



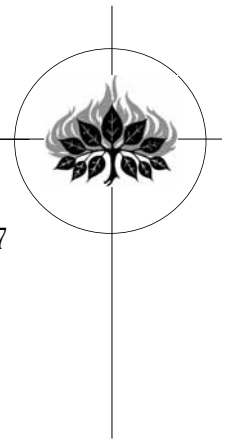
# For Elders

August/2007

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A Quick-Start Process  
for Congregational  
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August, 2007

Dear Elders,

This issue of *For Elders* contains three resources.

**Forward Thinking:**

**A Quick-Start Process for Congregational Visioning**

By Dorothy Henderson

*Forward Thinking* is a simple, enjoyable and effective planning technique that can be used by groups within a congregation, or by the congregation as a whole, to define new ministry foci for the upcoming year. One of the strengths of this technique is that it builds upon the God-given gifts, abilities, and interests already present in the congregation instead of trying to make the congregation into something it is not equipped to be.

**Session Starter**

**Who are we to make decisions for the congregation?**

This Session Starter reflects on the authority that is bestowed upon sessions. Some sessions are reluctant to accept the power they are given. Others may be tempted occasionally to misuse that same power. Authority is never to be taken lightly, but it still needs to be taken.

**What's on your mind?**

This is an invitation to send in polity questions that arise during a session meeting, or maybe in the parking lot after the meeting. We'll do our best to provide helpful answers.

Blessings,

Donald Muir  
Associate Secretary  
The General Assembly Office

Dorothy Henderson  
Associate Secretary  
Life and Mission Agency

# ***Forward Thinking: A Quick-Start*** **Process for Congregational Visioning**

Dorothy Henderson, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, © 2007

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

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

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

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

## **Steps in the *Forward Thinking* Process**

**Step #1.** Congregational gathering

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

**Step #2.** Wordsmith gathering

- a. A look at the action plans; is there a common theme?
- b. From the theme(s), draft
  - i) a mission statement
  - ii) a vision statement
  - iii) values statements
  - iv) motto

**Step #3.** Congregational gathering: *Fun and focus* (eliciting feedback)

**Step #4.** Congregational sign-up—*Making a World of Difference*

### **Possible Timeline**

#### **February:**

Congregational gathering  
(step #1)

#### **March to May:**

Wordsmith gathering  
(step #2)

#### **Late May:**

Congregational gathering  
(step #3)

#### **Summer to fall:**

Congregational sign-up  
(step #4)

# Instructions for how to run the *Forward Thinking Process*

## Instructions for step #1: Congregational gathering

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

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



- i) Identify a time for a congregational gathering. Invite all ages and all sorts of people. Food is usually helpful. Plan a pot luck meal after worship, a Friday evening Italian dinner using frozen lasagna and garlic bread, a Saturday soup and sandwich lunch or a retreat setting. Promote at least one month prior to the event and ask people to commit themselves by signing up.
- ii) At the gathering, when people are ready to “work,” divide them into small tables (separating family members) with groups of four or five. At each table put lots of paper (half sheets of 8 ½ by 11 inch paper) and at least one marker for each person.

Tell the people that you are going to give them 13 statements and each person will answer the statement for him/herself writing IN BLOCK LETTERS. Show an example—write a word like “MUSIC” in large block letters on your sheet of paper and remind people that this is what *each* sheet should look like. Each of the 13 statements must be answered on a separate sheet, but everyone may answer the statements several times if they wish. For instance, when they are asked to name something that they know a lot about, they may wish to write two or three things, but each should go on a separate sheet of paper. (It is okay to talk while doing this work, or people may work on their own.) Instruct people to just throw their answers into the middle of the table.

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

- Statement 1:** Name something about yourself that is strong.
- Statement 2:** Name something positive about our church building. (If you do not worship in a church, name something positive about the site where you worship.)
- Statement 3:** Name a positive physical aspect of our community.
- Statement 4:** Name something that you *care* a lot about.
- Statement 5:** Name something that you *know* a lot about.
- Statement 6:** Name talents or skills you see in someone else at the table.
- Statement 7:** Name talents or skills you see in someone else in the congregation who isn't here.
- Statement 8:** Name a group or association you are part of outside the congregation.
- Statement 9:** Name institutions associated with the congregation. (You may have to give examples here—If there are teachers, name “schools.” If your church holds a mortgage, name “banks.” If there are politicians, name “government,” etc.)
- Statement 10:** Name some institutional decisions that affect the people in our congregation and community.
- Statement 11:** Name something that you like to spend money on.
- Statement 12:** Name something you can make or do that people would pay you for.
- Statement 13:** Name something that the congregation likes to spend money on.

## **b) *Connecting the dots*** (Possibilities for ministry)

As Luther Snow reminds us in *The Power of Asset Mapping*, this next step—*Connecting the dots*—creates a bridge between what is and what can be. This next step is just plain fun, so invite people to be playful and creative. Each table simply shuffles around the cards—all containing assets and gifts present at the table—until a new creative ministry appears. You will be trying to identify action plans (Z in the example below).

It helps to give an example of how this might work. Here is the example I use: “If we combined W plus X plus Y we could have Z at this church.” This is how this might work—If we combined [Laura and Joan’s love of crafts] with the [junior youth group] and [our church’s passion for Presbyterian World Service and Development] we could have a—Z—[fund raising-awareness night sponsored by the junior youth.]

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

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

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

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

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

## **Instructions for Step #2: Wordsmiths gathering**

1. Prior to the meeting, type or print out all the action plans generated at the congregational meeting. Discuss these things:
  - a) Are there common themes? Can any be combined? If we combine some, would they lose key elements?
  - b) Do we have time, energy and money to implement all the action plans? Are there some that are more timely than others?

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

2. When the wordsmith group has decided on the action plans for the year ahead, begin the process of developing
  - i) a mission statement
  - ii) a vision statement
  - iii) values statements
  - iv) motto

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

Following are brief definitions.

### **Mission Statement**

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

### **Vision Statement**

- Explains how the church does what it does
- Can be 3-5 points or a single paragraph

### **Value Statements**

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

### **Motto**

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

### **Examples from two different churches**

#### **Church A:**

**Mission:** We are a caring congregation seeking to share with others the Good News of Christ.

**Vision:** We will care and share by:

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

#### **Value statements:**

We value:

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

**Motto:** The little church with a big heart

### **Church B:**

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

**Vision:** We will work for justice and peace by:

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

### **Value statements:**

We value:

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

**Motto:** Just us and peace

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

### **Step #3: Congregational gathering: *Fun and Focus***

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

You might, for instance, post five posters around a coffee time table—one each of these—action plan, the mission, vision, value and motto statements. Invite people as they mix and mingle over coffee to add questions, comments or suggestions to the charts.



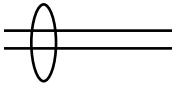
**Step #4:  
Congregational sign-  
up: *Making a World of  
Difference***

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

You may also use this time to highlight existing ongoing ministry, e.g. Be a volunteer at our In from the Cold Program **or** Sign up for our Boarding House Ministry **or** Sign here for more involvement with the Canadian Foodgrains Bank.

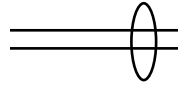
One of the several advantages of this style of visioning process is that it includes a broad spectrum of the congregation. Also, because the action plans come out of a serendipitous and playful group process, no one feels hurt if a "pet project" cannot be tried. This visioning process new ministry is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





# Who are we to make decisions for the congregation

## Session Starter Number 10



### **Unison Prayer:**

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

### **Introduction:**

Within our church, the session possesses significant power and authority. Section 105.2 of the *Book of Forms* states that the session meets, "...for the purpose of establishing good order and providing for the pastoral care of the congregation. All who are members are subject to the authority and discipline of the session." We ought not to treat this authority carelessly. As a session, we have been called by God, to make wise and holy decisions on behalf of the members and adherents of our church.

### **Scripture:**

*(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)*

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

Acts 14:21-23

### **A Brief Commentary:** *(Invite another elder to read the following commentary)*

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

### **Reflection:**

Two thousand years of history have slipped by since Paul and Barnabas appointed elders to provide leadership to the fledgling community of faith in Lystra. We continue to emulate this ancient model and appoint elders within our congregations through an election and discernment process. We do so in the faith that God calls women and men to this ministry through the fervent prayer and the careful thinking of congregations. We are reminded, therefore, that elders must not be selected on the basis of popularity or as a reward for years of service. The choice must always be grounded in the understanding that God gives some gifts to provide a specific kind of ministry within congregations. As stated in *Living Faith*,

Through the office of elder  
men and women are ordained to share with the minister  
in the leadership, pastoral care, and oversight of the congregation. (*Living Faith* 7.2.4)

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

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

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

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

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

As elders, we should do all we can to ascertain the needs and expectations of the

members and adherents of our congregation. We bring this knowledge to each session meeting. Then we must not shrink from our calling to make decisions -- some of them difficult decisions -- on behalf of the congregation in faithful obedience to scriptures and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

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

**Suggested follow-up question:**

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



# WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND?

**Do you have a question about the polity of our church?**

**Do you wonder why Presbyterians  
do things the way they do?**

**Are you ever confused by something that happens at  
session, presbytery, synod or general assembly  
but don't know where to turn for clarification?**

**Are you having trouble understanding  
a section of the Book of Forms?**

Each issue of For Elders provides resources meant to help individual elders and collective sessions carry out their ministry more effectively. It may be, however, that we don't always "scratch where you itch". We'd like to change that.

This is an invitation to ministers and elders to send us questions.

We will include answers in upcoming issues of For Elders. The questions will be presented in such a way as to maintain the confidentiality of those who send them. The answers, we hope, will provide beneficial information that can be used by other sessions. So...

**Friends, elders, ministers;  
lend me your queries!**

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