
Back to Basics

Retreat for Elders

Prepared by Dorothy Henderson, Life and Mission Agency

This workshop focuses on three main functions of elders:

- * Part 1: Overseeing
- * Part 2: Encouragement and care of members and adherents
- * Part 3: Leadership

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

Part 1: Overseeing (1-1 1/2 hours)

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

Prior to the meeting, prepare a "big picture" chart

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

Using the Chart

Explain the chart. Give each elder several small round coloured stickers. Ask him/her to put a sticker on any program/committee/outreach endeavour with which they have personal contact in an overseeing capacity. For instance, one person may report that her granddaughter is in the Junior Choir but, other than driving her to choir practice, there is no oversight of what happens in that program. However, another elder may report that he chooses the music for the choir and, from time to time, fills in for the pianist. He, then, would add a dot to that particular square in the chart because he plays an active role in overseeing how the program operates.

When people have finished adding dots, ask these questions:

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

Part 2: Encouragement and Care of Members and Adherents (about 1 - 1 1/2 hours)

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

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

Role Play Situations for Elders

Rules for role-playing

- * Each of the following role plays has two characters. Divide into pairs. Read the role play situation and agree upon who will play each part.
- * If you are the visitor, avoid:
 - giving helpful suggestions ("Have you ever thought about...")
 - giving advice ("You should probably get a lawyer or...")
 - making a judgment ("What your husband did was just plain wrong...")
 - discounting ("I'm sure things will be better in the morning...")
- * If you are the visitor, do:
 - listen carefully, nodding thoughtfully and use "minimal encouragers" such as "Oh, I see," or "Mmm" or "yes."
 - ask clarifying questions ("How would you feel about that?" or "Is that the way you see things going?")
 - reflect back the feelings that seem to lie under the comments ("That must have made you incredibly sad." or "How frustrating!")
 - rephrase or paraphrase what is said ("So you are thinking to go into the city for this test..." or "Let me see if I got that right...")

#1

Bob has been in your elder district for 10 years. You have always enjoyed visiting Bob and his wife Irene. Although retired, both were actively engaged in volunteer work and the life of your church. Six months ago, Irene died suddenly of a heart attack. Since then, Bob has "just not been able to get out to church." His neighbours say that he stays for days inside his house and sometimes doesn't even get dressed in the morning. Both you and your minister are quite concerned about Bob so you decide to drop by on Wednesday evening for a visit.

#2

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

#3

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

#4

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

#5

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

#6

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

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

Part 3: Leadership (about 1 - 1/2 hours)

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

Ask individuals to identify their own personal "top three" leadership gifts by choosing three from the list generated above. Write them on three separate post-it notes. Ask elders to choose only one of the notes and stand up with it stuck to their finger. Ask: Do you think you currently are able to make good use of this leadership ability in our church? Each person should then move to one end of the room where you have posted a "Yes" sign or to the other end where there is a "No" sign. Some may, of course, stay in the middle. Repeat with the other two post-it notes.

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

Further Leadership Development

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

Choose from the following areas:

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

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

NOTE: Because of space restrictions, articles and instructions about these areas cannot be included in these resources. However, ideas for how to develop skills in the areas listed above are available, free-of-charge, by contacting Dorothy Henderson (dhenders@presbyterian.ca) or Brian Doyle at church offices (bdoyle@presbyterian.ca); 800-619-7301. Also available is an additional 1 1/2 hour workshop on leadership development, written by Dorothy Henderson. It explores what makes a good leader, how people can grow as leaders, what things hinder us from being leaders and making a commitment to develop leadership skills.

Send out with joy

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