking styles of people to be used.

De Bono suggests that our decisions may be limited because our thinking process is too limited. To broaden our understanding of thinking, De Bono describes six thinking hats. Each hat has a different purpose. Each hat brings a different element to the discussion.

Each person has a preferred hat – a preferred thinking style. Learning which preferred styles are present in a group helps the group be more tolerant and understanding. Bert is not just a negative person. Bert is a person who prefers to use the black hat. But that is okay, because Annie prefers to use the yellow hat and Doris is a green hat thinker. We need all types of hats to make good decisions. Being aware of the six hats helps to ensure that everyone's thinking style is included.

The six hats are

1. Blue hat – Organizes the thinking process
2. Green hat – Generates new ideas and encourages creativity
3. Yellow hat – Is hopeful and positive, sunny, optimistic
4. Black hat – Covers the negative aspects, why something cannot or shouldn't be done<sup>5</sup>
5. Red hat – Allows the emotional view of an issue
6. White hat – Presents the facts, is neutral and objective

### Sequence for using the hats

The colours of the hats relate to their function and may be used in any order after a group is used to working with them. However, at the beginning, it is probably better to use them in a specific order.

The **Blue** hat is most commonly used by the chairperson who negotiates with the group which order to use.

<sup>5</sup> As I (Dorothy Henderson) was preparing this article, I was aware of the fact that many people with dark skin object to having the colour black used for stereotyping ideas, concepts or people as negative, critical, glass-is-half-empty types. Of course they should object! I would too. If I were using this in a church group, I would simply change the "black hat" to "purple hat," but because I want to be faithful to Edward De Bono's concepts, I've used black in this article.

As the group is learning to work with the hats, follow this order:

**Green**

**Yellow**

**Black**

**Red**

**White** may be used at any time.

In a meeting, says De Bono, we can become aware of which hat is being worn and be free to ask for another hat to expand our thinking. "We've had a lot of black hat thinking today, but how would we view this issue if we were to wear a yellow hat."

---

### Details on each hat

---

#### 1. Blue hat – Is the conductor of the orchestra of thinking

Blue hat thinking oversees the whole thinking process and keeps the big picture in mind. Blue hats provide the overview.

The blue hat person

- provides focus, which is needed for a good discussion
- may remind us when we need to switch hats to add to our depth of understanding
- suggests when we need to stop
- looks at how we feel about the discussion so far
- may point out that we're stuck at the creative process (green hat) and need to go to facts (white hat)
- concludes the discussion or meeting

Blue hat thinking usually falls to the role of the chairperson, but may be done by the group, e.g., "Let's go around the table and see where you think we are at this time."

#### 2. Green hat – Generates new ideas and encourages creativity

Green hat thinking

- finds ways to do things differently
- is concerned with change
- looks for ways to do things more simply or better

Green hat thinking is about movement: Where will this idea take us?

This is the time to generate provocative or reversal ideas. For instance, what would happen if people took offering out of the offering plate instead of putting it in? Creative pauses should be built into work on a regular basis so introverts have time to consider and reflect.

Although critical thinking is not part of this stage of thinking, it is appropriate to "shape" new ideas. For instance, someone might reflect that the proposed idea might work well in a large church but, since you are a small church, how could it work?

## Decision-Making and Evaluating

**3. Yellow hat – Is hopeful, positive, sunny, optimistic**

Once ideas have been generated, they are usually followed up with yellow hat thinking.

Yellow hat thinking

- allows for development of an idea
- offers a positive assessment of the idea
- supports the benefits and values of the idea
- asks, "What good might come from this idea?"

The yellow hat should not be confused with "feeling good" about an idea. (That belongs under red hat.) The yellow hat should be able to provide *support* for the idea. For instance, "I think a stewardship program will work in our congregation because I heard that this same program worked in 12 other congregations across Canada."

When assessing possibilities that come from an idea, categories can be used to rate the idea. For instance, you might rate the ideas as a) proven, b) very likely, c) based on experience and what we know, d) good chance, e) an even chance, f) remote or long shot.

Yellow hat thinking looks at opportunities, visions and hopes.

**4. Black hat – covers the negative side of the idea, why something cannot or should not be done**

This is the hat of critical judgment, a chance to play the "devil's advocate." This hat helps to identify why something may not work. It is not to be confused with red hat thinking: e.g., "I just don't like this idea."

Black hat thinking

- gives logic
- allows people who disagree with the idea to voice their opinion without being judged as the pessimist in the crowd
- allows people to look at an issue from another point of view
- gives people a specific time to view their negative thoughts so that negativity doesn't take over the entire meeting

When it comes to using the black hat, some observations need to be made. First, it is always more immediately gratifying to point out the weaknesses of something than to point out the strengths. Once the weaknesses have been pointed out, nothing further needs to be done. There is immediate gratification. But, if an idea is supported, there is no gratification until the idea is worked out. Generally speaking, it is easier to see the negative than the positive and once the negative is stated, expressing the positive is an uphill battle. It is best to express the positive first (the yellow hat) and then allow the black hat. Everyone should be asked to think of the positive aspects first and then consider whatever difficulties or weaknesses there might be. Black hat thinking can then try to help the positive ideas by asking questions like: Can this idea work? Are there any benefits to doing this? Is this worth doing? Does this support our mission or vision?

Black hat thinking is not to be confused with being argumentative. It is simply the objective attempt to put the negative elements on the table. It should not be confused with expression of emotions, which falls under the red hat. With any new ideas, the yellow hat should always be used before the black hat.

### 5. Red hat – Gives the emotional view to an issue

The red hat is the opposite to the white hat. Our emotions are a necessary part of the thinking process, not an intrusion into “let’s just have the facts.” Since emotions are always present, it is helpful to have a formal and neutral way for people to express them. Here is an example of red hat thinking: “Don’t ask me why, but I think two services would be a big mistake.”

Red hat thinking

- asks for hunches, intuitions, impression without any particular reason or basis
- allows people to express their emotions rather than bury them or take them out to the parking lot
- allows emotions to be expressed during the meeting but not take over the meeting
- allows people to speak about their emotions without having to justify them

### 6. White hat – Neutral, objective, only the facts

This hat calls for the facts in a neutral way without any arguments. It is harder than it might seem to give facts without making an interpretation. For instance, someone might say, “The giving in the congregation is down 25 percent because people don’t like the new hymn book.” Being down 25 percent may be a fact, but the rest is interpretation that needs to be checked out.

White hat thinking

- separates believed facts from checked facts
- no interpretation or point of view should be attached to a fact
- puts forward as many facts as possible
- does not use facts to support already preconceived ideas or assumptions

The key to white hat thinking is to be neutral and to present information much the way a computer would.

*Written by Dorothy Henderson, with thanks to Dale Woods for his contribution of an article on the book Six Thinking Hats, by Edward De Bono*

## Making decisions in the church by discerning God’s leading

Discerning the will of God – where God is leading – is somewhat of a holy mystery. Often we discern God’s presence only as we look back. As Christians, but particularly as Christians in the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition, we place high value on the collective wisdom of community. The following community process is adapted from *Discerning God’s Will Together*, by Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen (Upper Room Books, 1997). It makes use of “best practices” from other Christian traditions, particularly the Jesuits and Quakers.

This process is helpful for congregations who are attempting to make decisions that are consensual, constructive and, most importantly, in keeping with where the congregation senses God leading.

## How to use this article

Dorothy Henderson writes that she has used this process many times and found it helpful in some of the following situations:

- defining a path for the future
- deciding whether or not to start a new program/mission endeavour
- choosing a church school curriculum
- evaluating the current programs of a church

Although it is somewhat time consuming (it may take two meetings), at the end of the process, people felt confident that the decision was a good one and was shared by a broad base of people. More to the point, the people involved in the decision-making believed that they sensed the leading of God's hand.

While most members of the congregation become directly involved in this process in the interview step (#5: Listening), you will likely discover that most people want to understand the various steps of the process and where the process is leading. It is helpful to prepare a chart that outlines the ten steps and points out to participants where you are in the discernment process, especially if they have not been involved in steps 1 to 4.

Recruit a wise leader. Then follow the discernment steps from 1 to 10.

### 1. Framing

Describe what discernment is needed. The subject for discernment should be clearly stated and agreed upon by a group. The **key question** is, "God, what are you guiding me/us to do about...?"

### 2. Grounding

The **key question** is, "What is the guiding principle by which the discernment will happen?" The grounding step explains *how* the discernment process will proceed. For instance, a guiding principle might be that a small portion of the congregation would be polled in order to discern the larger opinion of the whole congregation. Or a different guiding principle might be that a small group of the congregation and a small group of community leaders might be consulted. Or a more generic guiding principle might be, "To seek God's will together."

### 3. Shedding

Shedding means naming and laying aside anything that will deter the person or group from focusing on God's will. The **key question** is, "Do I have ideas or feelings that interfere with me listening for God's will?" This means setting aside private agendas, pet causes and grievances so the discernment process can proceed. In a group, people may be invited to write their grievance on paper, which is kept private, but then be invited to say together, "I will put aside this grievance to search for God's will."

#### 4. Rooting

The **key question** is, "What biblical images or texts come to mind for this particular issue of discernment?" Invite the participants to suggest images, themes, stories or people in scripture that make connections with the issue they are considering.

#### 5. Listening

The **key question** is, "What voices do we need to hear?" Listening is essential to discernment. Listening may include gathering information and conducting interviews with people *inside* the group and *outside* the group. Listening should include working with groups and individuals and also encouraging private prayer.

#### 6. Exploring

The **key question** is, "What are possible options or paths that might be followed?" It is important to refer back to the guiding principle established in step 2. The exploring step is like brainstorming. Each option is offered like a trial balloon, but no evaluation takes place.

#### 7. Improving

The **key question** is, "How can we make each option the best it can be?" If a list of 20 options has been generated, try to group them or choose four or five which seem most acceptable to the group. Invite the group to work together to "better up" each option, adding detail for clarity, or describing advantages. (Note: In the process of majority rule, the goal is to find the lowest common denominator. However, in the discernment process, the goal is to make each option the best it can be. This helps all participants to have a win-win feel in the process.)

#### 8. Weighing

Weighing lets the discerning person or group move toward a preference. Weighing moves toward closure and bringing the process to a conclusion. The **key question** is, "Upon which option or path will the Spirit rest?" There are several methods of weighing. Choose one of the following:

- a. From the Jesuits, borrow the practice of drawing a line down the middle of a page and listing the pros and cons of each option.
- b. Using the image of biblical fruits, list the likely fruits (positive outcomes) of each path.
- c. From John Cassian, apply the five-way test to each option:
  1. Is it filled with what is good for all?
  2. Is it heavy with the fear of God?
  3. Is it genuine in the feelings that underlie it?
  4. Is it lightweight because we want to look good or because we want to do something new?
  5. Has excessive pride diminished the luster of our dream?
- d. From the Jesuits, borrow the practice of placing each path (option) near the heart. Is there consolation – a sense of peace and movement toward God? Is there desolation – a sense of dis-ease and movement away from God?

---

**Decision-Making and Evaluating**


---

- e. From the Bible, read the passage from John 14:1–3, where Jesus offers to go ahead and prepare a place for us in God’s house. Imagine entering God’s house and meeting Jesus at the door. As you walk with Jesus through the house, open each door, one at a time. Each room reveals one option. What do you see? What does Jesus say?

After using one of these weighing options, do not vote on the options. Based on the discussion, the leader may express what seems to be the preferred path: “From listening to you, I believe you are sensing that this is the path down which God is leading us.”

The leader gives the group two options:

1. I sense we are ready to move toward a consensus.
2. I sense that we need more time to think and pray about this matter.

(If the group is not ready to respond or the leader is in some way challenged by the group, the leader may suggest that more time is needed and may suggest another meeting.)

## 9. Closing

The group has used different activities – listening, exploring and improving – to move toward discovering a new view. By keeping the process open, there is always the possibility for new insight and wisdom. But we cannot keep matters up in the air forever. The following steps may now be taken to bring closure.

Test for consensus using the tradition of the Quaker clerk. Ask participants to choose one of the following levels of response:

1. I like the path as stated. (Consensus)
2. I’m concerned, but will support this path. (Consensus) This person might be saying, “If I were making the decision alone, I would express it differently, but I will not stand in the way of a group that thinks this is where God is leading us.”
3. I am uneasy for these reasons, but will stand aside. (Consensus)
4. I cannot support this direction. (Non-consensus)

If more than one person chooses option 4, it is probably wise to stop the process and give people more time. It is possible for one or two people to hold the entire group hostage by declaring themselves to be unmovable in position 4. This is not helpful or wanted. The leader may ask the non-consensus people if they are able to move to the position of standing aside so as not to block the rest of the group. The reasons for not supporting the path are recorded.

If there is some non-consensus in the group, the leader should now ask, “Do we need to proceed at this time, or can the decision wait for the future?”

If a group is divided, but needs to proceed, select one of these seven options:

1. Look at the guiding principle again (step 2), test for indifference and repeat the steps of the discernment process at a later time.
2. Take time for further prayer and reflection.
3. Cast lots. There is some biblical precedent for casting lots (Acts 1:26). This may be especially helpful if there are two or three almost equally viable options. The group agrees to write the options on slips of paper and agrees to abide by the one chosen.

4. Appoint one person to decide for the group.
5. Vote by majority rule. This may be a viable option in a large group, but this option should only be considered if there is a sense that everyone in the group has been heard and understood. Voting always brings with it the sting of winners and losers.
6. Count only the “yes” votes. This is particularly helpful when a specific number of people are needed to start a project or ministry. Work with those who have energy and passion for it.
7. Drop it. If the group cannot see where God is leading, celebrate the time you have had together, but drop the discerning process and move on to other things.

### 10. Resting

The **key question** is, “How does it feel? Is this a comfortable place to be?” Invite the participants to rest the decision near their hearts as they look for consolation or desolation. Does the decision bring peace and draw the group closer to God and each other, or does it result in distress and move the group away from God? Does the decision feel close to the heart of God?

## Talking with elders about leadership

Congregational leadership is vitally important. After reading an article about a church that decided to be intentional about providing a three-year leadership development program, Dorothy Henderson asked herself, “If I were the minister of a congregation, how would I go about raising the issue of how we could strengthen leadership?” Here’s what she thought she might do.

### Step 1: Gather two or three “leadership pals”

The energy for this initiative may come from the minister, an elder or a wise facilitator in the congregation. Talk about how a focus on leadership development will help the congregation. It’s important to think through *how* you will talk about leadership with elders and other leaders. You don’t want to imply that they are not providing good leadership now. Stress that the more good leadership there is, the more vital the ministry of the church will be. You might also point out the need of older leaders to mentor younger leaders so that the church is around for future generations.

### Set five goals, such as these:

By five months, we will have guided the session through short leadership discussions at each session meeting and in that time we will

- identify the current leadership roles (Goal 1)
- name some leadership gaps (Goal 2)
- interview leaders in our congregation to find out what might be helpful in their specific leadership role (Goal 3)

## Decision-Making and Evaluating

- invite a guest from a neighbouring church or presbytery who exemplifies the positive things that can happen when leadership support is provided (Goal 4)
- identify and plan specific leadership events that could be provided for congregational leaders (Goal 5)

### Step 2: Identify current leadership roles (Goal 1)

On the session meeting agenda, add this item: Thinking about leadership needs (15 min.). Explain why your small group is raising the issue of leadership. (See notes under step 1.)

Invite the elders to list, on chart paper, the different types of leadership needs in the congregation, using position descriptions and not people's names – e.g., music leader, children's church school teacher, elder, etc.

### Step 3: Naming the leadership gaps (Goal 2)

This step is a dreaming-visioning step. What leadership needs can be identified that would strengthen the work and life of the church? (Remind them that there are often "hidden" leaders in the congregation, and their gifts can be encouraged.) Elders might work individually or in pairs to finish one or more of these sentences as many times as possible:

If we had good leaders, I think it would be a wonderful ministry for our church to...

I notice in our community there is a need for...

If a specific leader is unavailable in our congregation, we could look...

By the end of the allotted time, identify, if possible, one new ministry that might be possible, given good leadership.

### Step 4: Interview leaders (Goal 3)

One of the mistakes we often make in providing leadership development is that we don't ask leaders to identify what it is they need to know or learn in order to feel more confident in doing their leadership task. Divide up the list of leaders and make a commitment to interview every leader, asking how the session could help leaders feel comfortable and confident in their role. (Elders should do this for themselves as well.)

### Step 5: Invite a guest (Goal 4)

It is inspiring to hear from another church or community leader about leadership events in their setting that were a great blessing and help. Dig around in your community and choose carefully for a great example of what can be done.

### Step 6: Identify and plan specific leadership events (Goal 5)

There are lots of ready-made leadership events provided by The Presbyterian Church in Canada – Stewards by Design, Ewart Lay Education Courses, Youth in Mission, Teacher Leader Courses (TLC), Natural Church Development, pre-Assembly

conferences, Canada Youth conferences, and so on. There are funding and resources available for leadership programs.

### Step 7: Implement the plan

Lastly, and most importantly, to borrow a commercial phrase – *just do it*. It is widely known in the business community that about 90 percent of all good ideas go nowhere. Why? Because they are simply not implemented.

Depending on your local context, you may also want to explore this question: What might happen to sabotage or halt our leadership endeavours? Thinking this through may help you avoid some pitfalls in your leadership journey.

## How well are we doing? A self-evaluation tool for the session

Elders in The Presbyterian Church in Canada want to do a good and faithful job. Sometimes, though, elders are plagued with self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. This self-evaluation tool is intended to

- celebrate the good things that happen because of the faithful work of the session
- attain an overview of the large picture of how well the session is functioning
- identify specific areas that may need more attention

### Options for using this self-evaluation tool

Complete the evaluation form (pp 147 to 150) in sections at regular session meetings, spreading the task over several months to allow time for conversation. Identify issues that need attention at a later time. (If you have a large session, break into small groups for this work.)

or

Use the evaluation form as the basis of a session retreat program.

or

Ask some of the elders on session to complete the evaluation form and report back to the entire session. Allow plenty of time for discussion by all elders.

All of the descriptions on the self-evaluation form are from the *Book of Forms*. The numbers following each statement identify the section.

*A special thanks to George MacAskill, an elder at Knox, Waterloo, Ontario, for passing along this idea from a Knox session retreat.*

Decision-Making and Evaluating

**Roles and responsibilities: How well are we doing?**

**A. Membership of session**

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). (106.1)

The number of elders in every congregation cannot well be limited, but should be according to the bounds and necessity of the people. It belongs to the session to determine the number of elders required by the circumstances of the congregation. (107, 107.1)

Elders are ordained for life unless deposed or suspended in process of discipline. They may fulfill the duties of the eldership on the session for periods of six years. One third of the session shall be elected every two years. (108, 108.2)

**B. Supervision and oversight**

It is the duty of those who are called to the eldership to meet regularly with the minister 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. (109)

The session is responsible for the supervision and oversight of all associations of members and adherents. (109.1)

The session is responsible for all policy and procedures with respect to the use of church buildings and property. (109.2)

The session is responsible for the election and admission of elders. (109.3)

The session assigns 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. (109.4)

The session is responsible for keeping a roll of the professing members, a register of baptisms, and a record containing the names and addresses of all members and adherents connected with the congregation. (109.5)

Excellent	Okay	Needs more attention

**Roles and responsibilities: How well are we doing?** *(continued)*

**C. Membership and pastoral care**

The session is responsible for seeking out, preparing and admitting persons as professing members, and for the pastoral care of all persons within the fellowship of the congregation. (110)

The session is responsible for the provision of instruction in the Christian faith of applicants for professing membership. (110.1)

The session is responsible for the examination of candidates for membership. (110.2)

The session, by resolution, is responsible for admitting candidates to professing membership. (110.3)

The session is responsible for provision for the sacrament of baptism. (110.4)

The session is responsible for the reception of professing members, whose membership has lapsed, and who apply to be reinstated. (110.6)

The session is responsible for the transfer of professing members and adherents to the care of another session when they move to reside elsewhere. (110.7)

The session is responsible for the exercise of discipline by counselling and encouraging professing members, being satisfied as to their repentance and restored faith. (110.8)

**D. Worship**

As the executive of the presbytery, the minister is responsible for the conduct and content of public worship and for the supply of the pulpit. (111)

The session is responsible for regulating the hours and forms of public worship and for arranging special services. (111.1)

The session is responsible for the organist and other leaders of the service of praise, whether voluntary or salaried. (111.2)

Excellent	Okay	Needs more attention

Decision-Making and Evaluating

**Roles and responsibilities: How well are we doing?** *(continued)*

**E. Christian education**

The session is responsible for providing for the program of Christian education for persons of all ages in order that they may be confronted by the gospel, may grow in faith, participate in the life of the Christian community, and be active witnesses to Christ in the world. (112)

The session is responsible for the administration, oversight, support and evaluation of the total Christian education program of the congregation. (112.1)

The session is responsible for ensuring the education of the entire congregation in its witness to the local community and in its mission to the world and for encouraging members both individually and corporately to share the gospel with others. (112.2)

The session is responsible for the recruitment, appointment, training and support of teachers and leaders, the selection and approval of resource materials and programs that will be used in Christian education. (112.3)

The session is responsible for setting before the persons under its care the obligations implied in their having been baptized. (112.4)

The session is responsible for providing instruction for persons requesting the sacrament of baptism. (112.5)

The session is responsible for the support of parents in the nurture of their children in the Christian faith by encouraging Christian family living and by providing organized opportunities for their children within the structure of the educational program. (112.6)

The session is responsible for creating a full-time or part-time position for a professional church educator. (112.7.1)

Excellent	Okay	Needs more attention

**Roles and responsibilities: How well are we doing?** *(continued)*

**F. Stewardship and mission**

The session is responsible for all aspects of stewardship and mission, both spiritual and material, within the congregation. (113)

The session will keep before the congregation the life and work of the church around the world. (113.1)

The session is responsible for seeing that the congregation develops and maintains programs of mission and outreach both related to its immediate community and beyond. (113.2)

The session will arrange for outreach to children, youth and adults in the community. (113.3)

The session will see that the congregation provides for persons in need of financial or material assistance both among its members and in the community. (113.4)

The session will seek to ensure that the congregation, in its commission to spread the gospel among all persons, is contributing according to its ability, both for the maintenance of its own witness and ministry to the community and for the mission of the whole church. (113.5)

The session is responsible for all decisions relating to stewardship, including how and when the financial needs of the church at all levels are to be presented to the congregation so that the programs of life and mission may be supported adequately. (113.6)

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. (113.6.1)

The session may approve and arrange for special offerings to be received for other religious and charitable purposes. (113.6.2)

Excellent	Okay	Needs more attention

# Policies

## Leading with Care:

### A Policy for Ensuring a Climate of Safety for Children, Youth and Vulnerable Adults in The Presbyterian Church in Canada

*Leading with Care* is a policy for ensuring a climate of safety in The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

As Christians, we are to be responsible and responsive to those in our care within the church building and outside – in our programs, visits and recreation.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada is committed to providing safe environments for all persons, including children, youth and vulnerable adults and those who minister to and with them.

This policy assists congregations in four areas:

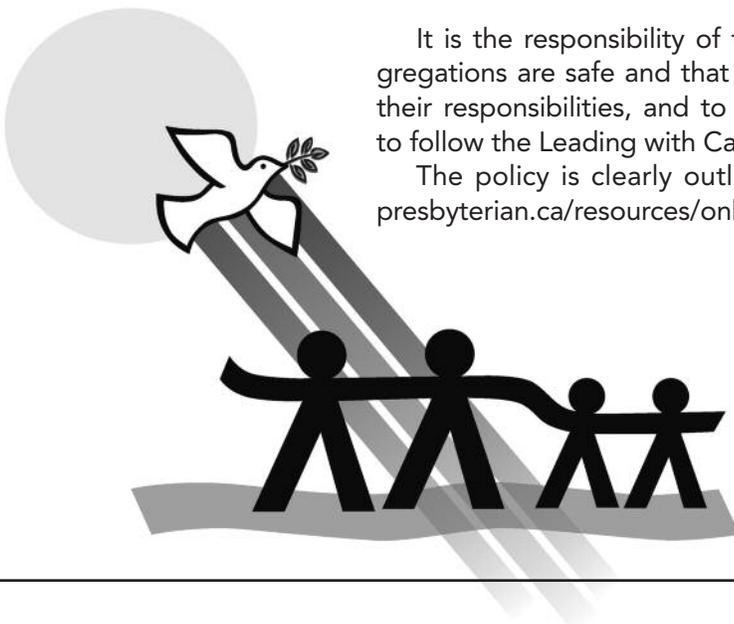
- to prevent the abuse of children/youth/vulnerable adults
- to protect the vulnerable in our midst
- to report incidents of abuse, neglect and harm
- to train and support our teachers and leaders

The General Assembly has approved the policy and has recommended its implementation in all congregations.

“That congregations expedite the implementation of the policy within one year (by July 1, 2006) and that presbyteries oversee the implementation for all congregations and ministries within their bounds” (A&P 2005, p. 369).

It is the responsibility of the session to ensure that congregations are safe and that those in leadership understand their responsibilities, and to train and support their leaders to follow the Leading with Care policy in word and deed.

The policy is clearly outlined on the church website at [presbyterian.ca/resources/online/275](http://presbyterian.ca/resources/online/275).



## Policy of The Presbyterian Church in Canada for Dealing with Sexual Abuse and/or Harassment

**“It is the policy of The Presbyterian Church in Canada that sexual abuse or harassment of any kind by church leaders, staff or volunteers will not be tolerated.**

**“Because of serious consequences of sexual abuse or harassment, the Church will make every effort to ensure that such abuse or harassment does not occur within its jurisdiction. When complaints of sexual abuse and/or harassment arise, the Church will respond with seriousness, sensitivity and concern for all involved, and will recognize the necessity of dealing with both complainant and complaine in a fair and just manner. This policy is designed to ensure that the Church deals with complaints. It is not designed to help search out wrongdoing.”**

*– from the Policy of The Presbyterian Church in Canada for  
Dealing with Sexual Abuse and/or Harassment, p. ii*

Complaints of sexual abuse or harassment are dealt with under this policy. It is important that elders and ministers are educated in how to exercise their leadership role with respect to sexual abuse and harassment. The General Assembly has recommended that sessions and leaders in the congregation receive training in dealing with these issues.

“That ministers of congregations arrange for training for sessions and other congregational leaders in dealing with sexual abuse/harassment by church leaders.” (A&P 1996, p. 36)

The policy, as well as a training workshop on the policy, is available for downloading on the church website under [presbyterian.ca/resources/online/142](http://presbyterian.ca/resources/online/142).

The purpose of the workshop, written by Sylvia Cleland, is twofold:

- To help congregational leaders recognize their responsibility for appropriate, ethical behaviour in their exercise of leadership.
- To educate leaders concerning the procedure to be used in dealing with complaints of sexual abuse/harassment, particularly at the congregational level.

---

## Section 6

# The Session and Working Relationships

- The Session and the Minister(s)
- The Session and the Board of Managers
- The Session and the Presbytery
- The Session and the General Assembly



The session is called to be in relationship with and work with other committees, courts and individuals in the life of the church. The word *relate* is of importance here. In the Presbyterian system, sessions work in collaboration and in harmony, according to the polity of the church.

## The Session and the Minister(s)

### A dual relationship

“A minister in charge sustains a dual relationship. In respect of his/her judicial function, he/she is a constituent member of the session, and it is inaccurate to speak of ‘the minister and session.’ In respect of his/her ministerial functions, he/she is the executive of the presbytery, and as such distinguishable from the session” (*Book of Forms* 105.1).

The minister of Word and Sacrament has a twofold relationship with the elders in a congregation.

On the one hand, the minister is one of the elders on the session. The minister moderates the session.

(When there are two ministers, they preside alternatively or as may be agreed upon by them. The other minister votes as an ordinary member of session.)

On the other hand, the minister also represents the presbytery within the congregation. The minister is an executive of the presbytery, not a member of the congregation. The presbytery functions as pastor to all the congregations, and the ministers who are part of the presbytery are the executives through whom the presbytery carries out its responsibilities, much like priests who assist the bishop in a hierarchical church.

**“In The Presbyterian Church in Canada covenantal relationships exist between presbyteries, congregations and ministers. They are rooted in our relationship with God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and in our understanding of who and whose we are. The congregation calls a minister, and the congregation and minister covenant to work together in ministry. The presbytery is responsible to care for the wellbeing of congregations and ministers within its bounds, by providing support and a means for accountability. Presbyteries, congregations and ministers must strive continuously to live out these covenants faithfully. When their efforts bear good fruit, the church is strengthened for its participation in Christ’s ministry in the world.”**

*– Called to Covenant, p. 5*

## Responsibility for worship

One area where the minister stands apart from the elders, as an executive of presbytery, is in the worship service. The *Book of Forms* outlines clear distinctions between the responsibilities of the session and the minister in worship.

“The minister is responsible for the conduct and content of public worship and for the supply of the pulpit” (111).

“The same section states that the session is responsible “for regulating the hours and forms of public worship and for arranging special services. The session determines the appointed times and provides for the administration of the sacraments” (111.1).

Presbyterian worship can be partly defined by three symbols: the font, the table and the pulpit. The distinction between the responsibilities of session and minister are as follows:

### The font symbolizes the sacrament of baptism

By baptism, children born of Christian parents and new Christians are incorporated into the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

- The session decides who will be incorporated into the church by baptism and has responsibility for the administration of baptism.
- The minister of Word and Sacrament is authorized to perform the baptism.

### The table symbolizes the sacrament of holy communion

At the Lord’s Table, the people are united with Christ and each other as they partake of the bread and wine.

- The session determines the time and provides for the administration of the sacrament.
- The minister of Word and Sacrament leads the communion.

### The pulpit symbolizes the preaching of the word and the worship of God

- The session is responsible for setting the hours and the form of public worship and arranges for special services.
- The minister of Word and Sacrament is responsible for the conduct and content of public worship and for the supply of the pulpit.

### But is the minister allowed to design the order of worship without consulting session?

A longer version of the question might sound something like this: “Our minister removed the hymnbooks from the sanctuary and installed a PowerPoint projector. Is the minister permitted to do that? Shouldn’t the minister get permission from the session before making this change?”



Photo © Lisa F. Young / Dreamstime.com

It has been said that the authority of the session stops at the chancel steps. In other words, the minister has authority to lead worship as he or she deems appropriate. This is true for Presbyterians.

What does this mean?

The **“conduct and content”** of worship is understood to refer to the choice of music, the translation of the Bible used, the style of worship – whether traditional, contemporary or a blend of the two, and so on. The **“hours and forms”** of worship is understood to refer to the time of day the service is held and whether it will be a baptismal service or a Thanksgiving service, and the like. In most congregations no one pays attention to this distinction until the minister, claiming responsibility for the conduct and content of worship, makes a significant change to the service that upsets the congregation. At this point the elders may want to know what say they have in the matter.

While legally it is the minister’s right to shape the worship, pragmatically, if the session is not in agreement, any change could meet significant resistance at best and may be doomed to failure. The decision of a minister to modify the worship service without explanation or consultation with the session could prove to be divisive and destructive rather than helpful and meaningful. There is wisdom to be found in discussing potential changes with the session. Sometimes it is best to try the change for a prescribed number of weeks, then assess it after the trial period. It is when God’s people prayerfully discuss matters under the guidance of the Holy Spirit that meaningful worship reformation can take place.

---

**The Session and the Minister(s)**


---

In summary, while the session and the minister have their specific responsibilities, they work together and listen carefully to each other about matters related to the church. It is important for the well-being of the congregation that minister and elders work together harmoniously, with mutual love and concern, in matters relating to worship as in all other aspects of the church.

It should also be noted that, ultimately, it is the presbytery's responsibility to ensure public worship is suitable (*Book of Forms* 198–198.1). The minister is answerable to the presbytery.

## Responsibility for assessing the performance of the minister

Every now and then someone asks a question such as, "Who is responsible for assessing the performance of the minister?"

It is sometimes assumed that the session or the personnel committee of the session should review the minister's work within the congregation. It is an understandable assumption since, on the surface, it appears the minister is employed by the congregation and therefore the minister's performance ought to be assessed by the same people who assess the work of the other congregational staff such as organist, secretary, caretaker and so forth.

According to the polity of our denomination, however, the minister is accountable to the presbytery and not to the session or congregation. It is the presbytery that approves the minister's call to a congregation. It is the presbytery that ultimately releases the minister from the congregation. During the period in between, it is the presbytery that oversees the work done by the minister.

How does the presbytery oversee the work done by the minister? It is hoped the presbytery and minister will develop the kind of rapport that fosters effective communication throughout the year, so that solid ministry is celebrated while troubles are dealt with fairly and without delay. The presbytery also assesses a minister during its periodic visitations to the congregation. Further, if there are serious complaints within the congregation about the minister's efforts that cannot be resolved locally, the presbytery will usually become involved.

In practice, most ministers strive to cooperate with the session and the congregation, and try to meet needs and expectations. This is, nevertheless, an enormous task. A congregation of 100 people may have 100 ideas about what the minister should do and how the minister should do it. Sometimes we joke about the expectation that a minister ought always to be available in the church's study but also spend time every day visiting in hospitals and member's homes. Naturally no minister can be all things to all people. It is hoped sessions and congregations will be understanding when it comes to the demands placed on the minister and cooperate with the minister to make the most of the minister's time and gifts.

It is the presbytery, not the session or the congregation, that assesses the performance of the minister.

## Regarding the minister's continuing education

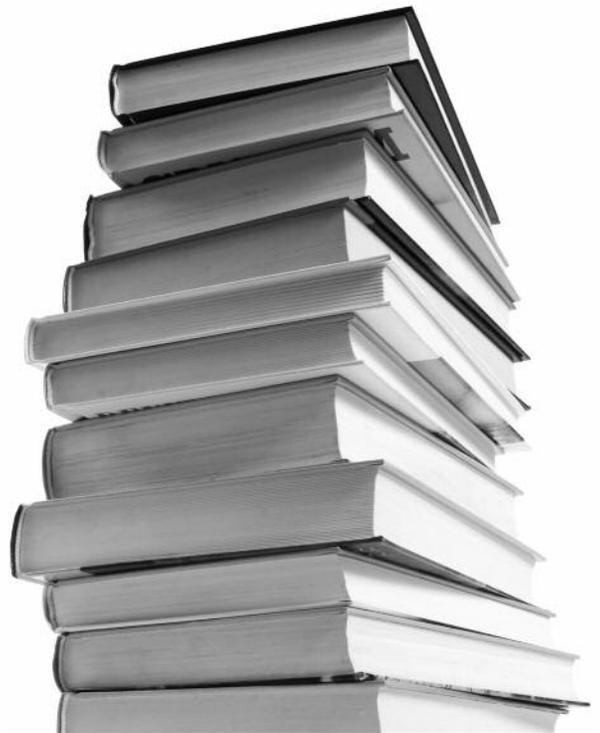
When a minister is called to serve a congregation, the congregation makes several promises. For example, the congregation vows to treat the minister with all due respect, encouragement and obedience in the Lord, and to provide suitable stipend and housing. The congregation further pledges to support the minister's ongoing education by setting aside an annual study leave allowance and offering time away from the daily expectations of pastoral care and leadership to participate in educational opportunities. This is an important aspect of the call and how we live together in a supportive and growing Christian community. (See the *Book of Forms*, appendices A-29, 30, 32, 34, for more details regarding these promises.)

Who decides what the minister should study? This is a decision made between the minister and the presbytery. The minister selects a subject of interest, then applies to the presbytery for permission to use study leave time and money for that purpose. It is the responsibility of the presbytery to determine that the course of study chosen is suitable before granting approval.

Nevertheless, elders ought to feel welcome to make appropriate suggestions in this regard. For example, a session might want to introduce modern music to Sunday worship. Consequently, an elder could recommend that the minister attend a course on how to make such a transition without unduly upsetting or dividing the congregation. Ultimately, the elder must respect the minister's freedom to choose some other theme. Elders may suggest, but they may not insist.

There are many kinds of programs available to ministers. Theological colleges and other Christian institutions offer programs whereby groups of ministers gather and study together. It is also permissible for a minister to plan a self-directed study leave that may consist of reading, reflection or prayer. Study leaves are intended to help the minister develop a deeper understanding of our faith and ministry.

The church's regulations about continuing education are available on The Presbyterian Church in Canada website ([presbyterian.ca/resources/online/469](http://presbyterian.ca/resources/online/469)) or by contacting Ministry and Church Vocations.



# The Session and the Board of Managers

The relationship between the session and board is one that can at times lead to misunderstandings and tension. Confusion over responsibilities, boundaries and authority often lies at the heart of this situation. Confusion is not surprising since the ministries of these two bodies often overlap.

Not all congregations have a session and a board of managers. Some smaller congregations, for example, do not have enough leaders to form both session and board. Therefore, session fulfills both roles. Some congregations have chosen to appoint a committee or two of the session to look after matters of finance and maintenance.

Whatever model a congregation uses, it is important that all understand their various roles and responsibilities.

---

## Activity 1

---

**Before reading the following information, on flip chart paper, make two lists of what you perceive to be the role/tasks/jobs of the session and of the board.**

The *Book of Forms* ties the work of the session and the board of managers very closely together.

“If a board of managers is elected by the congregation, the session will work closely with it to ensure that all aspects of the financial affairs of the congregation are managed in keeping with directives of the courts of the church” (113.6.4).

### **The session is responsible...**

Primary responsibility for the financial aspects of church life belongs to the session.

“The session is responsible for all aspects of stewardship and mission, both spiritual and material, within the congregation” (113).

The subsections that follow section 113 address the session’s responsibility to see that the congregation is kept aware of, and encouraged to support financially, the work of Christ. They also indicate that moneys raised within the congregation shall be used in accordance with the directives of the session and the higher courts of the church.

In section 109.2, the session is assigned responsibility for all policies and procedures regarding the use of church buildings and property.

### The board is responsible too...

It is the board's responsibility to look after the temporal and financial affairs of the congregation; to cooperate closely with the session in encouraging the congregation to generously support the ministry of the congregation; to disburse all moneys received for this purpose, subject to congregational approval; to provide for the ministers stipend and other salaries; and to administer all other matters committed to them by the congregation (162).

It is also the board's responsibility to care for the church buildings and ensure that they are kept in good condition and repair (163).

Simply put, it is the work of the session to provide leadership and direction in the life of the congregation. This includes the church's finances and property. It is the work of the board of managers to look after the finances and property honestly, wisely and in accordance with the direction of the session. It is this distinction that sometimes gives rise to misunderstanding and tension.

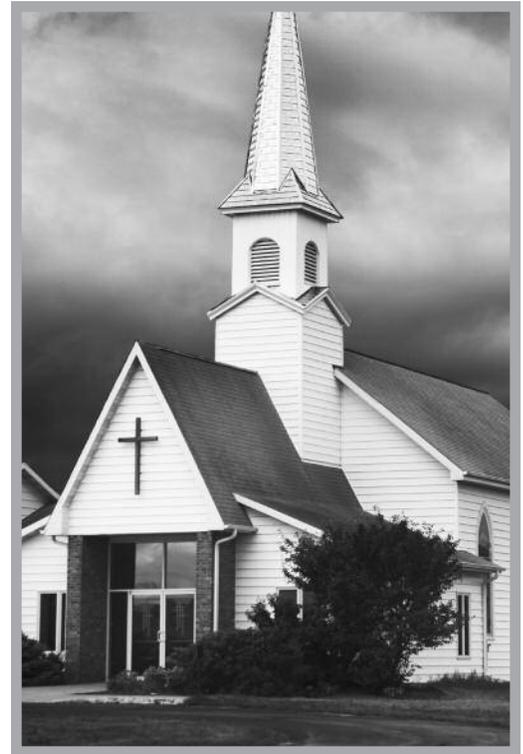


Photo © YangYin / iStockphoto.com

---

## Activity 2

---

**After reading the above information, go back to the two lists you created. Has your understanding of the roles/tasks/jobs of session and board changed? Were there surprises for you as a result of the reading? Do you need more information about the roles of either session or board? If so, how could you obtain this information?**

How a session or board functions will vary, depending on the size of a congregation.

For instance, in a **family sized congregation** (fewer than 50 people at worship), it is likely that a number of elders will be on the board, and so communication between the board and session should be transparent and open.

In a **pastoral sized church** (50–150 at worship), there is more differentiation between session and board, and there may be no elders on the board at all. This distinct membership, coupled with the fact that session makes policies while the board is responsible to manage according to those policies, increases the need for intentional and clear communication between the two groups.

There are a number of ways to achieve this level of communication:

- Appoint an elder to act as liaison between the board and session. The elder attends the board meetings and takes part in discussions but does not have a vote unless he or she has also been elected to the board.

---

**The Session and the Board of Managers**

---

- Have the board report regularly to the session – perhaps by supplying the session with a copy of the board minutes.
- The session should communicate decisions that affect the work of the board.
- The session and board should meet together at least once a year to discuss congregational plans and stewardship.

The session should give the board the grace of not reviewing everything they do. The board is elected by the congregation and entrusted with duties, and needs a certain amount of freedom to carry these out.

The board should not consider itself independent of session and the policies enacted by it. It should respect the policy-making authority and responsibility of the board.

The role of the minister: Ministers may attend any board meeting and should do so whenever possible. The minister should not seek to control the way the board carries out its work. The minister's role is to provide spiritual and moral support, provide a further link with the session, and provide pertinent information about session policies and information about the life of the congregation. The minister cannot be elected to the board and cannot vote.

In congregations that are **program sized** (150–350 at worship) or **corporate sized** (more than 350 at worship), it is less likely that the minister will have personal involvement with groups in the congregation. Instead, the minister will meet with the chairperson of the board, either privately or as part of a management team, to ensure that the board is functioning well and that policies of the session are being followed. Regular communication between the board and session will be very important; responsibility and authority will be delegated, although the session will remain ultimately responsible for the life of the congregation.

Sessions and boards have responsibilities that are sometimes of a serious, heavy nature. A good piece of advice for positive communication is to get to know one another. *At least once a year, have fun together! Have a barbecue or work together as servers at a church dinner.*

---

**Activity 3**

---

**Regardless of the size of your congregation, communication is vitally important. As a group, list ways to improve communication.**

**"We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another."**

**– Romans 12:5**

# The Session and the Presbytery

"The session is responsible for the carrying out of such duties as may be directed to it by a higher court of the church" (*Book of Forms* 114).

Congregations in The Presbyterian Church in Canada do not exist alone. They exist in covenantal relationship with each other, with and through their presbyteries, synods and the General Assembly.

A presbytery is a district assembly with representation from the congregations within its bounds. Active members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries, ministers of Word and Sacrament (teaching elders), and an equal number of ruling elders make up the presbytery. Each presbytery elects a moderator for a one-year term. There are 45 presbyteries across Canada. Of these, 43 are geographic presbyteries, which gather together congregations in an area. There are also two Han-Ca presbyteries, which gather together Korean-speaking congregations from Eastern Canada and Western Canada.

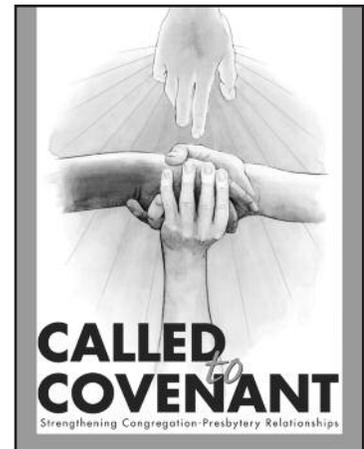
Together, members of presbytery fulfill, to a degree, the role of bishop or pastor to their congregations.

*Called to Covenant: Strengthening Congregation-Presbytery Relationships*, published by The Presbyterian Church in Canada (2004), is a valuable resource which identifies the covenantal relationship that links together presbytery, congregation and minister in a pastoral way.

***Called to Covenant* is comprised of two books.**

**The first (36 pages) covers the following topics:**

- Chapter 1    Called to Covenant:  
**The Biblical and Theological Basis for Call and Covenant**
- Chapter 2    Called to Care (1):  
**The Ministry of Regular Pastoral Oversight by Presbyteries**
- Chapter 3    Called to Be and Do:  
**The Ministry of Congregational Planning**
- Chapter 4    Called to Care (2):  
**The Ministry of Crisis Intervention by Presbyteries**
- Afterward    Called to Covenant:  
**Strengthening Congregation-Presbytery Relationships**



The second book – *Called to Covenant Resource Book* (72 pages) – is a collection of resources meant to support and augment the first.

The following is a brief summary of how the two *Called to Covenant* resources can be helpful for congregations in situations of conflict. It is hoped that when sessions know about the resources available within presbyteries, at least some conflicted situations can be dealt with before they escalate to levels more difficult to manage.

## The Ministry of Crisis Intervention by Presbyteries

### *Called to Covenant* Chapter 4: Called to Care 2

In The Presbyterian Church in Canada, the care of congregations and ministers belongs to the presbytery. This role gives the presbytery the duty and authority to intervene and assist congregations that are experiencing barriers to the way ahead.

Effective intervention by the presbytery is greatly enhanced when a trusting relationship exists between congregation and presbytery. When the presbytery-congregation relationship is strong, the guidance of the presbytery tends to be more appropriate and more readily received. Developing a good relationship during non-anxious times will help lay a solid foundation of trust for ministry needed during anxious times. Chapter 2 of this book describes ways to foster such a relationship.

The presbytery can equip itself to provide helpful intervention by:

**a. Identifying human resources**

Interveners need skills that are similar to those required for interim ministry. A list of these skills is provided in the book on page 29.

Interveners may be recruited from within the presbytery, from a congregation, from a neighbouring presbytery, from the synod, or from another denomination.

**b. Developing human resources**

The presbytery should seek to supply the intervention team with whatever training is needed to accomplish the task set before them. Trainers may be brought in from beyond the bounds of the presbytery, or relevant books and other resources could be supplied. Intervention teams may, themselves, also require pastoral care, since intervention can be an emotionally and spiritually draining experience.

**c. Ensuring an open and informative process**

The presbytery should ensure that the intervention process is open and that clear communication with the congregation and the presbytery is maintained.

**d. Carrying out an intervention**

The book outlines three intervention strategies (see pp. 30–33):

- A. Bridgebuilder
- B. Mediation
- C. A process for congregational turning points

Naturally *the congregation* helps prepare itself for intervention by being open to the Spirit of God and the possibility of reconciliation.

### **Implementing church-wide strategies**

The chapter concludes by exploring some ways that the denomination could assist and equip congregations and presbyteries for the work of intervention.

## Called to Covenant Resource Book

### Primary Resources for Chapter 4

When you explore the *Called to Covenant Resource Book*, you will discover the following resources specifically chosen to support crisis intervention ministries.

#### 1. Consultants and resource and training centres for conflict resolution

(pp. 62–63)

A list of possible contacts is provided.

#### 2. Framework for understanding conflict (pp. 64–65)

The following subjects are outlined:

- dimensions, sources or roots of conflict
- interventions to deal with conflict
- problems to manage: polarities

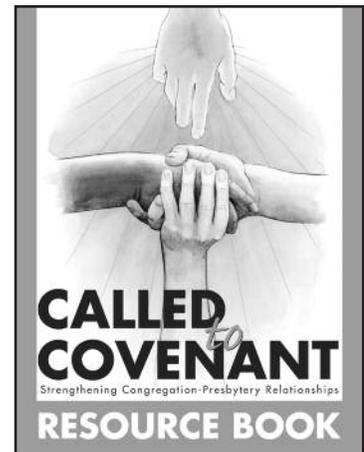
#### 3. Levels of conflict (p. 66)

Five levels of conflict are listed with recommended interventions described.

#### 4. Mediation (pp. 67–68)

The following subjects are briefly outlined:

- What is mediation?
- The goals of mediation
- The role of the mediator
- The process of mediation
- When is mediation appropriate?
- When is mediation inappropriate?



#### Session discussion:

1. Talk about the relationship your church has with the presbytery. What could the presbytery do to improve the relationship? What could the congregation do to improve the relationship?
2. Review the levels of conflict listed in the *Called to Covenant Resource Book* on page 66. What levels of conflict, if any, has your congregation experienced? Is it possible that some members of the congregation are at one level of conflict while others are at a different level of conflict over the same issue?
3. Discuss how the presbytery has been, or could be, helpful in dealing with conflict in your congregation.
4. If there is a conflicted situation happening in your congregation, what steps could be taken to deal with it?

*Called to Covenant and Called to Covenant Resource Book* are available for download at [presbyterian.ca/mcv](http://presbyterian.ca/mcv).

# The Session and the General Assembly

## What is the General Assembly?

Our denomination held its first General Assembly in historic Quebec City in 1875, the same year it was formed. Ever since then, through war and peace, depression and prosperity, social and political change, ministers and elders have faithfully gathered at this annual event to seek the will of God for our church. Usually the Assembly begins with worship on the Sunday evening of the first full week in June. Meetings and fellowship opportunities continue until the following Friday. As the highest court of the church, the General Assembly deals with matters of doctrine, worship, discipline and government affecting the denomination from coast to coast.

## What is a General Assembly commissioner?

The General Assembly consists of one-sixth of the total number of ministers and members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries whose names are on the constituent rolls of the presbyteries of the church, and an equal number of elders. This maintains a valuable balance between clergy and laity. Each presbytery is responsible for selecting the designated number of ministers and elders to attend the General Assembly according to the one-sixth formula. For example, a presbytery which has 24 ministers (including one diaconal minister) on the constituent roll will send for four ministers and four elders to attend. The elders may be those who represent congregations at presbytery meetings, but any elder on a session is permitted to serve. Those who are commissioned to attend the General Assembly are called commissioners.

---

## So...you're a General Assembly commissioner

---

What are the responsibilities of a General Assembly commissioner?

### Before the Assembly

**Register:** Each commissioner will receive a registration form to be completed and returned to the General Assembly office.

**Read binder:** Each commissioner will also receive a binder in early May. The binder will contain reports and recommendations slated to come before the General Assembly as well as resources designed to help each commissioner make the most of the General Assembly experience. It is important to try to read through the entire binder. The more you read and understand before the Assembly, the more meaningful the occasion will be and the better prepared you will be to serve the church well.

**Presbytery preparation:** Each presbytery ought to arrange a meeting for commissioners in order to help them become familiar with the procedures, format and reports of the General Assembly. Each commissioner should be asked, by the presbytery, to report on certain aspects of the Assembly.

### During the Assembly

**Be briefed:** The Monday of Assembly week provides commissioners with an opportunity to attend briefing sessions. (See the resource section of the binder for more information about how to enroll in briefing sessions.) The purpose of the briefing sessions is to meet with some of the authors of the Assembly reports and recommendations so you can raise questions about what you have read. As you read the reports, it would be helpful to jot down questions you would like to ask.

**Vote:** During the Assembly, commissioners will have opportunities to address and vote on recommendations as they are brought before the court. Each commissioner receives a voting card. This is a great privilege and responsibility as commissioners work together to discern God's will.

**Freely:** It is important for commissioners, their congregations and presbyteries to remember commissioners in prayer as they seek the will of God for our denomination. Consequently, commissioners must be allowed the freedom to vote on issues according to their conscience after listening to any debate that may lead up to the vote being taken. Sometimes presbyteries, congregations or sessions ask commissioners to carry to the Assembly predetermined ideas about how to vote, especially on controversial issues. Commissioners should never feel bound to do so; rather, they should feel free to vote according to what they believe is right at the time the decision is debated and voted on.

**Committees:** The Assembly has a few committees to which some commissioners will be appointed. A letter will be sent to those commissioners in May informing them of their appointment.

**Ecumenical visitors:** The Assembly welcomes special guests whom we call ecumenical visitors. They may be from international or partner churches with whom we have staff and programmatic relationships. Some may come from other denominations or church councils. Each of them brings a richness to the meetings of the Assembly.

**Enjoy:** The Assembly opens with worship on Sunday evening when commissioners and many others join to celebrate the faith. Each morning, the local committee leads worship. There are also other fellowship opportunities throughout the week for you to take in. Most who have participated in General Assemblies over the years have returned home enthusiastic, having found great meaning in the work of the church. "I never knew what the church was all about until I went," said one enthusiastic commissioner.

### After the Assembly

**Rest:** Go home, relax, ponder.

**Report:** After attending the General Assembly, commissioners will be asked to supply a report, either written or verbal, or both, to their presbytery. Choose those things that interested you, that will have a direct impact on your presbytery, or were of great importance to the church as a whole.

---

# Contact Information

**The Presbyterian Church in Canada**  
50 Wynford Drive, Toronto, ON M3C 1J7  
Phone: 1-800-619-7301; 416-441-1111; Fax: 416-441-2825  
Website: [presbyterian.ca](http://presbyterian.ca)

National office staff are available by phone at the above toll free and local numbers, or by email at [presbyterian.ca/contact](mailto:presbyterian.ca/contact).

There is also a wealth of information on the church's website. The following offices have been referred to in this resource.

**Communications** [presbyterian.ca/communications](http://presbyterian.ca/communications)  
Need help setting up a church website or want to share a story about your church on the national church website? Contact Communications.

**General Assembly Office** [presbyterian.ca/gao](http://presbyterian.ca/gao)  
The General Assembly Office is available for consultation on matters of polity.

**Financial Services** [presbyterian.ca/finance](http://presbyterian.ca/finance)  
Looking for information related to church finances? Contact Financial Services.

**Ministry and Church Vocations** [presbyterian.ca/mcv](http://presbyterian.ca/mcv)  
Ministry and Church Vocations provides support on matters of church leadership and polity, in particular regarding professional church workers. It also provides support in the process of calling ministers.

**Pension and Benefits Board** [presbyterian.ca/pensionandbenefits](http://presbyterian.ca/pensionandbenefits)  
Contact the Pension and Benefits Board to find out information about pension and benefits for professional church employees, and for information about the church's health and dental plan.

**Planned Giving** [presbyterian.ca/plannedgiving](http://presbyterian.ca/plannedgiving)  
Call Planned Giving for information about receiving, investing and distributing money from bequests or gifts of annuities, stocks, bonds, life insurance and so on. Planned Giving can also help congregations set up policies for such funds.

**Stewardship and  
Education for Mission**

[presbyterian.ca/presbyterianssharing](http://presbyterian.ca/presbyterianssharing)  
[presbyterian.ca/stewardship](http://presbyterian.ca/stewardship)

Do you have a question about *Presbyterians Sharing*? Contact Stewardship and Education for Mission for this as well as matters related to congregational stewardship and mission education.

**The Alban Institute**

The Alban Institute is an independent centre of learning and leadership development with a focus on congregations. It is a not-for-profit, membership organization that develops and shares knowledge through consulting, publishing, research and education programs. It has published a wide variety of books, authored by leaders in the field of congregational dynamics. It also offers consultancy services.

The Alban Institute  
2121 Cooperative Way, Suite 100  
Herndon, VA 20171  
Phone: 703-964-2700  
Fax: 703-964-0370  
Websites: [alban.org](http://alban.org)