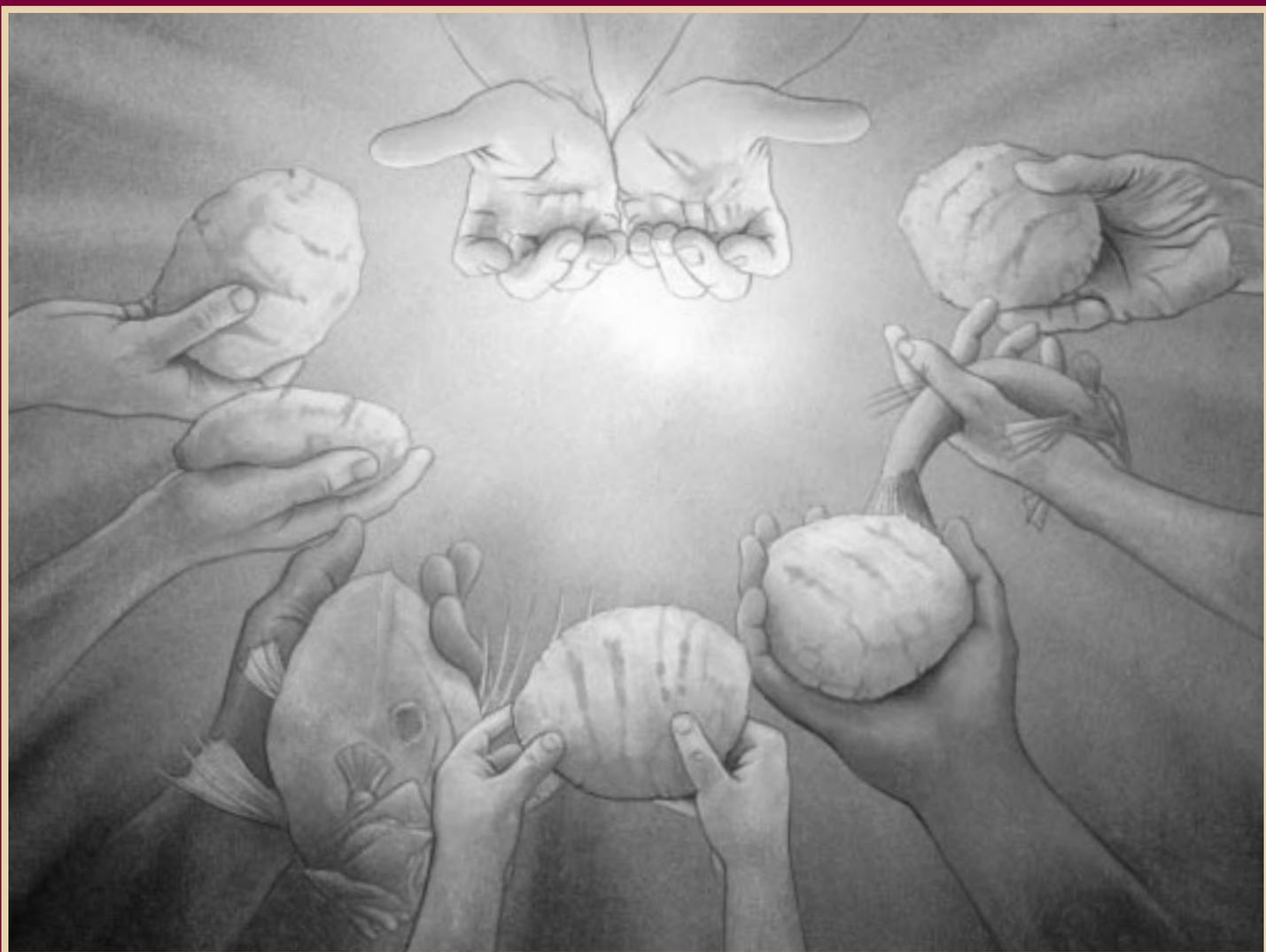


# Together in Ministry



The Theology and Practice of Ministry  
in The Presbyterian Church in Canada

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of Ministry in  
The Presbyterian Church in Canada



## **Together in Ministry**

### ***The Theology and Practice of Ministry in The Presbyterian Church in Canada***

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# Introduction

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## HISTORY OF THE PROJECT

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In 1993 a task group was assembled by The Rev. Dr. James A. Thomson at the request of the Associate Secretary, Ministry and Church Vocations, The Rev. Jean Armstrong. Initially the group was composed of the four ministers in the District of Muskoka, thus providing the task group with its name. It was charged with responsibility for examining and summarizing the responses to the “Green Paper” on the theology and practice of ministry in The Presbyterian Church in Canada.<sup>1</sup> This paper had raised numbers of significant issues concerning ministry but had not received wide acceptance in the church.

Consequently, the task group was instructed to examine these issues together with a study document produced in 1992 by the Presbyterian Church (USA), “A Proposal for Considering the Theology and Practice of Ordination in the Presbyterian Church (USA)”. The task group was given responsibility for determining whether an entirely new statement was needed for our church to replace or proceed forward from the “Green Paper”. The Muskoka Task Group determined that a new document was required and that it was prepared to proceed to work on this project. As a result, The Rev. Jean Armstrong, and The Rev. Lynda Reid representing diaconal ministries, were added to the task group.

The original Muskoka members, in addition to Dr. Thomson, were The Rev. Dr. James Sitler, The Rev. Dr. Richard Topping and The Rev. Raye Brown. Over time the group’s membership changed as some moved on or had changes in responsibility. Later additions consisted of The Rev. Susan Shaffer, who replaced Jean Armstrong as Associate Secretary, who nonetheless remained a member of the task group, The Rev. Dr. Harris Athanasiadis, and by correspondence several members of the Church Doctrine Committee acting as liaison with that committee.

Studies and papers from many sources were researched. Among these were papers specifically prepared for the task group at its invitation by theologians within our church. The Principals of Knox and Presbyterian Colleges provided varieties of source material. The task group spent many hours consulting papers, writing proposals and debating issues. As a result of this activity, study papers were written and presented to the church for study and report back to the task group.<sup>2</sup>

The task group appreciated the many responses it received from presbyteries, sessions and individuals, and valued the comments that were made. These

comments were considered seriously and had a significant effect on the composition of the final paper, accepted for use in the church by the General Assembly in 2003 and now published under the title *Together in Ministry: The Theology and Practice of Ministry in The Presbyterian Church in Canada*.

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## TOGETHER IN MINISTRY: THE THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF MINISTRY IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA

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*Together in Ministry* is presented as a resource to the church, rather than as a final doctrinal statement. Ministry in its broadest aspects is an evolving form. This document provides an historical, biblical study aimed at assisting the church to appreciate the distinctive understanding of offices of ministry that is ours within the family of Reformed and Presbyterian churches. It traces the evolution of these offices over the centuries, with particular attention to scripture and to the work of key theologians and church bodies.<sup>3</sup> Further, it discusses current challenges and possibilities, thereby attempting to assist the church in the 21st century to move forward in its service to God.

*Together in Ministry* is offered to the church for a wide variety of uses as a resource: for lay people studying their role in the ministry of Christ; for individuals preparing to profess their faith or to join this church by transfer of membership; for ruling elders, congregational deacons<sup>4</sup>, diaconal ministers or ministers of Word and Sacraments, or for people preparing for these offices; for sessions and presbytery committees who guide candidates for ministry; for anyone interested in the way The Presbyterian Church in Canada understands its theology and practice of ministry. The use of this document will be as broad and imaginative as people make it.

Consideration of ministry within The Presbyterian Church in Canada will continue as new situations arise that place strains on older understandings. As new situations arise, it will be necessary to understand where we have come from and why, and how the Holy Spirit, speaking to us through scripture, continues to guide us. In these endeavours it is the hope of the Muskoka Task Group that this paper will serve as a useful resource for years to come, generating discussion and insight.

*All members of  
the church are  
called to participate  
in Christ's work  
in the world,  
and all have  
been given gifts  
by God to do so.*

(page 9)

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## Endnotes

1. The document “Towards a Framework for the Theology and Practice of Ministry in The Presbyterian Church in Canada”, which came to be called the “Green Paper”, was circulated to presbyteries and sessions for study and report to the Board of Ministry in 1991. The Green Paper was an initiative of the Board of Ministry to examine this denomination’s understanding of its ministry, with particular attention to the place of members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries.
2. The study papers can be found in the Acts and Proceedings (A&P) — the minutes and reports of the different General Assemblies at which they were presented — as follows: “The Ruling Elder”, A&P 1996, p. 350-62; “The Deacon”, A&P 1997, p. 351-59; “The Ministry of the Laity”, A&P 1998, p. 342-48; “Diaconal Ministry”, A&P 2000, p. 356-62; “The Ministry of Word and Sacraments”, A&P 2000, p. 346-56.
3. While many theologians, church bodies and documents have influenced the development of ministry in Reformed churches and in this denomination in particular, certain key persons and groups have exerted a dominant impact. These include John Calvin, John Knox, the Westminster Assemblies and the documents they produced (*The Westminster Confession of Faith*, *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government*), and more recently, *Living Faith: A Statement of Christian Belief*. (*The Westminster Confession of Faith* and *Living Faith* are included among our subordinate standards.)
4. Congregational deacons are considered in chapter 4 on the ruling elder, p. 34.

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## Key Documents

*Book of Forms*, Toronto: The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 2002.

Calvin, John, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeil ed., Ford Lewis Battles, tr., Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960.

*Living Faith (Foi Vivante): A Statement of Christian Belief*. Windfield, B.C.: Wood Lake Books Inc., © The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1984.

*The Form of Presbyterian Church Government, in The (Westminster) Confession of Faith*, Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1979.

“*The Preamble to the Ordination Vows*”, in the *Book of Forms*, Toronto: The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 2002, section 409.

*The (Westminster) Confession of Faith (1646)* as adopted in 1875 and 1889. Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1979.



## The Ministry of Christ through the Ministry of the Church

1

The Presbyterian Church in Canada affirms a number of foundational beliefs about Christ, about Christ's church, and about ministry. These have been articulated in two documents that are widely used across the Church. "The Preamble to the Ordination Vows" is read each time ruling elders are ordained, diaconal ministers are designated or recognized, or ministers of Word and Sacraments are ordained or inducted. *Living Faith: A Statement of Christian Belief* is used frequently in services of worship and in teaching ministries.

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### FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

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There is one minister, the Lord Jesus Christ, and one ministry, the ministry of Christ. All other ministries come from and are sustained by the ministry of Christ.

The church is Christ together with his people called both to worship and to serve him in all of life.<sup>1</sup> Through the church, the Lord continues his ministry.

All members of the church are called to participate in Christ's work in the world, and all have been given gifts by God to do so. Christians are initiated into this ministry through baptism, the sign and seal of their union with Christ and with his church. The church's ministry begins with the worship of God, through which God sustains the life of the church. In union with Christ, the church prays for and works toward the healing and salvation of the world.

While Christ calls all Christians to share in his ministry, he also recognizes that there are specific and necessary forms of leadership and responsibilities within the ministry of the church.<sup>2</sup> Such "offices of ministry" are the means by which Christ orders ministry for the continual renewal and nurturing of the church. To support the church in fulfilling its mission, God gifts and calls individuals to serve particular offices of ministry. In The Presbyterian Church in Canada, these offices are ruling elder, congregational deacon, diaconal minister, and minister of Word and Sacraments.

Since the church is Christ together with his people, there are no individual ministries. Ministries are corporate in nature. When a Christian lay person makes sandwiches in a community soup kitchen, when an elder offers prayer for people in their home, when a diaconal minister helps the church school set goals, when a minister of Word and Sacraments proclaims the word and lifts the bread and wine, Christ's ministry unfolds. All ministries are Christ's ministry, given flesh among particular people in a particular place and at a particular time.

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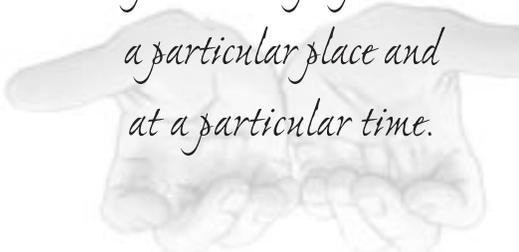
## THIS PAPER

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The goal of this paper is to describe the ministry of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. The chapters that follow will focus on the unique contributions of the laity, the church courts, and the offices of ruling elder, congregational deacon, diaconal minister and minister of Word and Sacraments. For each, biblical roots, historical development, and current challenges and possibilities will be explored. This discussion of these distinct and different roles is grounded in the conviction that they are interdependent. We are in ministry together.

1

*Since the church  
is Christ together  
with his people,  
there are no  
individual ministries.  
All ministries are  
Christ's ministry,  
given flesh among  
particular people in  
a particular place and  
at a particular time.*



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## Endnotes

1. *Living Faith*, 7.1.1, 7.2.1, 7.6.1, 7.3.
2. *A Proposal for Considering the Theology and Practice of Ordination in the Presbyterian Church (USA)*, 1992, p. 51.



## *The Ministry of the People of God*

To each is given the manifestation of the  
Spirit for the common good.  
(1 Corinthians 12:7)

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve  
one another with whatever gift each of you has received.  
(1 Peter 4:10)

The Presbyterian Church in Canada believes that all members of the church are called to participate in Christ's work in the world, and that all have been given gifts by God to do so.<sup>1</sup> Like the church in every age, however, this church faces the question of how such belief can be lived out in the lives of its people and communities. How do the people of God use their gifts to share Christ's work? What challenges are before the church as it seeks to support lay ministry?

### **This Chapter**

This chapter will examine the biblical usage of the term "people" and trace the church's changing understanding of the role of the people of God in the ministry of

God over the centuries. The chapter will develop a theology of the ministry of the people of God based on our common baptism, and explore the challenges and possibilities for lay ministry today.

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## WHERE DOES OUR UNDERSTANDING OF LAITY ORIGINATE?

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### Biblical Usage of the Term “People”

#### Old Testament Understanding of the Laity

The word “laity” is an English derivative of the Greek word *laos*, which simply means “people”.<sup>2</sup> In the overwhelming number of cases it refers to Israel as God’s chosen, covenant people. It expresses the special relationship that Israel has with God.

In passages such as Deuteronomy 26:16-19 and Exodus 19:5-6, Yahweh (the most sublime name of God in the Old Testament) not only declares Israel to be his obedient people, but commands the nation to bring the knowledge of God to the Gentiles. It is in this sense that the whole people can be described as a “priest-nation”. Yahweh’s calling of Israel is not for privilege, but for faithfulness and service. When Israel breaks this covenant relation, they are in danger of being called “not my people” (Hosea 1:9). Yahweh, however, remains faithful to the people, even in their disobedience, calling them back to faithfulness. This reminds us that Israel is a people of God, not through its own achievements, but only because of Yahweh’s faithfulness to them.

#### New Testament Understanding of Laity

In the New Testament, *laos* occurs 141 times and has a variety of uses and implications. It can refer to:

1. “nations” (Luke 2:31ff, Romans 15:11) (i.e. ethnic groupings or countries);
2. the common people in contrast to a ruling class (Luke 22:22, Acts 6:12);
3. the broad mass of the people as opposed to the priest (Hebrews 5:3);
4. ordinary people as opposed to the few witnesses of the resurrection (Acts 10:41);
5. the Christian church as a whole.

When *laos* is used in situations that are related to ministering to the world in the name of Christ, it is transferred to the Christian church as a whole. Jesus Christ creates a new faith community and gives to it the responsibility for communicating the gospel to the world.

#### Link between Old and New Testament Understandings

Many of the covenanting passages from the Old Testament between God and Israel are taken up in the New Testament and applied directly to the Christian church. God has taken from the nations (*ethne*) a people (*laos*) for God’s name (Acts 15:14). Even the local church is spoken of as the temple and *laos* of God

(2 Corinthians 6:16 ff). By faith in Jesus Christ as the Lord, the church becomes the people of God, irrespective of the national background, gender or social standing of its members (1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:26; Colossians 3:11).

Further, the First Epistle of Peter reflects the link between the Old Testament and the New Testament significance of the term *laos*. Like Israel, Christ's people are charged as a whole with the priestly tasks of offering spiritual sacrifices and engaging in proclamation<sup>3</sup> (1 Peter 2:5,9). Like Israel, as God's chosen people the church is commanded to keep covenant holiness as well as to offer witness to the world (1 Peter 1:15-16). In other words, "ministry" in the New Testament consists not only in the sacramental "ministry" of the community leaders, but also in the priestly ministry of the whole people of God in the world.

## Laity in the Middle Ages

### The Early Church

In the early church, the mission activity of spreading the faith to others had included the active participation of all the baptized. Even as leadership roles within the community developed during the first centuries of the church's existence, the whole community of faith had, to one extent or another, been the avenue of spreading the gospel. Within the church, individuals were seen to participate in the church's ministry according to the personal gifts (*charisms*) each had received from the Holy Spirit. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper was celebrated weekly, even daily.

### The Distinction between Clergy and Laity

Distinctions between clergy and laity begin to appear in Christian literature sometime in the third century. The terms for laity (*laos*) and clergy (*kleros*) are used to distinguish between two different classes of Christian. *Laos* now becomes associated with the non-specialist, uneducated masses. Influenced by the Judaism of the Greek-speaking world,<sup>4</sup> the *laos* are now defined by what they are *not*. The term *laos* acquires the sense of "those people not consecrated for divine service".

At the same time, there is a shift from St. Paul's understanding of personal gifts (*charisms*) as the basis for ministry, to that of the *charism* of office. Instead of seeing Spirit-given abilities as the basis for ministry, the church comes to regard office-holding as the gift. Therefore only individuals who held an office were viewed as individuals with ministries.

In addition to the negative use of the term "laity" (i.e. those who are not clergy), from the third century the term "priest" is used increasingly to describe one who presides in the liturgical and sacramental life of the church. "Ministry" becomes equated with the sacramental work of the clergy by the fifth and sixth centuries. Consequently, by the time of the Middle Ages, most people were excluded from the priestly ministry. The laity are understood to have access to God only through a person who had been set apart from all others. Thus theological and political developments in church leadership from the third century laid the basis for the exclusion of the laity from active participation in worship altogether in the later Middle Ages.

## **The Dominance of the Monasteries**

By the Middle Ages, the missionary activity of the church is carried out largely by the monastic community. This takes place because the literacy level in the western Roman Empire drops when large portions of it are overrun by Germanic tribes. It was now primarily the missionary activity of the monasteries that enabled the faith to make vast inroads into the life of these tribes. Thus here again, the role of the average lay person was restricted from that of an earlier time.

## **A Passive Laity**

The position of the laity during the Middle Ages can be characterized as almost completely passive. The language of the liturgy was in a foreign tongue for most people. Actions and responses that had been the part of the laity in worship in the first two centuries were now completely taken over by the priests. The central words of the Mass were said so quietly by the priests that they could not be heard. The reading of scripture had been reduced to a few sentences, also said in Latin. The sermon had disappeared. A screen before the altar meant that the people could rarely see the priest's actions. Although the priest celebrated the sacrament of communion daily, participation by the people was reduced to once a year. The "work" of the laity had been reduced to providing material support. This support was used to maintain the structure of the "clergy classes" within the church.

This is not to suggest that there were no evidences of "lay" ministry within this general period. This was the time during which the great cathedrals and imposing parish churches were built all across Europe. The skills of master masons and other stoneworkers created the imposing structures that gave evidence to the whole community of the presence of God in its midst. The later, or High Middle Ages, saw a flowering of creative expressions of the faith through the eyes of artists and the hands of sculptors.

It was also a time, however, when the concept of "ministry" was focussed on the Crusades, which sought to regain the Holy Land from the Muslim empires. For tens of thousands of European Christians — clergy, laity, men, women and children — service to Christ came to be identified with military action supporting this cause. The crusades caused great suffering to all concerned. In spite of the suffering, the role of the Christian was to accept passively the dictates of their church and state. Any who dared to dissent, whether clergy or laity, were defined as heretics and treated brutally.

## **The Calvinist Reformation**

The Reformers of the 15th and 16th centuries sought to correct what they regarded as imbalances in the life of the church. The major thrust of the Reformers was to return the church to the practice and theology of the Bible, and particularly to that of the New Testament.

## **Priesthood of all Believers**

One of the major contributions of the German Reformer, Martin Luther, to the understanding of a ministry of the laity was his emphasis on the doctrine of the

“priesthood of all believers”. Each Christian, he originally taught, is open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and is called to be a vehicle of God’s work on earth. However, this concept was pushed to extremes by many enthusiasts of his time. Some even fomented uprisings and rebellions. This created havoc throughout parts of the German principalities. Many of the leaders of these movements claimed to have been directly inspired by the Holy Spirit to take these actions. Luther later modified his position to one that was advocated by John Calvin, the Geneva Reformer, who taught that the actions of individuals must always be subject to the work of the Spirit speaking through the church.

### **Calvin and the Place of the Laity**

John Calvin, working in Geneva, Switzerland, made some significant recoveries in regard to the work and place of the laity in the life of the church and the faith. In regard to worship, the liturgy was now said in the language of the people. The sermon was recovered as a major part of Sunday worship. Calvin also demanded the return of weekly celebrations of the Sacrament of Holy Communion as the practice of the New Testament, but failed to achieve this biblical goal. The singing of the psalms by the laity was recovered.

At the same time as he restored the place of the laity, Calvin affirmed the setting apart of some individuals within the community. Like all the major Reformers, Calvin recognized that God called certain individuals and gifted them for ministry of Word and Sacraments. Unlike the Middle Ages, however, this setting apart did not confer any special or “holy” status upon those so called.

### **Calvin and His Time**

The Calvinist documents regarding the work of the laity are reflective of the time and conditions in which they were produced. They must be understood in their own context, so that the principles on which they were based may be properly applied to today’s conditions.

The Calvinist Reformation documents, including the writings of John Calvin and the later confessional statements of Calvinist churches (for example, *The Westminster Confession of Faith* and other documents), all assume a state or national church setting. Consequently the call to people to acknowledge each other as brothers and sisters in Christ and to live in a mutually supportive manner had implications for the whole of society.

Not only was each citizen a member of a city or nation state, but each citizen was also a member of the church that was established by law within that city or state. This imposed upon the theological authors of the time a certain set of assumptions about the Christian responsibilities of each citizen. For one thing, taking a stand against the teachings of the state church became equated with treason against the state itself, thus leading to some of the more distasteful events that took place throughout the Reformation period, such as the various wars of religion and the persecution of dissenters.

2

*The Reformed  
understanding of  
vocation is the life  
that is lived daily  
in the world ...  
How can we live  
in our world  
as salt and light  
and yeast?*

(page 20)

## Christian Life for Calvin

For John Calvin, there were two essential parts of the Christian life: (1) the love of righteousness<sup>5</sup> and (2) the following of a rule that conforms us to Christ. Calvin maintained that the sum of the Christian life is that of denial of ourselves to accomplish the following things, which define the biblical concept of the priest-nation as stated in 1 Peter 2:9 ff:

1. that we may devote ourselves to God;
2. that we may seek to serve God and neighbour;
3. that we may patiently bear the cross (in fulfillment of Jesus' command in Matthew 16:24-26);
4. that we may know in what manner we ought to use the present life and its material benefits. "Necessity demands that we possess all things as though we possessed them not; that we bear poverty with mildness, and abundance with moderation."<sup>6</sup>

Calvin did not intend this to justify the oppression of the poor. He called those who possessed more of the world's goods to support the needs of those less fortunate. In so doing, he created a moral and religious obligation on the part of the wealthy to support the needy.

## Calvin's Disciplines of Faith

For Calvin, living the Christian life required certain disciplines of faith without which there could be no expression of Christian life, no growth in grace. Since we all have access to God through Christ, it is the responsibility of every Christian to pray daily. As Calvin states, "When we are accustomed to flee to God, our heart is enflamed with a strong desire to seek, love, and adore him."<sup>7</sup> Faith in God and God's promises is to be revived constantly by prayer that we may persevere in love of and obedience to God. This means that the service of the people of God to others does not stand as an end in itself, but grows out of their devotion to God.

It is not surprising to discover that many of the sections on the Christian laity in Calvin's major work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, deal with the exercise of those practices that strengthen faith. These practices are prayer, devotions, meditation on one's own faults and shortcomings, and the seeking of God's help through the Spirit in one's living and corporate witness to the world. In Calvin's view, Christians could live and witness faithfully only if they were anchored to the spiritual reality of faith experienced in prayer and devotion to God.

## The Westminster Confession of Faith and the Laity

The Westminster documents, subordinate standards of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, re-affirm Calvin's basic position. *The Larger Catechism* does not speak anywhere of a "ministry of the laity," but requires certain things of every Christian:

1. an acknowledgment of the moral law as contained in the Ten Commandments;
2. the recognition that all humans fall short of this standard;

3. the necessity of utilizing to the fullest the gracious gifts of God in the word, sacraments and prayer. Through these, and by the edification of the Spirit, all of Christ's people are to evidence in their daily lives a practice consistent with the gospel.<sup>8</sup>

In Chapter 26 of *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, there is a recognition of the corporate nature of the faith. Every Christian has a responsibility to make use of the gifts God has given him or her so as to meet the needs of every other member of the community of faith. The "ministry" of every Christian is to fulfill daily a service of worship and devotion to God, and of love and support of each other.

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## THE MINISTRY OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD TODAY

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### Who We Are

This church's theology of the ministry of the people is rooted in our understanding of who we are as baptized Christians. We believe that God acts in baptism, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to graft us into the body of Christ.<sup>9</sup> Through baptism, we share in all that God has accomplished for us in Christ, and we become united with him.

As baptized Christians, we become part of a unique community of faith. We become God's own children, part of the people God has set apart.<sup>10</sup> It is within this covenant community that Christian faith is formed, and that God acts to form vocation or calling.

### A Called People

Baptism is the Christian's ordination into the priesthood of all believers.<sup>11</sup> We are called to be in relationship with God in Christ. This relationship is our primary purpose. As *The Shorter Catechism* says: "Our chief end is to glorify and enjoy God forever."<sup>12</sup>

We are also called to serve and represent Christ in the world. Just as we share in the death and resurrection of Christ through our baptism, so too are we commissioned to his service.<sup>13</sup> At baptism we receive a vocation or calling for mission. We are to bring Christ's healing presence to the world for which he died, his peace to its pain and anguish.<sup>14</sup> We are to reveal God to the world as we do what Christ is doing, just as the Son reveals God to the world as he does what the Father does. (John 5:19, 1:18)

There are no limits to the variety of forms that Christ's service can take. From a Reformed faith perspective, this calling of the baptized Christian is not limited to the calling of ministers of Word and Sacraments. Rather whatever one does in devotion to God is Christian vocation. God gives each of us a vocation that involves our total selves, who we are and our God-given gifts. Thus, in a Christian sense, vocation is not primarily what is done to earn a living, but includes all aspects of daily life.

2

*Baptism is the  
Christian's  
ordination into  
the priesthood of  
all believers.*

## Who Are the Laity?

The ministry of the people of God, a ministry that is grounded in our baptism, is the ministry of the whole church. Hence the term “the people of God”, or the “laos”, includes the entire covenant community of baptized Christians. From this viewpoint, all persons in the church belong to the “laity”.

However, this viewpoint is in opposition to our common usage of the expression “lay people” in modern secular society. People commonly express the desire that their doctors explain what is happening in their bodies in terms “lay people” can understand. So too economists, engineers and others with specialized roles are urged to communicate well with the public who are not in those specialized roles, that is, with the “lay people”. Add to this the church’s long-standing use of the term “laity” to refer to those who are “not clergy”, and there is considerable impetus for using the term to mean those who are neither ministers of Word and Sacraments nor diaconal ministers. How should we use the terms “laity” or “people of God”?

Perhaps the best approach to this confusion of terms is to continue to speak of “lay people” or the “laity” as those persons who have not been set apart to serve as ministers of Word and Sacraments or as diaconal ministers. Nevertheless we do so with a firm understanding that there are not two ministries, but one. There is one ministry of the whole people of God to which all contribute, with some serving in special leadership roles for the equipping of the saints and the building of the body of Christ.

*Vocation is not primarily what is done to earn a living, but includes all aspects of daily life.*

(page 16)

2

## What is Lay Ministry?

The role and work of the whole people of God has received much emphasis over the past number of decades. The liturgical renewal in the Western church from the end of the nineteenth century up to the present time gave a primary focus on the role of the people of God in the worship of God. This emphasis has led some to identify the ministry of the laity with what Christians do when they worship. Our Reformed tradition, on the other hand, has historically defined what we now call the ministry of the laity in terms of what Christian people do in the workplace. Consequently, the expression “the ministry of the laity” is being used in our denomination with a variety of meanings, such as:

1. lay people doing tasks in worship services that ordained ministers normally do;
  2. lay people exercising gifts within the structures of The Presbyterian Church in Canada;
  3. lay people exercising gifts outside the structures of The Presbyterian Church in Canada;
  4. lay people serving Christ within the context of the Christian’s everyday life.
- Which of these properly describes the ministry of the laity?

A ministry of the people of God that is grounded in our baptism includes all of these types of contexts for ministry. Simply stated, there are no limits to the variety of forms and contexts for which Christ calls, gifts and commissions his people.

## Unlimited Forms and Contexts

It is clear that the people of God participate in a rich variety of ministries.<sup>15</sup> Such ministry involves men, women, youth and children, and takes place both within the congregations and other ministries of this church and in the world.

Within congregations, lay persons use their gifts while participating actively in the life of the congregation. These gifts are offered through activities such as regular attendance at Sunday worship, faithful stewardship, teaching Sunday School, leading youth group, visiting, bible study and belonging to various church groups. The leadership of Sunday worship provides another focus where lay people offer their gifts: singing in the choir, reading scripture, leading in prayer, presenting “moments for mission”, and preparing and conducting special services (e.g. WMS/AMS Thankoffering, youth). In exceptional circumstances, during periods in a congregation’s life when an ordained minister is not available, the lay people take responsibility for many aspects of the worship service.

Congregational ministries also find lay people serving within ministries of The Presbyterian Church in Canada that take them far and wide into the world community. These ministries include mission exposure tours across Canada and around the world, as well as programs that seek to meet needs within local communities (“out of the cold”, food banks, literacy). They also include mission appointments through which lay people serve with international mission partners.

Lay ministries outside the structures of this church are also enthusiastically endorsed. Great value is given to participation in community programs both in Canada and internationally, such as Meals on Wheels, Guides and Scouts, Doctors Without Borders, Habitat for Humanity, and various volunteer boards and service clubs.

Lay service in the world extends past church and community programs. Lay ministry encompasses home and occupation where Christians have the opportunity to serve God in everything they do. Witnessing to the love of God in Christ is done as much by lived example that lets people know God loves them, as by a call to conversion.

## Supporting Lay Ministry

This church believes that Christ has called and gifted all his people to share in his ministry in the world, and that, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, our lay people continue to respond. How can the whole church support lay people in their ministries?

## Worship and Discipleship

We must recognize the essentially spiritual nature of ministry. Ministry is much less about “doing” and much more about “being” in loving relationship with God who has come to us in Christ. We can reveal God in Christ to the world only to the extent that we, like branches, cling to the Vine (John 15:5).

This reality underlines the absolute priority we must give to worshipping God, both publicly and privately, and to all the means of grace by which our faith in God

*Ministry is much less about “doing” and much more about “being” in loving relationship with God who has come to us in Christ.*

can grow. Each particular congregation needs to explore how to do so within its particular context. How can we open ourselves to God's Spirit, who is developing discipleship among us? How can our faith and confidence in the promises of God grow? How can we know and love God in Christ more deeply? How can we hear and respond more fully to God's call?

Engaging these questions is critical to ministries that seek to bring Christ's healing presence to the world.

## **Affirming Vocation**

We must affirm the vocation of all baptized Christians. We must affirm that the church's ministry, Christ's ministry, is carried out by Christ's people in a myriad of contexts: at work, at home, at play, in the congregation, and in the community.

This church recognizes the significant role congregations can play in affirming the vocation of the laity. Congregations can be communities where lay people can flourish, a place where they receive support and education as they grow in faith and discipleship. Congregations that are welcoming and open to change, and that can listen and love unconditionally are able to support their people as they work out the shape their ministries will take. Recognition in the service of worship of the vocations in the congregation would be a visible sign of the Reformed belief that Christian vocation encompasses all of life.

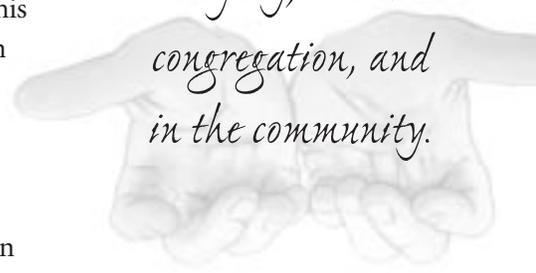
It must be acknowledged that affirming lay ministry will require resisting a double standard that exists in our church's lived view of ministry. On one hand, we state our belief that Christ has only one ministry. Further, we believe that it is to renew and nurture this one ministry that Christ calls individuals to serve in particular leadership roles.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, we succumb to the misconception that the real ministry of the church is carried out by those serving in the offices of the church (ministers of Word and Sacraments, diaconal ministers, ruling elders, congregational deacons), while the ministry of the people is something less than the church's real ministry. We live out this faulty belief in a number of ways, sometimes subtle. Whenever church members sidestep responsibility for ministry that could be theirs, whenever ministers hoard responsibility for ministry in which others could share, whenever anyone assumes that growing in faith and discipleship is important only for lay people, we fall prey to this misunderstanding. To what extent does misconception keep us from offering our best in Christ's service? Addressing this question is important for affirming lay ministry in The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

## **Keeping Faith and Life Together**

Christians in all ages may have been tempted to keep their Christian faith separate from their daily lives. However, the temptation to do so is enormous in today's increasingly secular Canadian society.

We recognize that the principal ministry of the laity is to enact genuine, committed service to God in every sphere of one's life. However, what will that look like? The central issue for the laity today is how to practice faith in a multi-value culture where the laity work and play. The situation of the Christian church in

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Canada is changing. Where Christians used to form the majority of the population and the dominant culture in Canada, they are fast becoming the minority. The Christian church thus has less influence in the community as Canada becomes a more secular and multi-religious society. It is often more difficult for individual Christians to express and live their faith. In fact, Christians in Canada can meet with indifference or even antagonism from those around them.

To recover the Reformed understanding of vocation as the life that is lived daily in the world will require ways for the people of God to explore creatively the question: how can we live in our world as salt and light and yeast? (Matthew 5:13-14, 13:33)

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## CONCLUSION

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Lay ministry is lay people offering themselves as they share in Christ's ministry in the world, in response to Christ's call in baptism. Lay ministry encompasses all of life, everything one is and does in grateful devotion to God. By faith and with the guidance of God's Spirit, lay ministry is carried out with confidence that the One who began a good work among us will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:6)

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## Endnotes

1. *Living Faith*, 7.2.1.
2. When discussing the Old Testament we will do so only in terms of the Greek translation that was made of the Hebrew scriptures about two centuries before the birth of Jesus, and is known as the Septuagint, to avoid confusion in terminology. *Laos* occurs some 2,000 times in the Septuagint.
3. Compare 1 Peter 2:5,9 with Romans 12:1, Philippians 4:18 and Hebrews 13:15,16.
4. Judaism as it developed in the Greek-speaking world, as opposed to the Judaism of Palestine.
5. Following a life-style consistent with the will of God.
6. Pringle, Wm., in "One Hundred Aphorisms" appended to the text of John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Henry Beveridge, James Clarke and Co., London 1953, Aphorism 51.4.
7. *Ibid.*, Aphorism 56.
8. *The Larger Catechism*, questions 91-196.
9. *Living Faith*, 7.6 and John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeil ed., Ford Lewis Battles tr., Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960, 4.15.6. All citations from *Institutes* are from this edition.
10. Galatians 3:26-27 and Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.15.1, 4.15.6.
11. For those baptized in infancy, this statement should read, "baptism and profession of faith"; *Living Faith* notes the importance of those baptized in infancy later making a profession of faith (7.6.4).  
For further discussion of the importance of baptism (and profession of faith), see James D. Smart, *The Rebirth of Ministry* (1965). Smart states that "baptism and confirmation are the primary ordination to the ministry of Jesus Christ to which all else is secondary." (p. 11). See also *Towards a Framework for the Theology and Practice of Ministry in The Presbyterian Church in Canada*, Thesis 4, p. 4.
12. This important statement answers question 1 in both the larger and the shorter catechisms.
13. *Living Faith*, 7.6.1.
14. *Ibid.*, 8.1.2.
15. The responses to the study paper on the ministry of the laity described many forms and contexts through which people express their Christian faith.
16. *Living Faith*, 7.2.6, 7.2.2.



## *The Ministry of the Courts of the Church*

3

The corporate nature of our church's life finds expression in its system of government through church courts. Beginning at the level of the congregation, the authority to govern rests first of all with the session, and then, moving upward through the system of courts, with the presbytery, the synod, and finally the General Assembly. The lower court is accountable to the court(s) above it, and the higher court is responsible for the court(s) below it. For example, a presbytery is accountable to the synod and General Assembly that are above it, and at the same time is responsible for the sessions and congregations within its bounds. This structure places church courts in a hierarchy, but never places individuals in a hierarchy. In fact, the same individuals often serve in courts at different levels. Within any particular court, all members serve as colleagues. Each one has an equal voice and vote, "to take away all occasion of tyranny."<sup>1</sup>

The courts of our church have ministries. Therefore the ministry of The Presbyterian Church in Canada cannot be understood apart from them.

### **This Chapter**

This chapter presents an overview of the courts of the church: their composition and the special focus and nature of their ministries. The biblical roots and historical

developments are covered elsewhere, in the chapters on the offices of ruling elder and minister of Word and Sacraments.

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## SESSION<sup>2</sup>

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Every congregation has a session that is comprised of a minister or ministers, active members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries serving in the congregation and ruling elders. Each has a voice and a vote. However the moderator votes only to break a tie.

The ministries of sessions centre upon leadership, nurture and the pastoral care of the members and adherents of the congregation. The corporate nature of the session is seen in the exercise of its leadership and authority, which reside in the session as a whole.

Sessions are active in leadership ministries as they enable the people of the congregation to live in the world faithfully as Christian disciples. Reaching out to the wider community also calls for dedicated people of God, trained and experienced, to engage in the ministry of mission and evangelism with knowledge, skill and sensitivity.

Sessions exercise a primary care for the welfare of the congregation. It is the responsibility of the session to oversee the observance of the sacraments, the time and place of worship services, the stewardship needs for ministry, the spiritual nurturing of the congregation, including all aspects of Christian Education, and the encouragement of potential candidates for ministry within the church. The competent conducting of the business of session, and the guidance and discipline of the membership, are important parts of this ministry.

Sessions provide pastoral care to their congregations through regular contact with members and adherents. Visitation programs and specialized activities in ministry all help to build strong relationships based in the love of God. Awareness of issues, consistent contact and specific programming are all aspects of pastoral care.

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## PRESBYTERY<sup>3</sup>

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Presbyteries are made up of all the called or appointed ordained and diaconal ministers serving within their bounds, and the congregational ruling elders who have been appointed by their sessions as representative and parity elders<sup>4</sup>. Together these individuals, each with voice and vote, form the constituent roll of the presbytery<sup>5</sup>.

The ministries of presbyteries focus on pastoral care, guidance and discipline. Teaching, preaching and worship leadership form some part of these ministries, while not their primary focus. Presbyteries have responsibility for the pastoral oversight of congregations, ministers and candidates for ministry within the bounds of the presbytery. Presbytery's responsibility for the care and good order of its congregations includes providing pulpit ministry in them.<sup>6</sup>

3

*The ministries  
of any court  
include the  
ministries of  
all those under  
their care.*

(page 24)

Presbyteries engage in pastoral ministries as they worship and as they pray for those under their care and for others. The ministries of presbyteries, like all pastoral ministries, are strongest when based on well-developed, caring and compassionate relationships. Therefore presbyteries visit congregations, meet with candidates for ministry, and provide opportunities for the members of presbytery to meet and support one another.

Presbyteries also make decisions. Types of decisions made by presbyteries include: erecting and dissolving congregations; reviewing requests by congregations for mission funds; approving calls to ministers by congregations; recruiting and certifying individuals as candidates for ministry; ordaining, inducting and recognizing ministers; dissolving pastoral ties between ministers and congregations; responding to requests sent from other church courts; promoting the plans and programs of the higher courts.

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## SYNOD<sup>7</sup>

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The synod is composed of all ministers, members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries and the elders on the roll of the presbyteries within the bounds, as set by the General Assembly. The synod meets annually and each member of synod has a voice and a vote.<sup>8</sup>

The ministries of synods focus on the review and certification of the effectiveness of the ministries of the presbyteries and sessions within their bounds. The synod transmits to and deals with all items received from the General Assembly, and engages the church through educational, informational and fellowship conferences and events.

Issues of administration and discipline are within the purview of this court. As with all courts of the church, the synod's ministry and actions are subject to review by the next highest court, the General Assembly.

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## GENERAL ASSEMBLY<sup>9</sup>

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As the highest court of the church the General Assembly is unique. It meets annually and elects its own moderator.<sup>10</sup> Representation 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, and an equal number of ruling elders.

The corporate nature of the General Assembly is seen in many ways from its membership, to the decision-making processes, to proportional representation<sup>11</sup> on standing committees and in the exercise of discipline.

The ministries of the General Assembly focus on doctrine, policy and discipline as pertaining to the congregations, sessions, presbyteries, synods, and professional church workers in The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Like the other courts of the church, the ministries of the General Assembly

*We believe that  
the Spirit of God  
moves and is  
discerned within  
the community of  
Christian believers,  
from the local  
congregation to the  
General Assembly.*

(page 25)

*Accountability can  
serve to keep us  
honest, while  
responsibility can  
serve to keep us  
connected to  
one another.*

(page 25)

involve making legislative, executive and judicial decisions. The General Assembly is, in effect, responsible for the spiritual and temporal welfare of the denomination. It is the final court of appeal and its decisions are final.

The General Assembly raises a budget for its ministry and missions both at home and abroad. National support is provided to ministries such as theological education through the theological colleges. Through the Life and Mission Agency, support is provided for education for discipleship, justice ministries, missions in Canada and internationally, ministers and congregations concerning ministerial issues, and communications. Other ministries include national archives, and the work of history, church doctrine and ecumenical relations committees, and the General Assembly itself.

Standing committees are appointed by the General Assembly for the transaction of the regular business of the church throughout the year. They report annually to the General Assembly and present recommendations for consideration, debate and decision. On occasion, commissions are appointed by the General Assembly, which defines their terms of reference. Commissions have no legislative function but deal with administrative or judicial matters.

The law of the church is enacted by the General Assembly.<sup>12</sup> The General Assembly may affirm what it understands to be the law of the church by passing a Declaratory Act, but may only change the standing law of the church with the approval of presbyteries under the provisions of the Barrier Act. In some cases the General Assembly gives a proposed law the force of law during the year when presbyteries are debating and judging the matter, by passing an Interim Act which requires a two-thirds majority of those present. However the proposed legislation ceases to have standing if the subsequent General Assembly, following the procedures under the Barrier Act, does not pass the law.

The General Assembly ceases to exist as a court as soon as it is closed. The Moderator presides over the Assembly while it meets, and is the only commissioner to hold his/her post once the General Assembly is dissolved. Over the intervening year between Assemblies, the office and work of the Moderator are seen as a focus for the unity of the denomination.

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## CORPORATE MINISTRIES

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These are the ministries of the courts of this church. Nevertheless, as indicated above, their actual ministries are much broader, because the ministries of any court include the ministries of all those under their care. For example, the ministries of the presbyteries include the ministries of all the congregations within their bounds and all the members and adherents of those congregations. Equally, the ministries of sessions are not confined to the particular decisions and actions they carry out, but also include the ministries of all persons under their care.

In a similar way, the ministry of a particular ruling elder cannot be completely described or understood apart from the ministry of session in whose work s/he shares. Equally, the ministry of a particular minister of Word and Sacraments is not

limited to his/her leadership and participation in the ministries of the congregation, but includes his/her involvement in the presbytery, synod and General Assembly.

By governing itself through church courts, The Presbyterian Church in Canada seeks to exercise corporate ministry. We believe that the Spirit of God moves and is discerned within the community of Christian believers, from the local congregation to the highest court, the General Assembly.

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## SUPPORTING THE MINISTRIES OF OUR CHURCH COURTS

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Our Presbyterian system of church government possesses a number of strengths. In the first place, our form of church order provides a structure, time and place for the Spirit of God to be at work within Christian community and to be discerned by it. As the Committee on Articles of Faith noted some years ago.<sup>13</sup>

Presbyterian order in this way provides for a deep organic unity between the membership of the church and the government of the church, and further, between the episcopate<sup>14</sup> in each congregation and the episcopate embracing each congregation.

Further, expectations of responsibility and accountability permit better decisions for the common good where more distance is possible. In very tangible ways, accountability can serve to keep us honest, while responsibility can serve to keep us connected to one another. Finally, the pooling of our resources (human, material and monetary) allows us to accomplish more than we might otherwise, in a strictly congregational church system.

Along with the strengths of our form of church government come some ongoing challenges. Since all ministry is spiritual in nature, seeking to grow as disciples of Christ has central importance. The ability of our church courts to reveal God in Christ to the world is linked integrally to our ability to glorify and enjoy God.

Strong Christian discipleship is foundational as well to building communities of trust and mutual support. Expectations of mutual accountability and responsibility bear good fruit in the fertile ground of well-developed, caring and compassionate relationships. To edify the Body of Christ in this way will require faith, vision, commitment, courage and a sense of hope. It will also require the development of knowledge and skills, including communication skills. How can The Presbyterian Church in Canada seek to create environments within our church courts and communities that encourage our members and adherents to offer their gifts in Christ's ministry, both inside and outside our church's structures? Our answers to this question will influence the kind of corporate witness to God's love in Christ we present to the world.

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*How can we  
create environments  
within our  
church courts and  
communities that  
encourage people to  
offer their gifts?*



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## Endnotes

1. *Book of Forms* section 4.
2. *Book of Forms* section 105-138.
3. *Book of Forms* section 176-258.
4. There is one representative elder from each pastoral charge or mission field in which there is an organized session. In addition, there are sufficient “equalizing” or “parity” elders to make the number of ruling elders equal to the number of ministers and members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries. See *Book of Forms* sections 176.2.1 and 176.2.2.
5. Presbyteries also maintain an appendix to the roll which lists all ministers and members of The Order of Diaconal Ministries who are living within the bounds of the presbytery and not serving half-time or more in ministries recognized by the presbytery. Individuals on the appendix to the roll remain subject to the discipline of the presbytery. Such individuals have no vote in the presbytery, but are often invited to speak and to serve in a variety of ways, including membership on committees of presbytery. Ministers and diaconal ministers remain on the appendix to the roll at the discretion of the presbytery, since being on the appendix is considered a privilege, not a right (*Book of Forms* section 176.3).
6. Such pulpit ministry is put in place by call of the congregation approved by the presbytery, by appointment by the presbytery, or by arrangements made by the interim moderator. (An interim moderator is a minister appointed by the presbytery to moderate the session and give leadership in the congregation during the time when the congregation is seeking to fill a ministerial vacancy.)
7. *Book of Forms* sections 259-276.
8. Synods may decide to function through commissioners appointed by its several presbyteries (*Book of Forms* section 260).
9. *Book of Forms* sections 277-312.
10. Presbyteries and synods elect their own moderators annually as well. Synods meet annually, while presbyteries meet more frequently.
11. See *Book of Forms* sections 301.1-301.3.
12. *Book of Forms* sections 293-293.4. It should be noted that the “majority of presbyteries” required under the Barrier Act is defined as the majority of presbyteries that reply to the General Assembly about the proposed legislation, provided they constitute an actual majority of ministers, members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries and elders on the constituent rolls of all presbyteries.
13. Further discussion of the corporate nature of ministry within The Presbyterian Church in Canada is found in the report of the Committee on Articles of Faith, A&P 1965, p. 327f.
14. “Episcopate” means overseeing or supervision.



## *The Ministry of the Ruling Eldership*

Christ has furnished some in the church, beside ministers of Word and Sacraments, with gifts for government, and commissioned them to use these gifts, when called, joining with the minister in the government of the church.<sup>1</sup>

The ruling eldership is the secret weapon of  
The Presbyterian Church in Canada.<sup>2</sup>

The Presbyterian Church in Canada ordains people, elected by the congregation where they are professing members, to the office of ruling eldership. Elders serve the office of the ruling eldership as members of the church court called the session. Together ruling elders and the minister of Word and Sacraments share the authority and responsibility for leadership, pastoral care and oversight of the congregation.

When appointed as representatives of congregations to do so, elders also share in the ministries of presbyteries, synods and General Assemblies.

How do ruling elders use their gifts for governing and leadership to share Christ's work? What challenges are before the church as it seeks to support the ministry of the ruling elders?

*Calvin claimed that elders could carry out oversight, departing from the position of the Roman Catholic Church, which relied on the clergy.*

## This Chapter

This chapter will examine key, historical precedents, along with their scriptural foundations, for the office of the ruling elder in The Presbyterian Church in Canada. The chapter will outline the role, responsibilities, election and ordination of ruling elders, and explore ways to support the ministry of the ruling eldership.

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### WHERE DOES OUR UNDERSTANDING ORIGINATE?

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Our Canadian Presbyterian office of the ruling elder can be traced back to three historical roots:

1. John Calvin (1509-1564);
2. The Scottish Church's *Books of Discipline* (1560 and 1578); and
3. The Westminster Assembly's *The Form of Presbyterial Church Government* (1645).

## The Ruling Elder According to John Calvin

The theology and practice of John Calvin in Geneva laid the foundation for the office of ruling elder as exercised in The Presbyterian Church in Canada. While another Swiss Reformer, Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531), had established the office of elder before Calvin, the authority and function of elders in Calvin's consistory (i.e. session) set the precedent for French, Dutch and Scottish Reformed churches.<sup>3</sup>

Calvin affirmed the elder as one of the four<sup>4</sup> permanent offices in the church that scripture attested. In Calvin's Genevan church, ruling elders were chosen from among the people to "join with the pastors in the spiritual rule of the church."<sup>5</sup> Calvin followed the conventional view that the church needed spiritual discipline, and offered biblical support for that discipline (Matthew 16:19, 18:15-18).<sup>6</sup> However he claimed that elders, who were neither clergy nor civic magistrates, could carry out such oversight. In this, Calvin departed from the positions both of the Roman Catholic Church, which relied on the clergy, and of Zwingli, who depended on the state, for moral discipline.

Although the first elders in Calvin's Genevan consistory were chosen from among the civic magistrates, they were installed as elders before they served as officials of the church exercising discipline. Unlike Zwingli, Calvin believed that the church's authority in matters of morality came directly from God, and that it should not entrust this to the state. Therefore, to exercise properly the discipline of morals, "governors" (1 Corinthians 12:28),<sup>7</sup> "rulers" (Romans 12:8)<sup>8</sup> or supervisory

presbyters (1 Timothy 5:17)<sup>9</sup> were selected from among non-ministers.<sup>10</sup>

Again unlike Zwingli, Calvin was reluctant to use Old Testament quotations to support his case for ruling elders. In Israel, “civic” officials were also leaders in the congregations of God’s people and, therefore Calvin believed, did not provide a proper model for Christian church order.<sup>11</sup>

The role of ruling elders, as they ruled with pastors (i.e. ministers of Word and Sacraments) in Calvin’s Geneva, was clearly focussed on matters of discipline: rebuking and correcting the morals of erring Christians. Calvin saw the elder functioning within the consistory “to supervise morals”, “to investigate vices,”<sup>12</sup> to be “judges of morals”,<sup>13</sup> and “to admonish amicably those whom they see to be erring or to be living a disordered life, and where it is required, to enjoin fraternal corrections themselves and then to make them along with others.”<sup>14</sup> In short, Calvin’s ruling elders were a kind of “spiritual” police force.

Discipline in Calvin’s Geneva was not an entirely negative function, including as it did religious education, guidance and corporate counselling.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, its main purpose was to enforce the Christian rule of personal conduct. “Governance was almost synonymous with the correction of errors and faults.”<sup>16</sup>

It should be noted that the jurisdiction of ruling elders did not extend to ministers of Word and Sacraments. Only ministers disciplined ministers in Calvin’s Geneva.

*Ruling elders  
focussed on matters  
of discipline,  
enforcing the  
Christian rule of  
personal conduct.*



## The Ruling Elder in the First and Second Books of Discipline

The second historical precedent for the office of ruling elder comes from the Scottish Church’s *Books of Discipline*. The importance of these sources is to be immediately seen in the number of references made to them in the current *Book of Forms* of The Presbyterian Church In Canada, especially in setting out the “principles and practice of Presbyterian Churches” and throughout the chapter on the session.<sup>17</sup> The *First Book of Discipline* (1560) and the *Second Book of Discipline* (1578) were attempts to reorganize non-Roman Catholic churches in Scotland by following Reformed church principles.

The office of ruling elder developed in Scotland primarily because Scottish reformer John Knox, a disciple of Calvin, transplanted the Genevan practice. The *First Book of Discipline*, despite being hastily composed and not always consistent, presents a fairly well developed view of the office. In Scotland, as in Geneva, elders were elected annually. In Scotland, unlike Geneva, elders were nominated from among “every rank and class” by both retiring elders and deacons and by members of the congregation. Nominations were made of twice the number of elders needed, and from this list the congregation chose the elders-elect.<sup>18</sup>

In another departure from Genevan practice, a Scottish session exercised discipline over ministers as well as members of the congregation.<sup>19</sup> Further, while the city of Geneva had only one consistory, in Scotland every congregation had its own session because the congregations were scattered throughout the country rather than located in one place. The very geography of Scotland led to the need

In Scotland  
the development  
of presbyteries  
expanded the scope  
of an elder's  
"governance"  
beyond the  
congregation.



for a more developed Presbyterian polity and thus to the more detailed *Second Book of Discipline*.

According to T. Wardlaw Taylor, a long-time Clerk of the General Assembly, the *Second Book of Discipline* "set the [ruling] eldership on an unassailable scriptural foundation."<sup>20</sup> In agreement with Calvin, this book grounds the perpetual and spiritual office of ruling elder on the "presidents" or "governors" referred to by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:28.<sup>21</sup> The *Second Book of Discipline* also refers to the rotation of the Levites serving in the temple as a justification for rotating the service of elders who, although by this time elected for life in contrast with the First Book of Discipline, may relieve another for a reasonable space.<sup>22</sup>

The *Second Book of Discipline* reflects Calvin's understanding of the office, but also goes beyond it. The development of presbyteries meant that the scope of an elder's "governance" expanded beyond the bounds of the congregation. However, ruling elders did not have equal status with clergy in presbytery — in fact they were not even obliged to take part in presbytery's proceedings. As with Calvin, ruling elders are very much responsible, individually and collectively, for discipline and the supervision of Christian morals in the congregation.<sup>23</sup> However in addition to this duty, the Scottish church added that ruling elders were to assist the pastor in the work of examining the religious knowledge of those who come to the Lord's Table and in visiting the sick.<sup>24</sup> They were also to look for the fruition of the word that was taught by the ministers of Word and Sacraments.

## The Ruling Elder in The Form of Presbyterial Church Government (1645)

The third historical precedent for the office of ruling elder is to be found in the Westminster Assembly's *The Form of Presbyterial Government* of 1645. This document was an attempt by the Westminster Assembly to advise the English Parliament on a form of church government that was agreeable to scripture and that would help to bring peace and a measure of agreement between the churches of Scotland and England. One sharp point of dispute among the churches was the role of ruling elders in the government of the church.

Following Calvin, Westminster recognized other "church governors" (i.e. our ruling elders) as one of the four "ordinary and perpetual" officers within the church.<sup>25</sup> Unlike Calvin, however, this document stated that the biblical precedent for the ruling elder was to be found in the Old Testament practice of having "elders of the people" join with the priests and Levites in the government of the church (2 Chronicles 19:8-10).<sup>26</sup> Once the precedent for "elders of the people" is established by Old Testament practice, the gift of governance given by Christ to the church (Romans 12:8; 1 Corinthians 12:28) provides further justification for its continued practice in the church.<sup>27</sup>

For the members of the Westminster Assembly, the function of church-governors (commonly called ruling elders) was always corporate. They were "to join with the minister in the government of the church."<sup>28</sup> Their primary responsibility was, as in Geneva, that of discipline and oversight of the moral behaviour of the

Christian community. This involved, amongst other things, persuading people to attend church regularly, determining whether or not parents were instructing their children in the faith, and overseeing the general deportment of Christians in society. However, as in the *Second Book of Discipline*, they look for the fruition of the word taught and sown by the doctor and the pastor. Barring a person from the Lord's Table was one of the potent means at the disposal of the ruling officers of the congregation.<sup>29</sup> In the session records of many Canadian Presbyterian congregations in the mid to late 1800s are found many examples of sessions acting on this authority, often barring a communicant for a period of months for such offenses as public drunkenness or profanity.

What is absent from the Westminster document is the role of the individual elder in the life of the community. All governing functions are carried out collectively whereas in the *Second Book of Discipline* and the writings of Calvin, the duties of ruling elders are both collective and individual. There, admonition is carried out privately by a single elder and, if not heeded, the offender is then brought to the assembly of the eldership. In the Westminster documents however, no individual or private functions are listed for a ruling elder at any court — session, presbytery, synod or general assembly. *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government* appears to operate under the conviction that ruling elders exercise the function of governance authoritatively only as an assembly moderated by “one whose office is to labour in the word and doctrine.”<sup>30</sup>

*Ruling elders are  
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the congregation.*

(page 32)

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## THE OFFICE OF THE RULING ELDER TODAY

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What use has The Presbyterian Church in Canada made of this biblical and historical inheritance? As may be seen in the following discussion, this church has been strongly influenced by the biblical and historical precedents in its development of the office of the ruling elder.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada ordains<sup>31</sup> people, elected by the congregations where they are professing members, to the office of the ruling eldership. What this church believes about the office of the ruling elder can be seen in three key official documents: the “Preamble to the Ordination of Ruling Elders”, *Living Faith*, and the *Book of Forms*.

The “Preamble to the Ordination of Ruling Elders”<sup>32</sup> is read each time elders are ordained in a congregation. It states: “That the church may be continually renewed and nurtured for her ministry, Christ furnishes her with officers, among whom are ruling elders.” The Preamble then cites *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government* with its reminder:

... that Christ has furnished some in the church, beside the Ministers of Word, with gifts for government and with commission to execute the same, when called thereunto, who are to join with the Minister in the government of the church, which officers Reformed churches commonly call elders.

*Living Faith*, one of the subordinate standards of our church, also reveals the strong influence of biblical and historical precedents. This document follows Westminster's *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government* in connection with the office of the ruling elder and quotes no other historical document on the subject in its "Notes" section.<sup>33</sup> *Living Faith* lists Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:28 as the scriptural warrants for the office. Our church identifies "the one who rules" of Romans 12:8 and the governor/administrator of 1 Corinthians 12:28 with the ruling elder.<sup>34</sup>

*Living Faith* also quotes a text that has not been central among the biblical justification generally offered for ruling elders: Acts 14:23.<sup>35</sup> The point of the text (along with Acts 11:30 and 13:22) is that ruling elders are like the elders in the Book of Acts, who were lay leaders ("elders of the people") along the model of the synagogue. Thus the office of the ruling elder has its warrant in the practice of the Pauline churches in Acts, not in the later pastoral epistles where the term "elder" is closer to what we call ministers of Word and Sacraments.<sup>36</sup>

*Living Faith* describes the office of the ruling elder in the section on "Ministry". It states: "Through the office of the ruling elder men and women are ordained to share with the minister in the leadership, pastoral care, and oversight of the congregation."<sup>37</sup>

While the influence of the historical precedents is evident, perhaps the most significant departure from them is the extent to which ruling elders now participate in the higher courts of the church. For instance, where ruling elders were not always required to attend presbytery, and in some cases were requested not to be in attendance when matters of ecclesiastical discipline that concerned ministers was under consideration<sup>38</sup>, our church now requires that the number of ruling elders equals the number of ministers in the presbytery.<sup>39</sup> In addition, elders may now moderate the proceedings of all courts of the church with the exception of the local session. Ruling elders share equally with ministers of Word and Sacraments as members of the courts of the church, with the exception of the laying on of hands at ordination. Consequently, the office of ruling elder has grown significantly from the time of Calvin and Knox. Now ruling elders who are members of presbytery, synod or general assembly have as much say in the determination of doctrine as do the ministers of Word and Sacraments.

When considering the role of ruling elders within congregations, it is very important to note that it is the session as a whole that holds authority and bears responsibility for the duties assigned to elders. Not all elders possess all of the gifts necessary to fulfill the responsibilities set out in *Living Faith* and more specifically in the *Book of Forms*<sup>40</sup>. It is the gifts of individual elders, shared collegially in the session, that provide the congregation with its guidance and rule.

## Responsibilities of Ruling Elders

Ruling elders share with the minister in the core functions of leadership, pastoral care and oversight of the congregation. In fact, the chapter of the *Book of Forms* dealing with the session could be summarized under these three general areas.

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## Leadership

This is a useful term for the task the ruling elders share with the minister of nurturing and setting direction for the congregation. The term generally used in the *Book of Forms* to describe this function is “responsible”. The words, “The session is responsible for...” begin almost every section of Chapter III of the *Book of Forms*.<sup>41</sup> They could be reworded to read, “The session has the task of leadership in...”; or, “Sessions lead congregations in these areas...”.

Sessions are responsible for facilitating the ongoing life of the congregation in the key areas of worship, education, pastoral care, mission and stewardship. In particular, sessions provide leadership with respect to the use of church buildings and property, the recruitment and care of members, the hours and forms of public worship, the entire program of Christian education, and all aspects of stewardship and mission. The *Book of Forms* describes these areas of responsibility in broad terms, without specific policies and goals. This, in turn, highlights the critical role that focused clear-sighted leadership by the session plays in setting policy and establishing good order in the particular congregation’s life. Sessions need to work at a biblical and theological understanding of the tasks of the church in the world, as well as familiarity with the strategies and resources available.

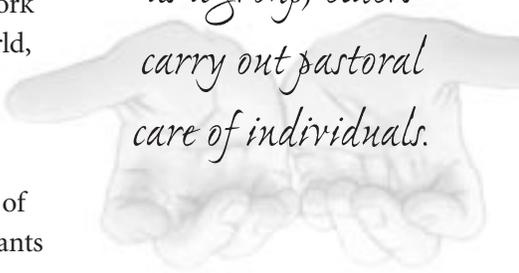
## Pastoral Care

Elders are also responsible for sharing with the minister in the pastoral care of the congregation. As a group, the session is responsible for ensuring that applicants for church membership are properly instructed in Christian faith.<sup>42</sup> This duty involves examining candidates to see that such instruction has been given, as well as formally admitting candidates to “professing membership”. The duty of assisting the minister in examining candidates for membership has been carried on from both the *Second Book of Discipline* and *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government*. Transfer of membership, exclusion “for just cause”, and restoration of professing members is also a pastoral function of the session.<sup>43</sup>

While the session oversees the pastoral care of the congregation as a group, the actual carrying out of pastoral care is performed individually by each elder. Elders are assigned a district and encouraged to “cultivate a personal relationship with those persons [in their district] through visiting, counselling and encouraging them in the Christian life”.<sup>44</sup> In continuity with the *Second Book of Discipline*, elders assist the minister by performing individually the work of pastoral visiting. Eldership is thus “a pastoral office as well as a ruling one.”<sup>45</sup>

This pastoral role of the eldership has received the most attention recently in our denomination’s development and promotion of resources for the office.<sup>46</sup> This may be because pastoral visitation requires more preparation and training than other aspects of the eldership. It may also be true that the pastoral role of the elder is most needed in the denomination at present. The benefit of a pastorally trained eldership allows, in the words of Samuel Miller, “all the principal advantages which may be expected from being under the pastoral care of four or five ministers, without having the disadvantages of having to support so many pastors.”<sup>47</sup> A second benefit has to do with a congregation’s perception of the session. Perhaps because the

*While the session oversees the pastoral care of the congregation as a group, elders carry out pastoral care of individuals.*

A faint, light-colored illustration of two hands, one from the left and one from the right, gently cupping a heart. The hands are positioned as if they are supporting or holding the heart, symbolizing care and support.

pastoral role of the ruling elder has not been well performed always,<sup>48</sup> sessions are perceived sometimes as remote, autocratic and uncommunicative. By encouraging the pastoral role of the ruling eldership, we may also address the issue of congregations feeling distant from the sessions responsible for leading them.

### **Congregational Deacon**

One way by which the session may delegate some of their pastoral duties is through the office of congregational deacon.<sup>49</sup> The congregational deacon is ordained to this office whose responsibility it is to administer charity and works of mercy in the community, to visit the sick and generally to administer the love of Christ in a hurting world. It should be noted that the authority to establish deacons' courts already exists.<sup>50</sup>

Historically, deacons had a very responsible service to provide the church. From the first to the sixth centuries, deacons were primarily responsible for pastoral care and administering church charities. Much of this activity ended when the church became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Many of the tasks performed by the deacons were taken over by state institutions. Today, we discover a reverse trend taking place. Many services to the community previously provided by government agencies are now being returned to private interests. Because of this, sessions may find themselves with opportunities of service in the name of Christ to their communities of a kind not required of them for many years. Yet, working to carry out an already full slate of duties, a session may not find the time or strength to develop such service. The reinstatement of a congregational diaconate might enable congregations to enter into new and exciting forms of Christian service to the world.

*Authority is  
vested neither  
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but in the courts  
of the church.*



### **Oversight**

The third core function, oversight, is also shared by the ruling elders with the minister. Oversight raises the issue of authority. In Reformed churches, the “keys of the kingdom” (Matthew 16:19) and “the power of binding and loosing” (Matthew 18:17-18) are vested neither in individuals nor in congregations, but in the courts of the church as they rule under the gospel. Oversight, therefore, is more than a function of the session: it carries with it an assumption that the session has behind it the authority of the church courts. All congregational members are “subject to the authority and discipline of the session”.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, all the “associations of members and adherents connected with the congregation” are under the supervision and oversight of the session. They may be established only by “first receiving the approval of session”.<sup>52</sup> Education, leadership, worship including sacraments, pastoral care, mission — in fact, all aspects of church life — receive the session’s oversight so that the life of the congregation as a whole and the lives of its individual members are in harmony with the gospel.

One way in which ruling elders can delegate their duties is through session committees, which are composed not only of elders but also of other members of the congregation. In fact, the number of elders on such committees could be quite small, thus making greater use of the specific gifts of many others in the

congregation. Decisions of these committees would be in the form of recommendations to session, brought forward by an elder member of the committee. Session would always have the final word in the implementation of such recommendations.

## Election and Ordination of Elders

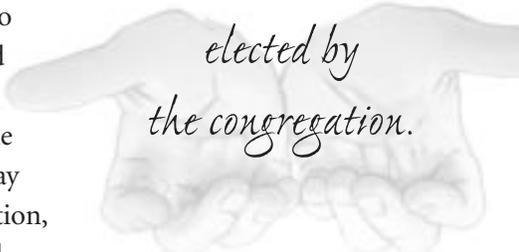
The *Book of Forms* provides a number of ways by which elders are to be elected by the congregation.<sup>53</sup> The session may appoint a nominating committee and spread the process of nominations over at least three successive Sundays. Nominations from the congregation must be in writing and made by at least two persons. A voting day is announced, with voting normally being done by ballot. Alternatively, a meeting of the congregation may be called by the session for the purpose of nominating persons qualified for the office. A list of such nominees is then drawn up and presented to the professed membership, for response by ballot by a fixed date.

The session may also simply call a meeting of the congregation for the purpose of electing elders without the above nomination process. The session may also simply ask the professed membership to submit voting papers with the names of candidates to the number required by a certain date.

In all of the cases listed above, the existing session is required to examine the candidates as to their fitness of the office. Thus, while the right of electing elders is vested in the professing members of the congregation, it is the session that has the final authority in the determination of the candidates to be elected. After election and approval by the session, the session informs the congregation of the upcoming ordination.<sup>54</sup>

Ordination of elders takes place within a service of worship in the congregation.<sup>55</sup> After the reading of the Preamble to the Ordination Vows, the elders-elect profess their faith in God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — and their acceptance of the subordinate standards and government of this church. They promise to share in and submit themselves to the lawful oversight of the courts of the church, and to perform faithfully their duties in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. The congregation, for its part, professes its faith in God, affirms its willingness to receive the elders as chosen by God through the voice of the congregation, and agrees to encourage them and respect their decisions. With prayer and the laying on of hands by the minister of Word and Sacraments, who acts on behalf of the presbytery, the elders-elect are declared to be ordained and admitted into the session of the congregation.

Ruling elders are ordained to this office for life, but actively participate in the office only within the congregation that has elected them. If an elder moves away from the bounds of a congregation or becomes a member of another congregation, that elder ceases to be a member of the former session but remains an ordained elder. General Assembly has also given permission for sessions, with the approval of presbytery, to institute a period of term service for elders, established at six years.<sup>56</sup> Elders may also resign as members of session for cause, but they remain ordained to that office and may be re-elected to the session later when the cause of their



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(page 35)

resignation no longer applies, such as family or business pressures. Unfortunately, sometimes a situation arises where an elder's conduct requires the session to petition the presbytery to remove the elder. In severe cases, the elder may be deposed from office.

## Supporting the Office of Ruling Elder

Suggestions have been made that the office of the ruling elder be widened to include some aspects of the work of the ministry of Word and Sacraments. This idea has arisen in locations where obtaining ministerial supply has been consistently difficult. However, there is no general support throughout the church for this enlargement of responsibility.

What is of more general concern is the fact that many elders feel overwhelmed by the scope of the requirements for the office as outlined in the *Book of Forms*. The historical and biblical outline in this chapter indicates how the office has grown over the centuries. There can be no doubt that the office of the ruling elder offers churches of the Reformed tradition, such as our own, a most unique and useful gift for the up-building of the church.

### Selection of Elders

For this reason, sessions must be careful to select candidates for nomination to the office who clearly demonstrate an ability to fulfill the requirements of the office or who show a willingness to learn and develop their gifts so that they may do so. These gifts and abilities include:

- mature Christian faith that is literate in the basics of Christian doctrine and the content of scripture, for the sake of leadership that is Christian;
- an awareness of the resources and strategies that can help provide direction, vision and goals to a given congregation in a specific time and place;
- a familiarity with the areas of responsibility assigned to the session listed in the *Book of Forms*;
- a willingness to look out for the spiritual welfare of the congregation;
- an ability to offer basic Christian guidance and encouragement and to pray with people in the congregation (or a willingness to see that this is done by others);
- an ability to assess whether candidates for church membership have been properly instructed in Christian faith;
- an ability to communicate the Christian gospel in a variety of contexts (pastoral, evangelical, educational);
- a genuine concern for the life struggles and circumstances of people of a variety of age groups (the ability to relate to people);
- a willingness to be accountable to the courts of the church for the supervision of the life of the congregation;
- the ability to confront in love people in the congregation who are engaged in behaviour that is self-destructive or neighbour-destructive (behaviour inconsistent with the gospel);

- a knowledge of the groups that are meeting under the auspices of the church;
- a basic ability to review Sunday school curricula, Bible study guides, or other Christian education materials considered for church programs.

Of course, some of these characteristics will be essential for every elder to possess (such as mature Christian faith), while others may be expressed more strongly by some elders than others. As noted previously, it is the gifts of individual elders, shared collegially in the session, that provide the congregation with its guidance and rule. When congregations are guided to consider these gifts and abilities during the nomination and election process, it will be easier to resist the tendency to choose individuals for the sake of popularity or as a reward for previous activity.

### Training Opportunities

Training opportunities for present and future elders must be given a high priority, since the development of individual gifts that enable elders to serve Christ in the church is of utmost importance.<sup>57</sup> Sessions need to give time to the study of scripture and the relationship of such study to the functioning of their office. Elders need to be aware of the importance and function of the higher courts in order to fulfil their responsibilities as representative elders should they be so appointed. Given that many people in our congregations now come from Christian backgrounds other than Presbyterian, elders need to be very clear in their own minds about the nature of our church's polity. Every opportunity should be taken by the courts and national agencies of the church to provide easily accessible training in pastoral care in order that the reluctance of many elders to perform the visitation of individuals within districts might be overcome.<sup>58</sup> Knowledgeable, well-equipped sessions are central to strengthening our church and enabling the whole Christian community to serve its Lord and Saviour to the fullest.

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## CONCLUSION

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Presbyterians have a unique office in the ruling elder. It brings to each congregation a rich treasury of gifts of the Holy Spirit in persons of faith, dedication, and ability. Where sessions are careful in the presenting of candidates for the office to their congregations, where elders are concerned to hear the call of God within their office, where time and talent are shared for the health of the community of faith — there will be found the genius of Presbyterian polity. Let us use and honour the office well.

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## Endnotes

1. *Book of Forms* section 412 (paraphrased).
2. Tony Plomp, in "You Were Asking?"; *The Presbyterian Record*, June 1992.
3. Calvin was dependent upon others for the unique way in which the ruling elder came to share in church discipline. In particular, Calvin drew on the work of John Oecolampadius (1482-1531) and Martin Bucer (1491-1551). See R.E.H. Uprichard, "The Eldership in Martin Bucer and John Calvin," *Evangelical Quarterly* 61:1, January, 1989, p. 21-37.
4. The other three permanent offices were pastors (i.e. ministers of Word and Sacraments), teachers (whom Calvin called "doctors" and who would be closer to our theological professors) and deacons. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.3.4, 4.3.8, 4.3.9.
5. *Ibid.*, 4.11.1.
6. *Ibid.*, 4.11.1.
7. 1 Corinthians 12:28 "And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership (κυβερνησεις — "governors"), various kinds of tongues."
8. Romans 12:8 "...the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader (προισταμενος — one who presides, rules, governs), in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness."
9. 1 Timothy 5:17 "Let the elders (πρεσβυτεροι) who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching." Using this text, Calvin established the distinction between two types of presbyters: those who labour in the Word and those who rule but do not preach. (*Institutes*, 4.11.1). Many later commentators believe that, by the time the pastoral epistles such as the letters to Timothy were written, the term presbuteros would have been used to refer exclusively to pastor-presbyters (i.e. ministers of Word and Sacraments).
10. *Institutes*, 4.11.1. For those interested in a detailed analysis of Calvin's use of these texts in his support for the office of ruling elder see E.A. McKee, *Elders and the Plural Ministry: The Role of Exegetical History in Illuminating John Calvin's Theology*, Geneva: Librairie Droz S.A., 1988.
11. See Elsie Anne McKee, "The Offices of Elders and Deacons in the Classical Reformed Tradition," in *Major Themes in The Reformed Tradition*, Donald McKim, ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992, p. 345.
12. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.11.1.
13. Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and Thessalonians*, R. MacKenzie tr., David Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, eds.; Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1973, p. 270.
14. "Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances" in *Calvin's Theological Treatises*, J.K.S. Reid, tr., Philadelphia: Westminster Press, p. 63
15. See E.A. McKee "Elders," in *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, Donald McKim, ed., Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992, p. 118.
16. Joan S. Gray and Joyce C. Tucker, *Presbyterian Polity for Church Officers*, 2nd ed., Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1986, p. 35.
17. In the *Book of Forms*, the "principles and practice" are outlined in section 3 and Chapter III is devoted to the session.
18. See Janet G. MacGregor, *The Scottish Presbyterian Polity: A Study of its Origins in the Sixteenth Century*, London: Oliver and Boyd, 1926, 41.
19. Gray and Tucker, op.cit., pp. 35-36. On this point these authors are dependent on MacGregor, op.cit., p. 51.
20. T. Wardlaw Taylor, *The Ruling Elder: His Offices and Duties*, Toronto: Presbyterian Publications, 1950, p. 11.
21. It should also be noted that, as Calvin, the *Second Book of Discipline* used 1 Timothy 5:17 to provide the biblical justification for elders who are not also teachers of the word. The *Second Book of Discipline*, Adam Lees, ed., (1992), Agreed Upon in the General Assembly 1578, 6.3.
22. *Ibid.*, 6.2. Previously elders were elected annually. See MacGregor, op.cit., p. 122.
23. *Ibid.*, 6.9. This would include seeing that "naughty persons" are brought back into the way (7.11) that the word is rightly preached, the sacraments rightly ministered, discipline rightly maintained and "ecclesiastic good incorruptly distributed." *Ibid.*, 7.12.
24. *Ibid.*, 6.6. The work of examining children in religious knowledge was forbidden to elders in the French Reformed Churches of this period. See MacGregor, op.cit., p. 91.
25. *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government*, in *The (Westminster) Confession of Faith*, Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1979, 172.
26. The Westminster document does not use 1 Timothy 5:17 to support two kinds of presbyters, but uses this text solely to support the multifaceted work of the pastor-presbyter. "Of the Officers of a Particular Congregation" in *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government*, note 4, p. 175. See G. D. Henderson, *The Scottish Ruling Elder*, London: James Clarke and Co., 1935, p. 194-196.
27. "Other Church Governors," in *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government*, 174.
28. *Ibid.*, 174.

29. "Of Congregational Assemblies," in *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government*, p. 177. See also *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 30 "Of Church Censures."
30. "Of the Officers of a Particular Congregation" in *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government*, 175-176.
31. "Ordain" means literally "to place in an order".
32. The *Preamble* was approved by the General Assembly in 1971. *Book of Forms* section 412, and *The Book of Common Worship*, The Presbyterian Church In Canada, 1991, p. 392-3. A service of ordination to the office of ruling elder begins at p. 390.
33. In *Living Faith*, notes for section 7.2.4 are found on p. 38.
34. As does also Calvin, the *Second Book of Discipline*, and *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government*. See notes 7 and 8 of this chapter for scripture, notes 10, 20, 26 for historical precedents.
35. In *Living Faith*, scriptural references for section 7.2.4 are found on p. 33.
36. For a discussion of the interpretation of 1 Timothy 5:17, used by Calvin and the *Second Book of Discipline* to support the office of ruling elder, see Stephen Hayes' book, *Eldership In Today's Church*. Hayes echoes some contemporary scholars in maintaining that later New Testament references to "elders", like those in Timothy and Titus, "refer primarily to ministers," p. 5.
37. *Living Faith*, 7.2.4. The word "share" is used in *Living Faith*, whereas in the *Second Book of Discipline* the word "assist" is used where it speaks of the relationship ruling elders have to ministers of Word and Sacraments. There may be something in this change in vocabulary. Sharing could be taken to mean that ruling elders do the same work, whereas assisting points more to the auxiliary role of ruling elders as an end in itself.
38. See discussion of the *Second Book of Discipline* above.
39. A concept called "parity". See *Book of Forms* section 176.2.2. There is no provision, however, for equalizing clergy. In other words, while the number of elders must be equal to the number of ministers and diaconal ministers, nothing is mentioned about the number of ministers being equal to the number of elders at presbytery.
40. *Book of Forms*, Chapter III on the session extends from sections 105-138.1 inclusive.
41. This is further emphasized by the wording of the liturgy for the ordination of elders in *The Book of Common Worship* (1991), authorized by the General Assembly, p. 394. The implication is that they accept the responsibility of "fostering Christian belief, worship, and service among the people."
42. *Book of Forms* section 110-110.3.
43. *Book of Forms* sections 110.6-110.8.
44. *Book of Forms* sections 109.4, 110.8.
45. See also Stephen Hayes, op. cit., 13.
46. For example, the video "What Do You Say After Hello?"; John Cameron's *Not By Constraint*, 1985; Bruce Miles' *The Elder: Who and What?*, 1984; *Prayer Guide For Elders*, 1992; *Elder's Record Binders* designed to record pastoral care and communion attendance.
47. Cited in Gray and Tucker, op. cit., p.39.
48. The State of the Church Committee reported to the General Assembly in 1994 (A&P 1994, p. 396) that one third of the respondents to their survey had not had a visit in two years from a ruling elder.
49. While the study paper promoting the possibility of the restoration of the office of congregational deacon was not received well by the church generally, nonetheless many congregations might benefit from its suggestions. See A&P 1997, p. 352-59.
50. *Book of Forms*, section 113.4. "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. The session may ask the congregation to elect a deacons' court for this purpose."
51. *Book of Forms* section 109.
52. *Book of Forms* section 109.1.
53. *Book of Forms* section 132.1.1-132.4.
54. *Book of Forms* section 132.3 and 132.4.
55. See foot note 32 of this chapter.
56. Term service can reduce the stress on dedicated elders, while at the same time broadening the pool of gifted elders within a congregation. It is interesting to note that while this has been a long debated issue in our denomination, in the case of the *First Book of Discipline* noted earlier, elders then were elected annually. While annual elections had disappeared by the time of the *Second Book of Discipline*, that document still allowed term service for elders.
57. Many responses to the study paper expressed this point strongly.
58. For example, the "Detailed Self-Evaluation Tool" in *For Elders*, November 1998, and Crissfield, E. *The Role of the Elder: An Elders' Institute in a Box Course*, St. Andrew's Hall Institute for Elders' Education, 2002. See also, Matthew, Stewart and Ken Lawson, *Caring for God's People: A Handbook for Elders and Ministers on Pastoral Care*, new edition, Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1995 and Matthew, Stewart and Kenneth Scott, *Leading God's People: A Handbook for Elders and Ministers*, new edition, Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1995.



## *Diaconal Ministry*

“I am among you as one who serves.”  
(Luke 22:27)

5

The model for diaconal ministry is Jesus Christ, “one who serves”. Servanthood is the key to understanding the “call” to diaconal ministry. Servanthood ministry is being a physical and positive presence to others, enabling them to experience God’s grace and redemption. It presumes an image of God whose love and care extends to all people. It is a call to be in relationship with God and God’s world, to accept, support, comfort, equip and encourage others to use their gifts to fulfil their potential in service and in life.<sup>1</sup>

Diaconal ministry in The Presbyterian Church in Canada encompasses Christian education, pastoral care and social ministries. Congregational ministries include youth leadership, family ministries, leadership development, program development, administration, spiritual direction, and preparation for baptism, communion and new membership. Other ministries focus on hospital visitation, inner-city missions, new church development, international ministry and social justice.

Historically, The Presbyterian Church in Canada sought to guide those who were being called into diaconal ministry by creating a religious Order of Deaconesses. An order is a community of dedicated and trained individuals recognized and set apart by the authority of the church and accountable to the church, called to a life-long journey of faith as servants of Jesus Christ. A distinctive mark of an order is the support and encouragement it provides for its membership and its collegial approach to ministry.

The creation of the Order of Diaconal Ministries (Deaconesses) was consistent with this church's belief that God "orders" Christ's ministry through the church by calling some to special tasks in equipping the saints. Men and women are designated to The Order of Diaconal Ministries:

to lead and serve the people of God, and, with the ordained and the laity, to enable the whole people of God to participate in the reconciling ministry of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Currently The Presbyterian Church in Canada finds itself at a crossroads with respect to diaconal ministry. While provision for designation to the Order of Diaconal Ministries remains in place, in recent years few candidates have presented themselves for designation. At the same time however, many individuals who are not members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries are providing diaconal ministry in a wide variety of contexts.

How has diaconal ministry found expression in The Presbyterian Church in Canada? What challenges are before the church as it seeks to support diaconal ministry today?

*Diaconal ministry  
encompasses  
Christian education,  
pastoral care and  
social ministries.*

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## This Chapter

This chapter will examine the biblical and historical foundations for diaconal ministry. It will trace the ways diaconal ministry has found expression in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, with special emphasis on the Order of Diaconal Ministries, and explore the possibilities and challenges of the current context.

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### WHERE DOES OUR UNDERSTANDING OF DIACONAL MINISTRY ORIGINATE?

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#### The Bible

The Greek word "*diakonos*" is used in various ways in the New Testament. It can refer to servants who carry out normal household activities (John 2:5) or to those who are servants of Christ, as "Epaphras ... a faithful minister [*diakonos*] of Christ on your behalf" (Colossians 1:7).

The "Seven" in Acts 6:1-6 are often considered to be definitive of the office of deacon, although the word *diakonos* is never used to refer to them. The Seven had primary responsibility for administering the resources of the church as it cared for the poor among its members. The qualifications for the office of deacon in

1 Timothy 3:8 indicate that deacons were primarily administrators with special responsibility for money and without teaching duties.

## The Golden Age of the Diaconate (100-600 AD)

In the first centuries of the Christian church, congregations provided many forms of charity and pastoral care under the oversight of the bishop. This work was administered by deacons, who at times needed subdeacons to assist them.

In the fourth century when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire and the church became part of the state, the real diakonia of the church was swallowed up by state-sanctioned services. Institutions such as hospitals and monasteries became the focus of Christian service to the needy, rather than congregations. Deacons no longer served as personal staff to bishops but gradually became liturgical assistants to priests.

## The Reformation

Calvinist theologians saw ministry as consisting of four offices: “presbyters” who led in worship and ministered as pastor, teacher and elder; and “deacons” who administered the affairs of the poor and cared directly for them. Deacons also read scripture and led the congregation in the prayers of the people.

The Church of Scotland initially made provision for deacons, who were to sit with the elders when discussing their business.<sup>3</sup> Later documents<sup>4</sup> make no reference to deacons, effectively restricting diaconal service to the individual activity of each Christian.

In North America, some churches lacked a diaconate from the beginning and others blurred the distinction between elder and deacon. In some Presbyterian and Reformed churches, “deacons’ courts” administered local charitable activity of congregations and administered the finances of the congregation. In many others, these responsibilities were divided between sessions and boards of management. Voluntary societies came into existence which gave expression to diakonia but existed outside church structures. Christians were expected to exercise charity as individuals, but churches did not recognize their corporate responsibility to practice *diakonia*.

## The Deaconess Movement of the 19th Century: A New Creation

The deaconess movement initiated by Lutherans in Germany in the 19th century borrowed the idea and the name from the early church and applied them to a new creation.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the early church model of congregation-based ministry to the needy, this diaconate was a para-church ministry connected to motherhouses which were independent corporations.

The Anglican Church in Britain developed a diaconate as “an association of free or independent women, affiliated with one another simply as a group in any

profession would be.”<sup>6</sup> They became involved in pastoral work and education, particularly catechetical instruction.

Both types of the European diaconate were brought to North America and influenced each other. Diaconal ministry in hospital ministries, education, Christian education and social service are interwoven into the histories of the Lutheran, Methodist and Presbyterian communions.

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## HOW HAS DIACONAL MINISTRY FOUND EXPRESSION IN THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA?

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The Presbyterian Church in Canada has always been engaged in diaconal ministry, particularly through the service of its lay women. In the 1870s and 1880s women missionaries had been sent overseas to do work with women with whom male missionaries were not allowed to mingle. Realizing the need to train women for this overseas work, the Ewart Missionary Training Home was established by the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society in 1897. Its mandate was:

1. to provide special training for young women who are looking forward to foreign missionary work;
2. to afford opportunity of judging by kind and careful oversight as to the physical, mental and spiritual fitness of candidates to enter upon the trials and responsibilities of foreign missionary life.<sup>7</sup>

By 1907 requests concerning this training reached the General Assembly through overtures from the Presbytery of Toronto and the Synod of Manitoba. The following year the committee reporting on this issue recommended “that the Assembly sanction the institution of the Order of Deaconesses for The Presbyterian Church in Canada.”<sup>8</sup> The report mentioned an increasing demand in the church “for the consecrated service of Christian women” for both the foreign field and for mission in Canada. Thus, the Order of Diaconal Ministries (Deaconesses) was organized as a means of giving official denominational recognition and structure to the work that women were already doing.

Much of the work of the deaconesses in Canada was to aid immigrants, organize charity work in congregations, nurse in remote hospitals and teach in pioneer schools. In the 1930s, social agencies developed and assumed much of the work of the deaconesses and the church. The deaconess’ role shifted to preparing and leading bible studies with children, youth and adults in the congregation. “Many were also called to start ministry in rural areas where they might be the only representative of any church, even conducting worship in areas where there were no ministers.”<sup>9</sup>

Diversity of deaconess work continued throughout the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Deaconesses who worked in congregations visited the sick and shut-ins, assisted in church school and other organizations in the church, participated in any welfare programs carried out by the congregation, and did secretarial work, which included maintaining the roll of the congregation. Those who were employed in a presbytery did “van work”, travelling to isolated congregations and small communities with no church building, where they visited in homes, conducted services of worship, and

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*The story of the  
Order of Diaconal  
Ministries is one  
of adaptation:  
responding to God's  
call to leadership  
and service in  
changing contexts.*

(page 45)

led Christian education, where permitted, in government schools. Alternatively, they served as hospital visitors, church extension workers, port workers, downtown workers (including counselling and contacts with social work agencies) and institutional workers. Other deaconesses worked at the synod or national level in the church, in interdenominational positions, or overseas in education, social work, medical or student work.

Since the Ewart Missionary Training Home was established in 1897, the school continued to be a major part of the training for deaconess work in The Presbyterian Church in Canada. In 1969 the primary focus of Ewart College, as it was then known, was changed to provide specialized training in Christian education.

Two factors contributing to this change were:

1. the request of congregations for graduates to give leadership in Christian education;
2. the continual professional developments in the Christian education field.

This major change in the Ewart curriculum had a significant impact on the qualifications the next generation of Ewart graduates brought to their role as deaconesses. "The graduating deaconesses were no longer generalists with some training in a variety of forms of Christian service. This was a significant departure from previous practice and one that changed the role of the deaconess to that of Christian educator almost exclusively."<sup>10</sup> Although most active diaconal ministers held responsibilities in the area of Christian education, some others served in hospitals, inner-city missions and administration.

In the early 1970s, Ewart College implemented a four-year degree-diploma program. Students earned a university level B.A. concurrently with a diploma in Christian Education from Ewart College.

A cluster of decisions in the late 1980s and early 1990s has had a profound impact on the place of members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries<sup>11</sup> within this church. In 1990, the Board of Ewart College introduced the requirement of a Bachelor's level university degree, making the college's three-year diploma in Christian education a post-graduate certificate. Also in 1990, the General Assembly mandated that all stipend categories must receive the cost of appropriate accommodation; this was the first time the church had required congregations to provide their diaconal ministers with a housing allowance.

In 1991, members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries in active service were made members of the courts of the church, with voice and vote. The reasons given in support of this recommendation by the Board of Ministry can be summarized as follows:

1. The ministry of the diaconate is central to the church's work and witness, a fully recognized part of the total ministry of the church.
2. Members of the Order already meet the basis for membership in the church courts by making a commitment to the church's doctrinal standards and to its discipline. In their service of designation, they are asked essentially the same questions as are asked of ministers, elders and deacons. Moreover, other Presbyterian denominations have granted full membership in the courts of the church to active deaconesses (England, 1965; New Zealand, 1966;

Scotland, 1990.) There appears to be no constitutional reason why the church courts must always be made up exclusively of ministers and elders.

3. Members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries would bring insights and experience from their serving ministries to the courts of the church.
4. Doctrinally, we understand diaconal ministry to be a distinctive office in the church, complementary to that of the ministry of Word and Sacraments.
5. The Order of Diaconal Ministries has a distinctive place in the law of the church.
6. It is right and just that the place of active diaconal ministers in the church's practice of ministry be recognized by granting them full membership in the courts of the church.<sup>12</sup>

In 1991, Ewart College and Knox College were amalgamated, and the gap in educational requirements between diaconal ministers and ministers of Word and Sacraments was eliminated. Diaconal ministers are required to earn a B.A. degree (or equivalent) and a M.Div. at Knox College in the Christian education, pastoral care or social ministry specializations. Minimum stipend requirements for individuals serving in diaconal positions continue to be set lower than for ministers of Word and Sacraments.

In 1992, the General Assembly approved the establishment of special course requirements by which members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries could qualify for ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacraments. Since then, most of the diaconal ministers in active service have applied for and been assigned such special courses. Many have completed these courses, and been certified for ordination and ordained as ministers of Word and Sacraments, seeking ways to exercise diaconal ministry through this office. A few members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries in active service have chosen to continue within the special diaconal role, without seeking ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacraments. Today the number seeking entry into the Order of Diaconal Ministries is small.

One of the significant contributions of the Order of Diaconal Ministries is the flexibility with which its members have sought to meet the ministry needs of the church. The story of the Order of Diaconal Ministries is one of adaptation and change: Christians responding to God's call to leadership and service in changing contexts.

*The Presbyterian Church in Canada is at a crossroads with respect to diaconal ministry.*

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## DIACONAL MINISTRY TODAY

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How has diaconal ministry in The Presbyterian Church in Canada evolved alongside the changes to the Order of Diaconal Ministries? The decisions made in the early 1990s collectively could bear the message that the church no longer has need of diaconal ministers. However, diaconal ministry continues to be a vibrant part of the church's ministry. What differs is that diaconal ministry is no longer carried out exclusively by members of the Order.

Instead, congregations are calling associate or assistant ministers of Word and Sacraments to have primary responsibility in the areas of Christian education,

*Diaconal ministry continues to be a vibrant part of the church's ministry, but it is no longer carried out exclusively by members of the Order.*

(page45)

pastoral care or social ministry. Like diaconal ministers, these ordained ministers have had their call discerned and affirmed by the church and have been educated for ministry at a theological seminary.

In other cases, congregations are employing gifted lay people to carry out specialized ministries, particularly to children and youth. Most of these church workers have no formal theological education. Even fewer have studied in a seminary of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. None have received the formal guidance of the church in discerning their calling, beyond the decision of the particular congregation to employ them. This is in stark contrast to the rigorous candidacy process for preparation and discernment completed by ministers of Word and Sacraments and members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries. In most cases, presbyteries have not reviewed the position description, the qualifications of the individual or the terms of the contract, as stipulated in the *Book of Forms*.<sup>13</sup> Contracts for these workers frequently offer part-time level remuneration at rates much less than set by the General Assembly for either diaconal ministers or untrained lay missionaries.

The current context is particularly challenging for the Order of Diaconal Ministries and for The Presbyterian Church in Canada. It is clear that our denomination recognizes the call of people to a variety of ministries. It is also clear that congregations require help to work with the youth and to develop leadership skills of volunteers. However there is considerable diversity of opinion about whether the church needs to provide structure for all who are engaged in diaconal ministry.<sup>14</sup>

There is concern that the current educational requirements are a deterrent to individuals considering designation to the Order. One solution would be to revisit the educational qualifications for designation. For instance, the present requirements of a Master of Divinity degree could be changed to a university undergraduate program that includes a specialization in diaconal ministry.

The church is favourable to employing lay people to give leadership in Christian education, pastoral care and social ministries. To support these leaders and to give guidance to congregations, the church needs to take seriously a number of issues. How can the church work with the lay people providing diaconal ministry to discern their gifts, calling and suitability for service in this Church? Should the church's role in such discernment take place at the level of the congregation or the presbytery? What educational qualifications, if any, should be set? How should these lay leaders relate to the courts of the church? How can appropriate position descriptions that include adequate remuneration be developed?

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## CONCLUSION

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Diaconal ministry by its very nature remains fluid, flexible and responsive to the grace of God. The church has before it the question of how formally it wants to regulate those serving in diaconal ministry. Even as the church addresses this question, God is calling individuals to a wide variety of specialized ministries, thereby giving the church new opportunities to share in Christ's servant ministry.

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## Endnotes

1. "A Study of Diaconal Ministry," a working paper from DIAKONIA: World Federation, 1998.
2. *Living Faith*, 7.2.2, 7.2.5, 7.2.6, and the Service for Designation in *The Book of Common Worship*, p. 382.
3. *Second Book of Discipline* as cited in *Book of Forms* sections 135-138.1.
4. Such as *The Westminster Confession of Faith*.
5. F.S. Weisner, "The Origins of the Modern Diaconate for Women" in Bloesch, *Servants of Christ*, p. 19.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
7. Irene Dickson and Margaret Webster, *To Keep the Memory Green: A History of Ewart College*, Ewart College, 1986, p. 8.
8. A&P 1908, p. 313.
9. Karen Timbers, "A History of the Deaconess Movement within The Presbyterian Church in Canada," unpublished paper, 1985, p. 12.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
11. Diaconal Ministers were called members of The Order of Diaconal Ministries prior to 1991.
12. A&P 1991, p. 346-47.
13. *Book of Forms* sections 112.7.1-112.7.4.
14. Responses to the study paper ranged widely on this question. Some respondents favoured a comprehensive candidacy process for lay people performing diaconal ministry, while others preferred to leave discretion over these matters to the individual and the employing session. Similarly, a wide range of educational "requirements" were recommended, from the current university undergraduate and M.Div. degrees required for designation to occasional, short-term workshops chosen by the individual.



## *The Ministry of Word and Sacraments*

The gifts (Christ) gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

(Ephesians 4:11-13).

That the Church may be continually renewed and nurtured for ministry, Christ furnishes the Church with pastors and teachers. He requires and enables the Church to discern and to confirm by ordination those whom he calls to this pastoral and teaching office. The standards of his Church he entrusts in a special degree of responsibility to their care.<sup>1</sup>

Unto this catholic visible church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints in this life....<sup>2</sup>

There be only two sacraments, ordained by Christ our Lord in the gospel, that is to say, Baptism and the Supper of the Lord; neither of which may be dispensed by any but a minister of the word, lawfully ordained.<sup>3</sup>

Ministers of Word and Sacrament are set apart to preach the Gospel, celebrate Baptism and Holy Communion and exercise pastoral care in Christ's name. Their ministry is an order which continues the work of the apostles.<sup>4</sup>

The Presbyterian Church in Canada ordains men and women to the office of minister of Word and Sacraments. Such ordination follows the individual's completion of an extensive process of preparation and discernment, culminating in the acceptance of a call from a congregation or agency of this church.<sup>5</sup> Ministers of Word and Sacraments serve this office as members of church courts called presbyteries. Within congregations, ministers of Word and Sacraments share with the ruling elders the authority and responsibility of the session for leadership, pastoral care and oversight. They also share with other ministers of Word and Sacraments, with diaconal ministers, and with appointed ruling elders in the ministries of presbyteries, synods and, when commissioned to do so, General Assemblies.

How do ministers of Word and Sacraments use their gifts within the pastoral and teaching office to share Christ's work? What challenges are before the church as it seeks to support the ministry of Word and Sacraments?

## This Chapter

This chapter will examine biblical and historical precedents for the office of minister of Word and Sacraments in The Presbyterian Church in Canada. It will outline the role and responsibilities of the office, and explore ways to support the ministry of Word and Sacraments today.

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### WHERE DOES OUR UNDERSTANDING ORIGINATE?

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#### The Bible

The models for ministry in the Bible are numerous. In selecting appropriate models for the ministry today, we must be sensitive to the relevant contexts then and now. For instance, a church that was serving within a Christendom (establishment) context<sup>6</sup> would find the biblical models of the temple priesthood and the court prophet quite appealing. On the other hand, a church serving within a religiously pluralistic, secular, indifferent and sometimes hostile environment would find the model of the teaching rabbi/prophet/healer to a dispersed, exiled ("diaspora") faith community, or the pastor/shepherd of a counter-cultural "flock"

or “remnant”, much more appealing.<sup>7</sup> This latter group of models for ministry is particularly relevant for our Reformed ministry in Canada today. In this group we would find the ministry model of Jesus and the apostles.

*The biblical model for ministry of the pastor/shepherd of a counter-cultural “flock” is particularly relevant in Canada today.*

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### **Teacher, preacher and prophet**

Teacher, preacher and prophet are the terms most frequently used to describe the activity of Jesus and the apostles. “Teacher” (or rabbi) is by far the most frequently used term to describe Jesus’ ministry. Used by his disciples (Mark 4:38, John 1:38) and others (Matthew 9:11), it was also the term Jesus used for himself (Luke 6:40). The apostles continued the tradition by being teachers themselves (Acts 2:42, 4:02, 18:11). The church’s greatest treasure is the gospel and the gospel is something that needs to be taught. A primary way through which the gospel is taught is through the act of “preaching” (Matthew 4:17, Luke 9:2, Acts 5:42). Often “preaching” and “teaching” are joined in the same sentence in the New Testament. Both Jesus and the apostles taught by preaching. The term “prophet” is a little less clearly defined. Many people, even some of his own disciples, thought of Jesus as a prophet (Matthew 14:5, 13:57, Luke 24:19, John 9:17). Yet Peter’s confession in the gospel also makes it clear that the Messiah is more than just a prophet (Mark 8:27-30). Much of what Jesus and the apostles taught and preached, however, was “prophetic” — a revelatory communication or insight from God with a future/present thrust, and also a call to moral accountability and justice, individually and socially. Prophecy also became a particular gift in distinction from preaching and teaching in the early church (e.g. Acts, 1 Corinthians). It was also an office that clearly included women (Exodus 15:20, Judges 4:4, 2 Kings 22:14, Nehemiah 6:14, Luke 2:36, Acts 21:9).

### **Shepherd, pastor (Latin)**

Shepherd and pastor are important metaphors in the New Testament describing the role of Jesus and “elders” (pastor-leaders) of the church in relation to believers — the “flock.” They point to the caring, nurturing, and guiding aspects of ministry (Hebrews 13:20, Revelation 7:17, 1 Peter 5:1-4, Acts 20:28-29). Jesus feels compassion for the crowds whom he sees as “sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34, Matthew 9:36), and also for individual sheep within the flock that go astray (Luke 15:3). But the best known reference to Jesus as shepherd is John 10. The “good shepherd” shows his love for his sheep by being ready to “lay down his life” for them (v. 11). He must also protect them from thieves whose only motive is to kill and destroy (v. 10). The good shepherd also has an intimate relationship with each one of the sheep. “He calls his own sheep by name” (v. 3) and “they know his voice” (v. 4).

### **Physician, healer**

Physician and healer describe a central aspect of the ministry of Jesus and the apostles. Along with teaching and preaching, they also healed. Healing was a visible sign that God’s reign was truly present in Jesus. The apostles heal “in the name of Jesus” and in the power of his Spirit (the Holy Spirit) (Acts 3:6,16). But God’s reign

also required a willing, open heart to which alone the gift of faith was granted. Jesus challenged those who came to him for healing to believe that they could be healed (Luke 8:48, Matthew 8:10). In some places Jesus was unable to heal because of a lack of faith on the part of people (Mark 6:1-6).

What kind of healing did Jesus and the apostles perform? The most obvious effects of healing were external — the healing of body and the casting out of demons. But much more essential was the healing of the human spirit. Even though Jesus challenged the prevailing notion that sickness was a consequence of sin, he treated sickness and sin together. He spoke of healing as the liberation of the human spirit, a liberation to love, celebrate and become a follower of the way of the cross in spirit and in truth. Sometimes the sin had to do with worldly attachments or idols and the healing involved the challenge to let them go (Luke 18:18-28). Sometimes the sin was self-righteous pride and the healing involved a call to repentance (Luke 18:9-14). Sometimes the sin had to do with an inability to accept oneself and the healing involved absorbing the gospel of God’s embracing, accepting love (Luke 18:9-14). Other times the sin had to do with bitterness or anger and the healing involved becoming capable of forgiveness (Luke 15:25-32). Often healing was as basic as comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable (Luke 10:25-37). In any and all of these ways, healing was viewed as a necessary accompaniment to teaching and preaching in the pastoral ministry.

## The Reformed Tradition

### Calvin

Central to the doctrine of ministry and the church within the Reformed tradition is the tenet of the priesthood of all believers.<sup>8</sup> All members of the church are called to engage and participate actively in the ministry to which God’s Word and Spirit call the church. Further, the ministry of the church is never an end in itself. It is an expression of the ministry of Jesus Christ to the world. The church’s ministry can only be authentic and legitimate if it is an effective witness to and vehicle for Christ’s ministry to take place.

According to Calvin, the scriptural office of pastor and teacher was to be understood within this framework. Commenting on Ephesians 4:11, Calvin held that the offices of apostle, prophet and evangelist were raised up by God in the early days of the church, and revived again from time to time as needed. But the office of pastor and teacher was the only “ordinary” (permanent) office noted in this scriptural passage, and one that continued to be essential for the church’s life.<sup>9</sup>

Calvin described the role of the office of ministry in terms of teaching the gospel:

In order that the preaching of the gospel might flourish, (God) deposited this treasure in the church. He instituted “pastors and teachers” (Ephesians 4:11) through whose lips he might teach his own; he furnished them with authority.<sup>10</sup>

The authority of the ministers was derived from the way their preaching and teaching gave faithful witness to Christ, rather than from any aspect of their person



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to take place.*

or personality. Ministers were entrusted with keeping the church's understanding of the gospel pure.<sup>11</sup> The goal of the pastoral and teaching offices was of the highest importance: equipping the saints for ministry, and building up the body of Christ until it reached unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and maturity in the full measure of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).

How was this teaching of Christ's disciples to be carried out by ministers? Ministers held prime responsibility in three areas that were the "marks" of the church: preaching the Word of God, administering the sacraments, and exercising pastoral care/discipline.<sup>12</sup>

Calvin gave the church a significant role in the call of a minister to the pastoral, teaching office. Such a call had both inner and outer dimensions. Calvin spoke of the inner call, in which the minister was conscious of being called by God. The church had no formal role in witnessing the inner call. By contrast, however, the church was required to test the outer call. The church was to choose individuals who possessed sound doctrine and a holy life, adequacy and fitness to bear the responsibilities of the office, and who had developed the necessary skills. Recognizing the seriousness of these decisions, the church fasted and prayed as it made them.<sup>13</sup>

Ministers were to be chosen by the whole people.<sup>14</sup> According to Calvin, calls to ministers were considered to be lawful, according to the Word of God, when those who seemed fit were chosen by the consent and approval of the people, with pastors presiding over the election.

Ministers were admitted into the office of Word and Sacraments by the rite of ordination: the laying on of hands by the pastors alone, in the presence of the people. Calvin felt that this act continued the practice of the apostles. Further, it commended the dignity of the ministry to the people and warned the one ordained "that he (sic) was no longer a law unto himself, but bound in servitude to God and the church".<sup>15</sup>

## **The Form of Presbyterial Church Government (1645)**

The Presbyterian movement in England that developed into the Westminster Assembly<sup>16</sup> in the 1640s pitted Presbyterian "Puritans" against "Independents" and "Congregationalists". One of the key issues was the status of the clergy. Presbyterians favoured a distinctive leadership by the clergy. Independents and Congregationalists feared that too much authority vested in the clergy would lead to an abuse of power and tyrannical control.

In an attempt to advise the English Parliament how to resolve these and other controversies dividing the churches of Scotland and England, the Westminster Assembly produced *The Form of Presbyterial Church Government*. This document was strongly influenced by and consistent with the teachings of Calvin. The Assembly anticipated that there would be one officer in each congregation, the minister, who would "labour in word and doctrine" and who would rule<sup>17</sup>. Thus, ministers were understood to have authority in teaching, spiritual care, direction, and moral example. However the minister did not carry the responsibilities for ruling alone. On the contrary, lay church-governors (ruling elders) were required

to join with the minister in the government of congregations and at the level of the presbytery. As well, the entire congregation was given a significant role in the call and ordination of ministers.<sup>18</sup>

The Presbyterian vision of a distinctive spiritual leadership by the ordained ministers had implications for their preparation for ordination and service. In independent and congregationalist communions, lay preachers and teachers were quite common. Presbyterians, however, felt this was a negative development on the whole. Such preachers/teachers were regarded as “mechanic” (less than the genuine article). They were viewed as untested, uneducated, and uncultivated in the sacred arts.

By contrast, Presbyterians placed a strong accent on the education of their ordained ministers. The presbytery was to examine the person to be ordained rigorously, noting the individual’s diligence and proficiency in studies, degrees taken in the university and the length of time in studies there. Presbyteries were to consider evidences of the grace of God in the minister, at the same time assessing the minister’s learning and sufficiency.

However in Presbyterian churches, the ordained ministers were not the only ones to be receiving education in the faith. On the contrary, all Christians were to be practicing the disciplines of Christian faith, thereby seeking maturity as disciples of Christ. It is in this context that people of the congregation were given input into the choosing of their minister.<sup>19</sup>

Thus the vision of the Westminster Assembly — strong ministerial leadership serving among active, committed lay leaders and participants — can be placed in the middle of Christian tradition. It gives a much more active and informed role to lay Christians than did the church in the Middle Ages, while at the same time giving a more distinctive leadership role to the ordained minister than did the anabaptist, congregationalist churches.<sup>20</sup>

*The pastoral and teaching office is a gift of Christ to the church for the continual renewal and nurturing of the church for ministry.*

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## THE OFFICE OF MINISTRY OF WORD AND SACRAMENTS TODAY

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What use has The Presbyterian Church in Canada made of this biblical and historical inheritance? As may be seen in the following discussion, this denomination has been strongly influenced by the biblical and historical precedents in its development of the office of ministry of Word and Sacraments.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada ordains people who are professing members of its congregations to the office of minister of Word and Sacraments. What this denomination believes about this office can be seen in three key official documents: The “Preamble to the Ordination of Ministers of Word and Sacraments”, *Living Faith*, and the *Book of Forms*.

The “Preamble to the Ordination of Ministers of Word and Sacraments”<sup>21</sup> opens by affirming the Lordship of Christ and by asserting that the church’s ministry, to which all members are called, is the ministry of Christ.<sup>22</sup> Against this foundation, The Preamble describes the office of the ministry of Word and Sacraments:

*Ministers of Word  
and Sacraments  
have a special  
responsibility to  
help the church  
understand the  
gospel and to give  
leadership to the  
church as it offers  
a faithful witness  
to the gospel.*

That the church may be continually renewed and nurtured for ministry, Christ furnishes the church with pastors and teachers. He requires and enables the church to discern and to confirm by ordination those whom he calls to this pastoral teaching office. The standards of his church he entrusts in a special degree of responsibility to their care.<sup>23</sup>

Thus The Presbyterian Church in Canada regards the pastoral and teaching office as a gift of Christ to the church. The purpose of this office is the continual renewal and nurturing of the church for ministry.

This denomination recognizes that it is Christ who calls ministers, at the same time equipping the church for its essential role in testing and validating such calls. Ministers are called by and responsible to Jesus Christ. Their ministries are not their own, but are a participation in the one ministry of Jesus Christ in the church and to the world. At the same time, ministers are called by and responsible to the church. Their ministries must be validated by the church and must be directed at enabling, equipping, and empowering the “whole people of God” to participate in Christ’s ministry.<sup>24</sup>

With the call of ministers to the pastoral and teaching office, Christ places in their care in a special way the teachings of the church. Thus ministers of Word and Sacraments have a special responsibility to help the church understand the gospel and to give leadership to the church as it seeks to offer a faithful witness to the gospel.<sup>25</sup> Thus The Presbyterian Church in Canada believes ministers of Word and Sacraments are to be teachers and leaders.<sup>26</sup> For this reason, they are sometime called “teaching and ruling elders”. As in Calvin’s church, the authority of ministers is derived from the way their preaching and teaching gives faithful witness to Christ, rather than from any aspect of their person or personality.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada also believes ministers of Word and Sacraments are to be servants. In the scriptural references for the section on “ministry”, *Living Faith* draws attention to Jesus as the model for ministry: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45). The word “minister” means servant or slave. To minister is to serve. This Bible passage (Mark 10:35-45) reminds the church to understand ministry as service, service to Christ and to the church, for “... whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

*Living Faith* describes the ministry of Word and Sacraments<sup>27</sup> as an order that continues the work of the apostles. The church recognizes the people Christ calls to ministry in the act of ordination. Ministers of Word and Sacraments are set apart to preach the gospel, celebrate the sacraments of baptism and holy communion and exercise pastoral care in Christ’s name.

## **Responsibilities of the Ministry of Word and Sacraments**

In everything they do, ministers of Word and Sacraments are responsible to teach faithfully the gospel — how to receive, understand and live it. The content of their teaching is not their own ideas or philosophies, nor is it the latest trends and cultural fads. Rather it is the gospel, and the gospel is nothing but the “good news”

of “Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). Ministers of Word and Sacraments become teachers of the gospel only after having been “learners” (disciples) of Christ. The aim of teaching is to “make disciples” (Matthew 28:18). Disciples are made by hearing and inwardly receiving the good news that God’s reign is at hand in the preaching, teaching, healing, dying and rising of Jesus the Christ. God’s reign is at hand when the afflicted are comforted by the good news of divine love and forgiveness, and the comfortably complacent are afflicted by the demand for heart-felt repentance and a turning to Christ for healing, wholeness and peace (Mark 1:15, Luke 4:16-21, John 3, Matthew 5-7, Luke 6:17ff).

The church safeguards the purity and authenticity of the gospel through its scriptures, creeds, standards and courts.<sup>28</sup> Ministers are therefore responsible to the larger church for the quality and content of their teaching. The intended purpose of teaching is to inspire a deeper devotion to Christ, a more profound fellowship among members of Christ’s body, and a greater witness of compassion and justice in the world (Acts 2:42-47, 1 Corinthians 12:12-28).<sup>29</sup>

## Preaching

Preaching is the act of proclaiming the gospel with all its words of judgment and of grace. This is done through explaining the biblical narrative, reflecting on what it means in biblical and theological terms, and pointing the listeners to connections between their lives and the biblical text.

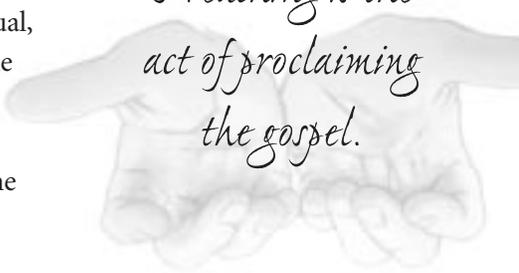
Classic<sup>30</sup> Presbyterian sermons contained three basic elements:

1. “Opening” or understanding the biblical text itself. What are the contextual, linguistic and interpretive features that are essential for understanding the text? It is important to note that Presbyterian preaching has always been rooted in an exposition of scripture.
2. “Dividing” or theologically reflecting on the text. Where does it fit into the larger doctrine and understanding of Christian faith?
3. “Application” or “uses” of the text. What does the text have to say for us today? Application was the most important part and, as can be expected, the most controversial depending on how the preacher was applying the text and its teaching to the particulars of his/her time and place. But application was also the climax of the sermon, without which no sermon was complete.

Classic Presbyterian sermons at their best<sup>31</sup> were very structured and substantial in terms of content. Preachers expected a lot of mental focus from their hearers. There was a lot to teach! They also guarded against two extremes: 1) preaching that was spontaneous and extemporaneous, without structure, without much content or depth, aimed simply at the emotional level of the hearer; and 2) preaching that was sophisticated, intellectual, witty and entertaining, without being clear, practical and spiritually engaging.<sup>32</sup>

## Sacraments

Right teaching of the gospel leads to a right participation in the sacraments (baptism and the Lord’s supper). The Reformed view is that sacraments do not reproduce the once for all nature of Christ’s redemptive death, nor do they confer



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salvation and eternal life in and of themselves. But they are unique and special means of spiritual blessing and transformation appointed by God and instituted by Christ.

A wrong understanding/application of the sacraments can lead, on the one hand, to a false sense of spiritual security. We cannot depend on the sanctity of the minister or of the church, nor can we depend on some magical benefit through sacramental participation. We come to the sacrament on the basis of our faith (or the faith of our parents/guardians), as feeble and imperfect as it may be. We are at one and the same time accountable to God and dependent on God's grace alone for the inner benefit of being joined to Christ, supported and sustained by our faithful trust in God's love.

A wrong understanding/application of the sacraments can lead, on the other hand, to a false sense of fear and insecurity. Again, this arises when we depend on human beings, the church or our moral worthiness to establish the benefit of the sacrament. It is God's grace alone, appropriated and received by faith alone, that provides us with confidence and assurance on the one hand, and a desire to respond with thanksgiving, obedience and participation on the other.

This is why it is critical that the minister teaches about the meaning of the sacraments and effective participation in them. Sound teaching about and proper administration of the sacraments will help the people to be receptive to the testimony of the Holy Spirit, who brings the grace of God to them in and through the sacraments.<sup>33</sup>

### **The development of 'fencing the table'**

The practice of examining communicants before they were permitted to participate in communion was based on Paul's admonition to the Corinthians about examining oneself before participating in the Lord's supper (1 Corinthians 11:27-32), as well as Christ's words about the church's authority in retaining and forgiving sin (Matthew 16:19). This practice began with Calvin and later intensified in the Reformed tradition. It is easy to see how this practice could be the basis of abuse and many felt unfairly excluded from the sacrament.

But was there a worthy intention behind the practice? In an era when everyone in society was "Christian", would it not make a mockery of the sacrament to have openly immoral people partake of it? Some examples might be the greedy shopkeeper who defrauded his clients, the merchant who lacked compassion for his debtors, the husband who was negligent toward his children or unfaithful to his wife. "Fencing the table" could be viewed as a way of trying to encourage those who took part to do so in sincerity and truth. Even though the minister was to lead the process of examination through preaching and teaching, it was the elders who were assigned the task of interrogating and examining communicants where necessary. If participation in the sacrament was to be taken seriously, its spiritual benefit had to be safeguarded for those who were sincere in their desire to receive spiritual life through the forgiving, transforming love of God in Jesus. This was also part of the spiritual teaching and care for those who needed to be confronted as well as those who needed to be strengthened.

In Puritan circles it also became essential to distinguish formal Christians from sincere ones by expecting some kind of testimony of inner conversion and newness of life. Thus, “covenant” members of the church would be those who claimed some experience of change in their lives, change in terms of a powerful conviction of their sinfulness and a joyous experience of resurrection from spiritual death rooted in the forgiving love of God. Only covenant members were welcomed to the table.

But how can all of this inform our practice today? It is essential that the church teach about the sacraments and challenge those seeking to participate in baptism or holy communion to examine themselves — their sincerity of faith and openness to God’s grace — in order that the sacraments serve their intended life-giving purposes as instituted by Christ. However, the church no longer believes it should make judgements of the heart, where only God has the right. The minister and the church teach, set standards and testify by loving example. Individuals must confront themselves in all sincerity in the presence of God and in community with God’s people.

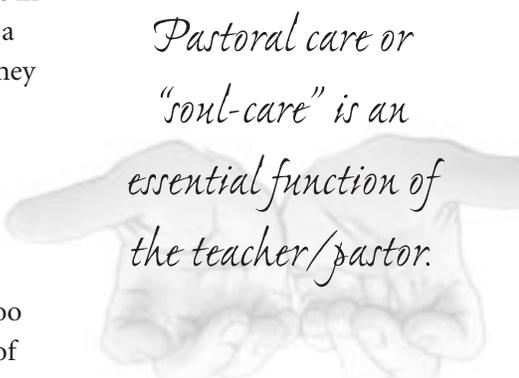
Children too have a place at the Lord’s table, although this is something that Presbyterians have permitted only recently. Children can be taught to approach the Lord’s Supper with a sincere heart, believing that this Jesus whom they celebrate in the sacrament is both the living embodiment of God’s forgiveness of them and a God-given example for them to model their lives. By receiving the sacrament, they are committing themselves to spiritual union with Christ.<sup>34</sup>

## Pastoral Care (Discipline)

### Pastoral Care and Teaching

Whether in terms of comfort to the afflicted or affliction to those who are too comfortable, pastoral care or “soul-care” has always been an essential function of the teacher/pastor. People need spiritual guidance through the particular situations, circumstances, relationships, struggles, and issues of their lives. The great Scottish and Puritan divines were known not simply for their great preaching and teaching, but for their pastoral care. In correspondence by pastors such as the apostle Paul, Calvin, Knox, Rutherford, Baxter, and many others more contemporary, we have abundant testimony of spiritual comfort and guidance of the faithful through all the trials and tribulations of life. Without such guidance the gospel remained abstract and distant in its applicability, as did God. Making connections between the tenets of Christian faith and the particulars of one’s life was essential for growth and strengthening in the Christian life. This continues to be central for ministry today.

Having said all this, we are also confronted today with the growth of psychological counselling, therapy, and the use of therapeutic drugs. Theory and technique have become so sophisticated and specialized that the average pastor often feels intimidated and afraid of doing more harm than good in engaging in pastoral care. One alternative is simply to refer people to the “professionals”. The other is to resist any interference by “secular” therapy. Beyond this, however, there is the path of working together. Most “professional” therapists are now quite open



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to the spiritual dimensions of the person and there is no reason why people cannot be treated psychologically, as they are medically, and yet still require the spiritual counsel and guidance that are an essential part of the pastor's role.

Psychotherapists can tell us the cause and effect of why people think, act, and react the way they do. They can also offer helpful techniques for dealing with destructive patterns of thinking and behaviour, as well as prescribe medication (psychiatrists).

But ministers offer a resource that is not part of the repertoire of the medical professional, namely the gospel of Jesus Christ. In their pastoral and teaching role, ministers can help a person understand how sin can obstruct the flow of God's Spirit in his/her life and bring moral degradation into his/her relationships. They can help a person learn how to open up to God in ways that nurture a conviction of his/her infinite worth in God's eyes. They can help a person discover his/her life purpose in surrender to God and a moral foundation for discerning right from wrong in the face of life's injustices. All these are essential to the goals of the teaching ministry for "equipping" the people of God with the gospel of Christ.

*Pastors are called  
also to walk  
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word of God.*

### **Pastoral Care and Healing**

Another essential component of pastoral care in the Reformed view of ministry has always been healing. But of what exactly does healing consist? We have already discussed above the relationship between physical and spiritual healing as practiced by Jesus and the apostles, as well as the deepest spiritual goals of the healing process according to the Reformed reading of the gospel: inner freedom and renewal in receiving, accepting and inwardly digesting the forgiving love of God in Jesus as well as engaging ourselves in the life-long, life-giving struggle to obey God's will of loving compassion in all we think, say and do. Reformed pastors are called to proclaim this transforming gospel not only publicly, but also privately and individually as pastoral caregivers. They are called also to walk with their people on their individual spiritual journeys through the highs and lows of their lives, seeking always to discern the voice of God. Reformed pastors are also called to provide resources and cultivate means for their people to grow through their spiritual journeys. People need to learn how to pray, what prayer can accomplish, how to discern answers to prayer as well as what can obstruct the hearing of God's voice in their lives. People need to learn how to read and inwardly digest scripture, how to meditate and reflect in a way that opens them up to God, and how to apply biblical principles in their particular lives.

Pastors also have to help their people discover inspiration to believe in the healing power of faith and the boldness to expect miracles as a sign of God's presence and working within and among them.

### **Pastoral Care and Discipline**

The fencing of the table and the interrogation of communicants were part of a larger practice of discipline in the church. Today we think of discipline in cases of clergy misconduct or church members' severe offence to another. In the past, it was considered quite legitimate to look into the private lives of church members for

evidence of unrepentant sin. The *Book of Forms* provides for a basic structure of discipline following Matthew 18:15-18. As can be expected, there has been considerable abuse here, even as early as in Calvin's day.

Nonetheless, a key intention behind the practice of discipline must not be lost because of failure in practical application. Frequently one needs to be confronted and challenged in order to hear the gospel afresh and to grow. Pastoral care is about helping believers locate the stumbling blocks to God working in them and strengthening them on the Christian journey. The pastor has a key role to play here, not only in preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments, but also in guiding members through their individual life journeys. Discipline is about believers feeling accountable before God and to each other for the quality and sincerity of their Christianity. It is also about the integrity and substance of the witness of the church in obedience to Christ. If love is not a visible mark of the church and if the spirit of love is not evident in the church, then Christ cannot be present either. Within this framework of obedience to the law of love as taught by Christ, discipline is a legitimate and necessary aspect of pastoral care in the practice of ministry.

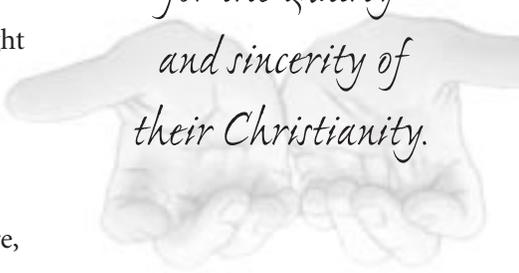
## Teaching

Besides preaching, administering the sacraments and exercising pastoral care, a minister fulfills his/her task of teaching the faithful through a variety of teaching-learning activities. In the early church there developed the practice of the "catechumenate" which involved a period of up to several years of Christian education before one was admitted to full membership in the church. Throughout the history of the church there has also been the practice of organizing various study groups focusing on the bible, Christian doctrine, and the mission of the church.

All of this has taken place within Reformed churches also. Indeed, Bible study was a key component in fueling the Puritan revolution and the empowerment of lay people (including women, well before they were being admitted into ordained ministry). By being involved in Bible study led by the minister, people were taking charge of their spiritual lives and their role as Christians in the leadership of their church as well as an active ministry of witness and service in the world. Lay people also became educated and articulate about their faith, as well as more demanding of quality from their ministers. Through such study, the minister was also able to understand his/her people and offer them guidance specific to their struggles and needs in body and soul.

## Leadership through the Courts of the Church

The ministries of ministers of Word and Sacraments are not limited to the things they do "as individuals". Within congregations, ruling elders share with ministers of Word and Sacraments the authority and responsibility of the session for leadership, pastoral care and oversight. Nor are the ministries of ordained ministers limited to the way they lead and participate in the ministries of their congregations or agencies of the church. On the contrary, ministers also exercise



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their pastoral and teaching office as members of church courts. With other ministers of Word and Sacraments, with diaconal ministers and with appointed ruling elders, they share in the ministries of presbyteries, synods and, when commissioned to do so, General Assemblies.

It is instructive to note that, although ministers of Word and Sacraments are integrally involved in almost all aspects of the church's life that are detailed in the *Book of Forms*, there are very few sections that “single out” ministers for tasks not shared by ruling elders. Notable exceptions<sup>35</sup> include the minister's role in 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.” As well, only ministers of Word and Sacraments moderate meetings of the session. Similarly, ministers of Word and Sacraments have unique roles in asking the questions and laying on hands at the ordination of a minister, ruling elder, or deacon.

*Ordination is  
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minister of Word  
and Sacraments.*

## **Ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments**

The Presbyterian Church in Canada upholds the Reformation tenet that the church community is responsible to test and confirm the call to the ministry of Word and Sacraments. For this reason, the candidacy process for preparation and discernment of ministers<sup>36</sup> assigns key roles to a number of church bodies: the session, the presbytery and the theological college, and, at the time of a call to a particular congregation, the calling congregation and presbytery.

The church's confirmation of the call to the ministry of Word and Sacraments comes in the form of ordination, setting apart the minister (Romans 1:1) and placing him/her in an order that continues the work of the apostles today.<sup>37</sup> Ordination by the presbytery takes place within the service of worship in the congregation.<sup>38</sup> After the reading of the “Preamble to the Ordination of Ministers of Word and Sacraments”, the person to be ordained professes his/her faith in God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — and acceptance of the subordinate standards and government of this church. The candidate promises to uphold the church's doctrine, relying on the Holy Spirit. The candidate promises further to share in and submit to the lawful oversight of the courts of the church, and to conduct him/herself in his/her public and private lives as befits a minister of the gospel. For its part, the calling congregation promises to receive the minister to be its minister “as from Christ”. With prayer and the laying on of hands by the ministers of Word and Sacraments, the individual is received in the name of the Spirit of God and ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacraments in the holy catholic church. The right hand of fellowship is extended to the newly ordained minister by all members of the presbytery. This includes all representative elders and ordained ministers of the presbytery, as well as other ministers present. The newly ordained minister is asked to sign “The Formula”, in the presence of the people, testifying to adhere to those things declared and required in the preamble and questions at the ordination of a minister.

Whenever the minister subsequently begins a new ministry, a similar covenant is made, with repetition of all the steps except ordination.<sup>39</sup>

# Contexts for Ministry of Word and Sacraments

## Congregational Ministry

The most common context for ministry of Word and Sacraments in this denomination is the congregation (or multi-point pastoral charge) that has one minister of Word and Sacraments. In such contexts, the ministers of Word and Sacraments become involved in all aspects of the responsibilities outlined in the preceding sections, as they help the church to understand the gospel and as they lead the church in faithful discipleship.<sup>40</sup>

In multi-staff congregations, however, a division of roles and responsibilities occurs. While the pastoral staff as a whole takes responsibility for all aspects of the ministry of Word and Sacraments, the different ministers take primary responsibility for different areas of the church's life. For instance, one minister might focus on the preaching, visioning and leadership, while another might focus on pastoral care, teaching or youth ministry.

## Specialized Ministry

The majority of the church's ministers of Word and Sacraments exercise their pastoral and teaching office while called or appointed to congregations within The Presbyterian Church in Canada. However, some ministers exercise their pastoral and teaching office in specialized, non-congregational contexts. Several ministers teach at theological colleges, both the colleges of this church and other colleges. A few ministers serve in independent teaching and evangelizing ministries. Several ministers serve as chaplains in hospitals, universities, the military and other institutions. Several ministers serve in street missions, urban native ministries, and refugee and para-church organizations. Several ministers provide leadership in the national agencies and courts of the church; examples include the Principal Clerk of the General Assembly, some executive staff of the Missionary Societies and the Life and Mission Agency, and some synod staff. Ministers appointed as overseas missionaries serve in a variety of contexts, including congregations of our partner churches.

## Supporting the Ministry of Word and Sacraments

We believe that a strong, compassionate and spirit-filled church requires strong, compassionate and spirit-filled ministers who lead courageously by preaching, teaching, administering the sacraments and providing pastoral care, rooted in a Christ-centred, biblically based faith and spirituality. We also believe that such ministers are inspirations and enablers for the "equipping" of the laity in the development and exercise of their leadership and gifts in church and world.<sup>41</sup>

What challenges and possibilities does The Presbyterian Church in Canada face as it seeks, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to bring its life in line with its belief? How can we support the ministry of Word and Sacraments within this denomination?

## Developing Christian Discipleship

The first step in supporting the ministry of Word and Sacraments is to seek to develop mature Christian disciples among the people of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. For the reality is that, notwithstanding the fact that many fine ministers have entered the ministry of this denomination from other branches of the Christian church, most of the individuals who have served the office of ministry of Word and Sacraments among us have been nurtured in Canadian Presbyterian congregations. The first step in supporting the ministry of Word and Sacraments is to grow Christian disciples.

### ‘Calling Out’ Individuals To Serve

The Presbyterian Church in Canada has an ongoing task of seeking out those whom it believes have the gifts and calling for ministry in the church. As stated in the Preamble to the Ordination of Ministers of Word and Sacraments, “(Christ) requires and enables the church to discern and to confirm by ordination those whom he calls to this pastoral and teaching office.”<sup>42</sup> The responsibility for “calling out” individuals to serve the office of ministry of Word and Sacraments rests primarily with sessions and presbyteries:

Sessions and presbyteries are enjoined to make diligent and careful inquiry whether any men and women are to be found within their bounds whose attention should be specially directed to the claims of Christ upon them with respect to the ministry of the church, to aid and encourage in all proper ways suitable young men and women who may declare their purpose to consecrate themselves to this sacred vocation, and watchfully to keep their eyes upon any who are prosecuting a liberal arts education and whose piety and abilities make it desirable that their thoughts should be turned towards the ministerial office.<sup>43</sup>

The significant leadership role carried out by ministers requires sessions and presbyteries to exercise care in their discerning and “calling out” role.<sup>44</sup> They seek individuals who clearly demonstrate an ability to fulfill the requirements of the office or who have the capacity and the willingness to learn and develop their gifts so that they may do so. These gifts and abilities include:<sup>45</sup>

- a Christian faith
- an integration of faith and life
- a call to ministry
- the ability to express this faith and call in a way that is real, articulate and integrated
- awareness of having gifts for ministry
- awareness of qualities or circumstances that may be obstacles to ministry
- a spiritual discipline
- an ability to create a support system for self
- active involvement in a congregation of this church
- tested and affirmed leadership in this church
- an acceptance of the Reformed understanding of the faith
- acceptance of the diversity in The Presbyterian Church in Canada

*Sessions and presbyteries must exercise care in discerning individuals with the gifts and calling for ministry.*

- understanding of the mission of the church
- understanding of the role of the minister of Word and Sacraments
- integration of faith, view of the church and concept of ministry
- a realistic assessment of self
- mental and emotional health
- potential for growth
- a commitment to learning
- ability to relate to others and work with others
- ability to give leadership
- ability to handle conflict
- ability to cope with stress
- compassion
- a healthy attitude toward authority
- a good command of language
- ability to study at a Master's level
- a capacity for critical reflection
- a plan to finance studies.

We believe that Christ calls individuals to the pastoral and teaching office to meet the needs of the church. Creating an environment where individuals and the church can hear and respond faithfully to those calls is essential for supporting the ministry of Word and Sacraments.

### **Fostering Partnership between Ministers of Word and Sacraments and the Laity**

Fruitful exercise of the ministry of Word and Sacraments requires partnership between ministers of Word and Sacraments and the laity. Whenever minister and people share the life of discipleship and the church's work to the best of each one's ability, whenever the contributions of each are valued, the church lives faithfully.

Sharing the life of discipleship means recognizing that all, ministers and people alike, are Christ's disciples and God's children. Like the disciples going up to Jerusalem, we are all on the road, and Jesus is walking ahead of us (Mark 10:32). There simply are no pedestals in Christ's church.<sup>46</sup>

Sharing the church's work requires minister and people to honour the roles and responsibilities that properly belong to them, neither hoarding nor neglecting their part. Ministers must be prepared to teach the gospel and to lead the church in a faithful witness. For their part, the people must be prepared to be taught and to be led. The absolute necessity of ministers and people growing in their Christian faith so that each can do their part faithfully cannot be overstated. Are we, ministers and people alike, learning and growing in faith and open to hearing the gospel's prophetic voice, as evidenced by the fruits of the Spirit? Seeking to strengthen the partnership between ministers and people requires the church to address spiritual questions such as these.

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*There are no pedestals in Christ's church.*



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## **Providing Leadership in a Shifting Landscape**

Supporting the ministry of Word and Sacraments requires the church to recognize that its contexts for ministry have been changing dramatically. Recent decades in Canada (and the rest of the western world) have seen the end of Christendom, the end of the church having a high degree of respect and influence in society, and the end of Christian tradition shaping culture. At the same time, expectations about the value and necessity of participating in church have also changed.

In the midst of such changes, there is no question that the church is experiencing stress. To some extent, the church is confused about the role and place of the church in the world. Who are we, now that we no longer have a dominant, prestigious voice? The church is also grieving, for moving from the old to the new always involves loss. How can the church navigate this transition in healthy ways? To a similar extent, the church is confused about the role and place of the minister and the role and place of the people in the church. In church communities where healthy responses to anxiety are not practiced, blaming, denial and other destructive behaviours are distracting the church from its mission.

Ministers of Word and Sacraments have an important leadership role in helping the church acknowledge and address the stresses it is experiencing, as well as the opportunities that accompany change. At the same time, any growth in health and maturity in the church as it meets these challenges will serve to support the ministry of Word and Sacraments.

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## **CONCLUSION**

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The ministry of Word and Sacraments is one of Christ's gifts to the church. Today Christ continues to call men and women to the pastoral and teaching office. These individuals serve Christ, helping the church to understand the gospel and leading the church as it seeks to offer a faithful witness. With appropriate support from the church, the ministry of Word and Sacraments serves the purpose for which God made it: the renewal and nurturing of the church for ministry.

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## Endnotes

1. "The Preamble to the Ordination of Ministers of Word and Sacraments," *The Book of Common Worship*, p. 325.
2. *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 25:3.
3. *Ibid.*, 27:4.
4. *Living Faith*, 7.2.3.
5. In some cases, presbyteries have recognized as a gospel call the offer of employment an individual has received from an agency outside the formal structures of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, and have proceeded to ordination.
6. By "Christendom" or "establishment" we mean Christianity as the official religion and the church as the official religious institution of the state. This has been the case for the last 1700 years in Europe and in the colonial era in North America.
7. Biblical terms such as "diaspora," "remnant," or "flock," refer to the faithful of Israel or the disciple community as a minority within a culture indifferent if not hostile to its existence.
8. See Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.19.28, p. 70, where the point is made that "Calvin frequently affirms the priesthood of all Christians, stressing the offering of ourselves unreservedly to God".
9. *Ibid.*, 4.3.4.
10. *Ibid.*, 4.1.1.
11. *Ibid.*, 4.3.4. Included with ministers in this task were "doctors" (theologians and theological professors), to whom Calvin gave a special place.
12. Following Luther, Calvin stated explicitly two marks of the church of God, the pure preaching and hearing of the word of God and the administration of sacraments according to Christ's institution (*Institutes*, 4.1.9). However, he also stressed church discipline as an essential ministry of the authentic church (*Institutes*, 4.7).
13. *Ibid.*, 4.3.11 and 4.3.12.
14. *Ibid.*, 4.3.15.
15. *Ibid.*, 4.3.16.
16. Out of which *The Westminster Confession of Faith* was produced.
17. *The Form of Presbyterial Church Government*, p. 175.
18. *Ibid.*. See p. 175 and 178 for the role of lay church-governors, and p. 180 for the congregation's role in the call and ordination of its minister.
19. *Ibid.*. The extensive "rules of examination" for presbyteries (p. 183-186) that preceded the decision to ordain an individual included input from the "calling" congregation, after the individual had preached in worship and conversed with them.
20. These views have traditionally been described as "high church" and "low church," respectively. Fuller discussion of the relative roles of ordained ministers and lay people can be found in chapter 2 of this document, in the sections on the middle ages and Reformed tradition.
21. The "Preamble to the Ordination of Ministers of Word and Sacraments" was approved by the General Assembly in 1970, revised 1992. It is found in the *Book of Forms* section 409, and *The Book of Common Worship*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1991, p. 325, 354, 372, along with the service for ordination and induction, the service for induction, and the service for ordination.
22. These concepts, central in the teachings of Calvin and the Westminster Assembly, are found as well in the work of 20th century Reformation theologians. Barth: The ministry of the church is the ministry of Jesus Christ. The church's role is to witness to Christ (what he has done once for all — incarnation, cross, resurrection — and what he continues to do) without taking his place. (*Church Dogmatics*, IV.3.2). Bonhoeffer: The role of the church is to enable the meeting between Christ and the people. This is an activity of proclamation and witness for the whole people of God. (*Spiritual Care*. Translated by J.C. Rochelle.) See also J.C. McLelland, *A New Look at Vocation*, p. 8-28.
23. *The Book of Common Worship*, p. 325.
24. In support of the "double responsibility" of a minister, see the Report of the Church Doctrine Committee in A&P 1979, p. 222; also, W. Bryden, *Separated Unto the Gospel*, p. 118.
25. The priority of the teaching, preaching and prophetic office of the minister is wonderfully highlighted in J. Stanley Glen's *The Recovery of the Teaching Ministry*, p. 9-26. Also in James D. Smart's *The Teaching Ministry of the Church*, p. 11-20.
26. The high status of the minister of Word and Sacraments is a consistent emphasis of Canadian Presbyterianism, as reflected in David Hay, "The Adventures and Misadventures of the Presbyterian Doctrine of Holy Ministry"; Walter Bryden, op. cit., p. 120-6; James D. Smart, *The Rebirth of Ministry*, p. 11-12.
27. *Living Faith*, 7.2.3.
28. *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 25.3; *Living Faith*, 1.2-1.5; *Book of Forms* section 409.1-3.
29. See also *Book of Forms* section 409.4.

30. By “classic” is meant the kind of basic consensus position developed among Presbyterian preachers in England, Scotland and the New World beginning in the late 16th and early 17th centuries.
31. Some examples include William Perkins in England, John Knox and later Samuel Rutherford in Scotland, and Jonathan Edwards in New England.
32. See John Leith, *An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, Atlanta: John Knox, 1978, p. 82, 84, 176, 191.
33. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.14.3. The sacraments require preaching to beget faith (4.14.3). Like the word of scripture, however, the sacraments cannot serve to establish and increase faith, the goal for which our Lord instituted them, without the action of the Holy Spirit (4.14.9 and 4.14.17).
34. A&P 1987, p. 243.
35. *Book of Forms*, for the role in worship, see sections 111 and 198.2; for moderating the session, see 115, 115.1-2; for role in ordinations, see sections 235, 235.1, 132.6, 413, and *The Book of Common Worship*, p. 396.
36. *The Candidacy Process of Preparation and Discernment for Ministry in The Presbyterian Church in Canada*, approved by the General Assembly in 1999, is available through the Book Room at Church Offices and on the denominational webpage ([www.presbyterian.ca/mcv](http://www.presbyterian.ca/mcv)).
37. *Living Faith*, 7.2.3.
38. *The Book of Common Worship*, p. 316-36.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 347-60.
40. In fact, the majority of the responses from sessions and presbyteries to the study paper on the ministry of Word and Sacraments indicated that the paper’s description of this ministry reflected their understanding and experience very well. Further, a number expressed their pride in their ministers and in this denomination’s ministerial tradition.
41. Such ministers would never be a hindrance to the laity. See notes 15 and 24 of this chapter re the minister being the servant of Christ and of the church.
42. See foot note 1 of this chapter.
43. *Book of Forms* section 202.
44. The *Book of Forms* has a separate section (Appendix J) to assist sessions and presbyteries in their roles of discernment and pastoral care of candidates for the ministry.
45. *The Candidacy Process of Preparation and Discernment for Ministry in The Presbyterian Church in Canada*, p. 5. This list of gifts and abilities was compiled from the questions in Appendix J of the *Book of Forms*.
46. Except the one on which God has placed the Lord Jesus Christ, the only King and Head of the Church (*Book of Forms* sections 409, 412, 414).

# Glossary

**Acts and Proceedings (A&P)** — the minutes and reports of the General Assembly.

**Anabaptist** — a member of a church that believes that baptism should be administered only to believing adults.

**Barrier Act** — an Act passed by General Assembly in 1877 (but dating in Scotland from 1697), which stipulates that no law or rule relating to the doctrine, discipline, government or worship of the church can be made permanent by General Assembly until it has been submitted to the presbyteries for their consideration.

**Book of Forms** — a book containing rules and procedures for the administration of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. It is published in loose-leaf format with annual updates.

**Calvinist** — relating to the theology of John Calvin (1509-1564), a French Protestant theologian and reformer who spent most of his life in Geneva.

**candidacy process of preparation and discernment** — the process by which candidates for ministry of Word and Sacraments or diaconal ministry prepare for such service, at the same time confirming whether they are being called by God and the church to it. A number of church bodies have key roles in this process: session, presbytery, theological college, and calling congregation and presbytery.

**catechism** — a document summarizing the central doctrines of a Christian denomination in the form of questions and answers.

**church courts** — any of the four governing bodies (session, presbytery, synod, and General Assembly) of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

**congregational deacon** — see deacon.

**congregationalist** — relating to a system of church government in which individual congregations are self-governing.

**deacon** — (in some congregations) lay persons elected (and sometimes ordained) in addition to ruling elders, with responsibility for pastoral care including visiting the sick and administering charity.

**deaconess** — a name formerly used for female members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries (see diaconal minister).

**designation** — the act by a presbytery of setting a person apart as a member of the Order of Diaconal Ministries.

**diaconal minister** — a person who, on completion of the church's candidacy process for preparation and discernment, has been called and designated as a member of the Order of Diaconal Ministries. Diaconal ministers are members of church courts and are included in the constituent roll or appendix to the roll of the presbytery in which they are employed and/or reside. Diaconal ministers are usually employed in the areas of Christian education, pastoral care, and social ministries.

**district** — a division of the membership roll of a congregation, whether by geographical or some other distinction, assigned to a particular elder. Elders are encouraged to maintain personal relationships with the members in their districts by visiting them on a regular basis.

**elder** — a person elected and ordained to the session of his or her congregation. Also called ruling elder.

**equalizing elder** — see parity elder.

**General Assembly** — the highest court of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. It meets annually, and is made of one-sixth of the total number of ministers of Word and Sacraments and diaconal ministers on the constituent rolls of the presbyteries of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, with an equal number of elders.

**induction** — the act by which a presbytery formally installs a minister of Word and Sacraments as the minister of a particular congregation or pastoral charge.

**interim moderator** — a minister appointed by the presbytery to moderate the session during the time that a congregation is without a minister of its own. Interim moderators are appointed also when a congregation is calling an associate or assistant minister, or diaconal minister.

**laity** — lay people, as distinct from ministers (Word and Sacraments or diaconal).

**minister** — When used alone (without descriptors like “Word and Sacraments”, “ordained”, or “diaconal”) the word “minister” most frequently refers to a minister of Word and Sacraments. When used alone in plural form, “ministers” may also include diaconal ministers.

**minister of Word and Sacraments** — a person who, on completion of the church’s candidacy process for preparation and discernment, including the receipt of a call to a particular ministry, has been ordained by a presbytery. Ministers of Word and Sacraments are members of church courts and are included in the constituent roll or appendix to the roll of the presbytery in which they are employed and/or reside.

**moderator** — in every church court except the session, one of the members of the court (an elder, a minister of Word and Sacraments or a diaconal minister) elected to keep order at meetings, take the vote, and announce matters coming before the court. The moderator of session is the ordained minister of the congregation, or one of the ordained ministers of the congregation.

**office** — the ministries to which people are ordained or designated. In The Presbyterian Church in Canada, these are ruling elder, congregational deacon, minister of Word and Sacraments (ordained) and diaconal minister (designated).

**ordination** — the act of setting an individual in an order, by authority of the presbytery. In The Presbyterian Church in Canada, individuals are ordained to three offices: the ruling eldership, congregational deacon, and ministry of Word and Sacraments. All cases involve prayer and the laying on of hands by ordained ministers who are present. Ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacraments takes place in a worship service within the context of a presbytery meeting. Ordination to the ruling eldership or congregational deacons court usually takes place within the context of a congregational worship service, with the ordained minister(s) of the congregation representing the authority of the presbytery.

**parity elder** — an elder appointed to presbytery to make the number of elders equal to that of the ministers (Word and Sacraments and diaconal). Also called “equalizing” elders, they compensate for ministers in congregations with more than one minister or in non-congregational ministries (e.g. college faculty or staff of courts or agencies of the church).

**presbytery** — the court of the church with responsibility for the care of congregations and ministers within its bounds. It is comprised (the constituent roll) of the

ministers of Word and Sacraments and diaconal ministers serving in the presbytery, with an equal number of elders from the congregations. The names of ministers of Word and Sacraments and diaconal ministers who are not serving in presbytery-recognized ministries or who are serving less than half-time are placed on the appendix to the roll.

**Puritan** — a member of a group of English Protestants who believed that the work of the Reformation had not been completed and sought to continue to simplify and regulate church government and worship.

**Reformation** — the sixteenth-century movement to reform the practices and doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church that led to the establishment of the Protestant churches. Key figures in the Reformation, also known as Reformers, include Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin.

**Reformed church** — a church accepting the principles of the sixteenth century Reformation, especially a Calvinist church.

**representative elder** — an elder appointed by session to represent the congregation at meetings of presbytery and synod.

**ruling elder** — see elder.

**session** — the decision-making court that gives guidance to the work and worship of the local congregation. It is comprised of the minister(s) (Word and Sacraments and diaconal) of the congregation together with elders elected by the congregation.

**stewardship** — the act or process of taking care of something that has been entrusted to us.

**subordinate standards** — the documents (subordinate in the sense of being less important than the bible), which contain important beliefs about our faith. The Presbyterian Church in Canada has three subordinate standards: *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (as adopted in 1875 and 1889), the *Declaration of Faith concerning Church and Nation of 1954*, and *Living Faith (Foi Vivante)* (as adopted in 1998).

**synod** — the court of the church with responsibility for the care of presbyteries. It is comprised of equal numbers of ministers (ministers of Word and Sacraments and diaconal ministers) and elders. Synods can choose to use commissioners appointed by presbyteries instead of having all members of synod gather for meetings.

**teaching elder** — minister of Word and Sacraments, ordained both to teach and to rule, distinguished as a member of the session from the ruling elders.

*Together in Ministry* provides an historical, biblical study of the distinctive understanding of ministry that The Presbyterian Church in Canada shares with other Reformed and Presbyterian churches, and discusses current challenges and possibilities. It is offered as a resource for lay people, new members, ruling elders, congregational deacons, diaconal ministers, ministers of Word and Sacraments, those who guide candidates for ministry, and anyone interested in the way this denomination understands its theology and practice of ministry.

