
Engaging in God's Work:

Ruling Elders in The Presbyterian Church in Canada

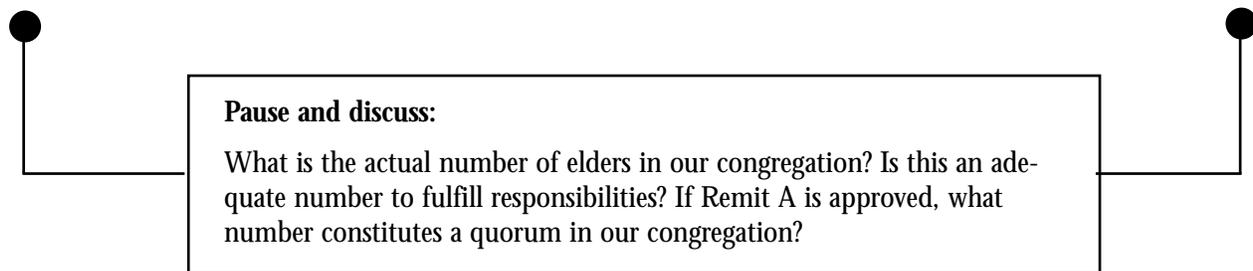
Part 2: How Elders do their Ministry/Work

Session Meetings	p. 2
Discussion	p. 2
Decision	p. 4
Delegation	p. 6
Declarations	p. 6
Management or Leadership	p. 7
Pastoral Care	p. 8
Discipline	p. 8
The Elder's District	p. 9

Session Meetings

In each congregation, the session provides prayerful care and oversight. The session of a congregation consists of its minister or ministers, its active members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries, and ruling elders. The minister is always the moderator of the session and no session meetings can be held without the minister. The quorum for a session meeting is currently the minister and two elders. However, Remit A, 2003 has been sent by the 2003 General Assembly to presbyteries under the Barrier Act. If approved and made the law of the church, the definition of quorum will be rewritten as the moderator and 25 per cent of the ruling elders on session, or two, whichever is greater. When a church is without a minister, the presbytery appoints another minister as interim moderator. It is the responsibility of the interim moderator to moderate the meetings of session until a new minister is settled.

Within the session, the work of the elders falls into three general areas: discussion, decision and delegation. Declaration follows.



Discussion

Discussion arises from committee reports, congregational problems, concerns raised, suggestions from the minister, elders, others outside the session, and so on. When a matter is being discussed in the session, there should be complete freedom of expression, but the form of the discussion should be controlled.

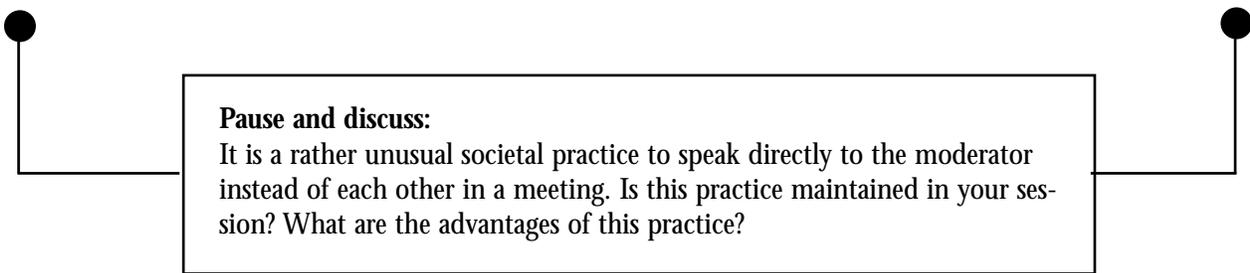
The motion

According to *The Book of Forms*, discussions should begin with a motion. "No discussion is in order until a motion is before the court. Speakers should confine themselves to the matter referred to in the motion, and if they depart

therefrom they may be called to order." (Section 39) This is particularly important in larger sessions, because it enables the moderator to keep the discussion to the issue at hand and minimizes extraneous discussion which either muddies the waters or takes up time. Smaller sessions sometimes discuss an issue first and then compose a motion to summarize the decision. This can work with smaller sessions because it can be easier to control the discussion in a smaller group. It is vital, however, that the discussion be carried on within the clear set of rules for discussion and debate which are set forth in sections 33 – 64, *The Book of Forms*. These sections should be studied and clearly understood by all elders, not just moderators.

Speak to the moderator

Whatever the size of the session, it is important for members to speak only to the moderator. Jane may be replying to a comment made by Peter, but her reply must be directed to the moderator. This reduces the chances of differences of opinion becoming verbal fisticuffs. When elders have to address the moderator, they are more likely to deal with the issues and not indulge in personal disputes. If someone attacks another elder personally, the moderator has a clear responsibility to stop that elder from speaking, inform him how his speech is inappropriate, and instruct the elder to stick to the issue. Because we so easily identify with our ideas and opinions, we can become defensive when people disagree with us and attack the speaker rather than debate the ideas. Few things can destroy the unity of the session more quickly than this! Therefore the moderator has a great responsibility to insist that elders address their comments properly.



Pause and discuss:

It is a rather unusual societal practice to speak directly to the moderator instead of each other in a meeting. Is this practice maintained in your session? What are the advantages of this practice?

Free and open discussion

It is important that every elder has the freedom to speak his or her mind without fear of becoming a pariah within the session or having his/her words repeated outside the session. No one should fear raising objections to a pet project of some person or committee. Presbyterians govern their congregations by a group rather than by an individual because they believe that greater wisdom is found in group decisions. But that wisdom only comes to expression when there is a full and free exchange of differing opinions, information, understanding and perspectives. No idea should be above question or criticism. Full, free, unhampered discussion enables the session to seek carefully the will of God for their congregation.

A closed court

It is for this reason that session meetings are closed meetings. The meetings of presbyteries, synods and the General Assembly are open to anyone who wants to attend. The only exception to that is when a court (which is what Presbyterians call their governing assemblies) decides that it must have a closed (Latin: *in camera*) meeting. (Latin terms like *in camera* have recently been removed from *The Book of Forms*.) Session meetings are open only to non-members by invitation. Individuals may be invited to attend a meeting in order to make a presentation to the session. Such people are excused after their presentation and ensuing discussion is complete; they are not invited to stay for the entire meeting. Sessions may also decide to invite the congregation as a whole to meetings which are called to consider a special issue. Since this is still a session meeting and not a congregational meeting, visitors may not speak to issues unless granted permission and they never have the right to vote. If the session decides at some point

that the public part of the meeting has accomplished all it can achieve, the session can move to end the public part of the meeting and visitors must leave. A session should never take a vote on an issue while visitors are present. Session members must be able to vote as their consciences dictate without having their vote judged by visitors. Attending a session meeting as a visitor is a privilege, not a right.

Pause and discuss:

In a democracy we have come to expect that all information and meetings will be open to the public and information will be accessible to all. Do you see justification for sessions having closed meetings? List other examples of "closed meetings." What types of "closed meetings" might happen in family life?

Sing a hymn:

Sing hymn # 739, (Lord, make us servants of your peace), *The Book of Praise*, 1997

Confidentiality

The discussion and voting in session meetings is confidential. No elder has a right to go outside the session room and announce, "Jane said she wants to allow Boomer Jones to play his drums during worship on Sundays!" or "Peter doesn't think the W.M.S. should be in charge of the kitchen." Every elder should be able to express views on any issue with the confidence that it will not go beyond the walls of that room. If session members had to weigh everything they said in the light of how people in the congregation might react, they may be less likely to speak frankly. If confidentiality is not respected and observed, elders who speak against certain plans or programs could find themselves ostracized by members of the congregation.

Decision

The purpose of discussion is decision. The session is called to govern the church, and governing is not accomplished by discussion alone. Decisions must be made. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator reminds us that when it comes to making decisions, there are two opposite preferences. Some of us feel more comfortable when we get a decision made; the sooner we can decide the better. Some of us feel more comfortable keeping our options open; certain there are more facts that should be considered. Both of these extremes must be avoided. It is not good to rush decisions, particularly on important matters. When possible, we should deal with important matters before they become urgent, so that we do not rush headlong into poor decisions. It is often a good idea for a session not to decide on a matter in the meeting in which it is proposed, but to take time to consider it more thoroughly. On the other hand, to keep on postponing a decision indefinitely is not helpful.

To pass a motion

The Book of Forms does not specify how a vote shall be taken (Section 57) or what the deciding percentage should be. Although two-thirds majority is required for some important matters, it is assumed a simple majority vote is sufficient in most cases. The rule of the majority can become tyrannical, however, if a small majority of elders overrides the sincere concerns of the minority. The ideal approach is to find a consensus that is satisfactory to most. The ideal goal is a unanimous vote. On matters of little importance, such as housekeeping items, unanimity is fine. But on important issues unanimity is good only if there has been adequate discussion in which other views have been heard and considered. No plan, no position, no program is so good that it has no negative features! Easy unanimity probably means that the negatives have not been fully considered, and they may come back to haunt the session. But

while unanimity and consensus have their place, they can never become the rule for passing motions, for that allows a minority to hold the majority from making decisions. "I oppose that!" or "I can't live with this!" can be used to maintain the *status quo* at times when change is necessary. The majority (or, in the case of extremely important issues, a two-thirds majority) must rule.

Pause and discuss:

There is a tradition in some Quaker and Mennonite groups to make decisions only by consensus. When it is time to vote, people have three options. They may say, "Yes, I believe God is leading us this way." Or, they may say, "I have some hesitation about this decision, but I am willing to step aside and let others take this decision forward." Or, they may feel so strongly that the decision is not where God is leading that they will say, "I absolutely cannot let this decision go forward." In other words, they may veto a decision. Proponents of this way of operating say that, by waiting and working on group consensus, the unity of the body of Christ is maintained. Opponents of this way of operating say that one or two cantankerous people can hold everyone hostage. What do you think?

The session has decided

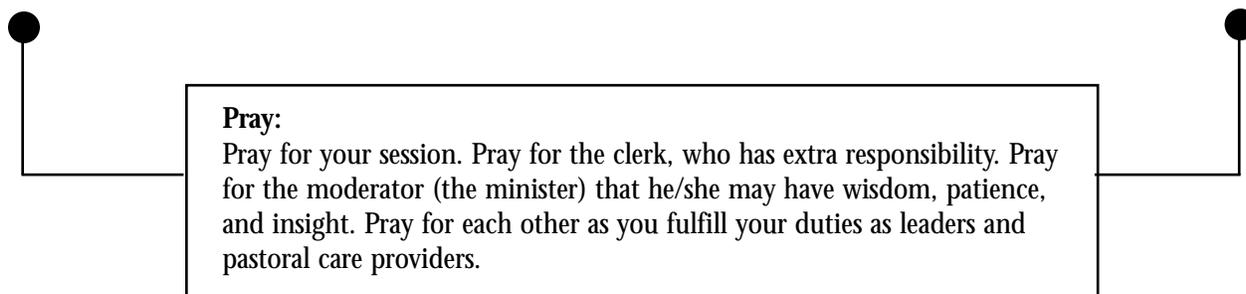
Once a decision is made, it becomes the decision of the entire session! This means a member of session cannot say, "The majority support allowing Boomer Jones to play his drums on Sunday mornings, but I wasn't in favour of it." Once a decision is made, it is the decision of the entire session and individual session members are duty bound to support it. But what if a session makes a decision which an elder cannot support in good conscience? "Any member of a court who has voted on a question and is not satisfied with the decision is entitled to have his dissent recorded. This must be done as soon as the decision is announced. Dissenting relieves the elder from responsibility and saves him from censure on account of it." (Section 91) That does not mean that an elder who has his dissent recorded has a right to campaign in the congregation against the session's decision. He need not speak in favour of the decision, but may not speak against it. If it is a matter of sufficient moral or spiritual import, an elder may "complain to the higher court." (Section 93) The elder may argue against the session decision in the presbytery, and may seek to persuade the presbytery to overrule the session's decision. That is a right which cannot and should not be denied, but unless the session decision is overturned, all the elders must live with it. By doing so the elder fulfills the ordination vow which instructs all elders "to follow no divisive course but to seek the peace and unity of Christ among your people and throughout the Holy Catholic Church."

Share with someone:

Turn to the person closest to you and share one new idea you had after reading or hearing this section.

Delegation

Discussion leads to decisions. Decisions must be delegated or they become no more than paper statements. Each motion passed must be assigned to someone, for what is everyone's work is no one's work. In practice, many of the motions are carried forward by the clerk. For example, if a session approves the transfer of a member to another congregation, it is the clerk's responsibility to write a letter informing that congregation of the session's action. Letters to be written as a result of session decisions are the clerk's responsibility. Some actions of session are carried out by the minister, others by committees within the church. The clerk is responsible to inform people of the work that has been assigned to them, but the session itself must state clearly who is responsible for carrying out the session's decision. Every elder should be aware of the truism that no decision is complete until it is assigned to someone for action. And every elder should feel a sense of responsibility about that. If a motion is passed and the action contemplated is unassigned, any elder has the right and responsibility to ask the session to assign the task to an individual or group. Failure to delegate has prevented many good decisions from entering and contributing to the life of the congregation.

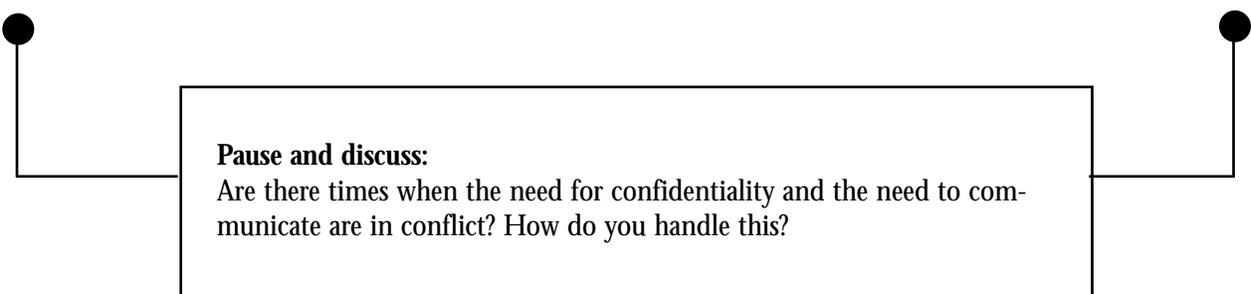


Declaration

Once discussion had led to a decision that has been delegated to an individual or group to implement, then it needs to be declared to the congregation. Work in progress should normally remain within the session in case it gives rise to expectations that are never fulfilled. Session confidentiality covers the process of discussion and decision, but since decisions generally affect the life of the congregation, the congregation has the right to know what those decisions are. In some instances, the congregation must also understand the reasons why an action was taken. For example, in the early days of Presbyterianism, it was determined that Holy Communion should be celebrated *at least* four times a year. In time, the minimum became the norm, and many older Presbyterians grew up celebrating the Lord's Supper once a quarter. In recent times, many sessions have agreed that Holy Communion should be celebrated more frequently. Those who assume that quarterly celebration is "the Presbyterian way" deserve to have an explanation as to why session has decided to move to more frequent celebrations of Holy Communion. Failure to make such explanations can lead to a sense of distrust or mutterings about session arrogance which may unnecessarily develop into conflict and confusion.

Communicate, communicate, communicate

It is almost impossible to over-communicate. Sessions ought to use every available method to broadcast their decisions to the congregation. Certainly there should be announcements of their actions in the bulletin or newsletter. Important decisions should also be outlined orally in the worship service. And extremely important issues should be a matter of discussion between the elders and the people in their districts. Sessions should never assume the average member is as familiar with congregational issues as they are.



Pause and discuss:

Are there times when the need for confidentiality and the need to communicate are in conflict? How do you handle this?

Evaluate:

Ask yourself, "How well does our session communicate? Can we do better?" A previous paragraph said, "Failure to delegate has prevented many good decisions from entering and contributing to the life of the congregation." Who will be delegated to do a better job of communicating?

Management or Leadership?

Discussion, decision, delegation and declarations are steps towards carrying out the work of the session. *The Book of Forms* states that the session is fully responsible for both the good order and pastoral care of the congregation. All organizations in the church are accountable to the session. The session is responsible for the management of the congregation; that is, it must ensure that things are done properly. But the session must also provide leadership for the congregation; that is, it must ensure that the right things are being done properly. Both functions are important, but they are quite different from one another, so we need to examine each of them.

The work of management is the task of making sure the physical, financial and spiritual resources of the congregation are used effectively and efficiently. This may be done directly or by assigning others to carry out ministry.

The work of leadership is the task of evaluating the life and ministry of the congregation in light of the task that Christ has given to his church. That is an ongoing task. Programs which began as a means of fulfilling a vital role of the church may continue after changing circumstances have made them ineffective. Leadership requires recognizing the difference between vital, meaningful activities and those which have outlived their usefulness. Leadership means asking over and over the question, "What is Christ calling us to do at this time and in this place?" It means finding answers to that question and then focusing the vital energy of the congregation on making those answers a central part of the life of the congregation.

Evaluate:

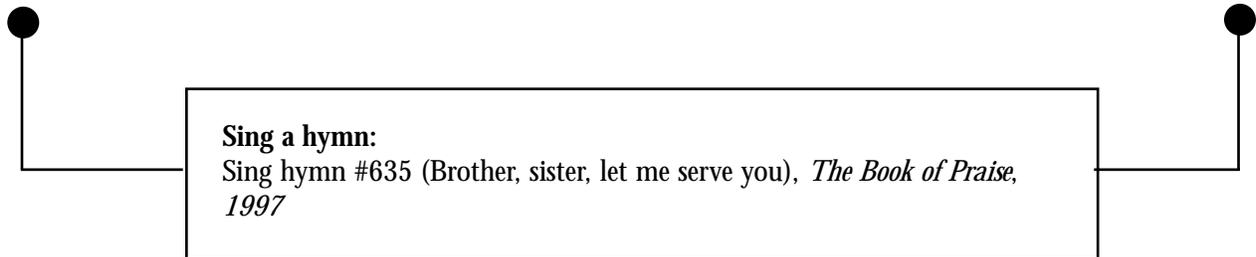
Look back over minutes from previous session meetings. At each topic, pause and ask, "Was this the work of management or the work of leadership?" Keep a running tally on a chart paper. After you have looked at the minutes of several previous meetings, note which activity—management or leadership—is most prevalent in your meetings. Is there a balance? Does your session need to make a shift?

Pastoral care of the people in the congregation is an important part of an elder's ministry/work. *The Book of Forms* describes pastoral work in sections 109.4 and in sections 110 - 110.8. Section 110, with its sub-sections, has been given the heading "Membership and Pastoral Care". Section 110 clearly assigns the responsibility for admitting people to membership and for providing spiritual care for them to the session. Its sub-sections deal with various aspects related primarily to membership in the congregation:

- 110.1 Instructing applicants for membership in the Christian faith.
- 110.2 Examining candidates for membership.
- 110.3 Admitting candidates to membership.
- 110.4 Approving and arranging for baptisms.
- 110.5 Transferring members from other congregations.
- 110.6 Restoring lapsed members.
- 110.7 Transferring members to other congregations.
- 110.8 Exercising discipline over church members.

How do we do it?

These actions are performed partly by the session meeting as a body and partly through delegation. For example, it is common for the instruction of applicants for membership to be done by the minister, although it may also be done by a ruling elder. The examination of candidates for membership may be done by the minister or by a small committee of elders. At one time it was commonly done by the entire session, a practice which was the source of dread on the part of those who were to be so examined. The session, however, must accept new members at a meeting, and the motion to do so must be part of the session's minutes. Similarly, transferring members in and out of the congregation and restoring lapsed members must be done by motion in a session meeting. The same is true of the approval of baptism.



Discipline

The matter of church discipline, which is raised in 110.8, is a difficult part of pastoral care. It is helpful to think of discipline as coming from the same source as the word "disciple," meaning learner. The goal of discipline is to help others become Christ's disciples, Christ's learners. Discipline, in the broad sense, is constantly exercised within the church because discipline includes counseling and encouragement. Everything which educates and motivates church members to live lives that reflect the righteous love of God can be considered discipline. That includes sermons, personal conversations, and example. Elders certainly have a part in this broad sense of discipline when they offer pastoral care.

Discipline also involves dealing with church members who have sinned and are not repentant. That is where discipline becomes difficult. Chapter 9 of *The Book of Forms* deals specifically with church discipline in this more difficult sense. It is an exercise of the spiritual authority which the Lord Jesus Christ has appointed in his church. It is meant to maintain truth and promote the spiritual wellbeing of offenders. The General Assembly has appointed a

special committee to study this part of *The Book of Forms* to ensure that it is clear, organized, consistent and fair. Perhaps *For Elders* will explore this topic in more detail after the work of the special committee is completed.

Explore aspects of "discipline":

Make a chart with a +sign on one side and a -sign on the other. List some of the advantages and disadvantages of being the group in the church who has responsibility for discipline. When you have finished that, list some of the areas which might demand that you take a disciplinary stand. At one end of the room place a sign displaying "10". At the other end, put a "1". Ask people to place themselves in the room according to their comfort level in regard to discipline with "10" being "I feel quite comfortable and confident with this role," and "1" being "I feel very uncomfortable with this role." Is there follow-up which needs to happen as a result of this exercise?

The Elder's District

As a means of providing pastoral care, the congregation is divided into districts and an elder is assigned to look after one. Section 110 says "The session is responsible for ...the pastoral care of all persons within the fellowship of the congregation." Section 109.4 says "the session shall assign the names of all members and adherents to the elders who shall keep a list of the names and addresses of those assigned to them, and shall cultivate a personal relationship with those persons through visiting, counseling and encouraging them in the Christian life." This is the basis for the "elder's district" which is the foundation for pastoral care by the elders in most Presbyterian congregations. Many congregations have sessions which are far larger than the number needed to carry on discussion and decision. The number of elders is determined by the need to keep elder's districts small enough that the elders can effectively care for the people in their districts. This pastoral care is part of the elder's responsibility that is carried out individually.

Reflect:

Invite elders to individually reflect on their personal commitment to their district. What are things they love about having responsibility for a district? What things are difficult? If people are comfortable with sharing these aloud, invite them to do so.

A Personal Relationship

The Book of Forms says that an elder "shall cultivate a personal relationship with [the people in his/her district] through visiting, counseling and encouraging them in the Christian life". (Section 109.4) Note that the emphasis is on getting to know the people in the district personally. For an elder, the people in his/her district should not just be names on a list. There should be faces attached to those names in the elder's mind. More than that, the elder should know something about each person in the district. Some elders keep notes on birthdays, pets, and special occasions in the lives of those under their care.

If the goal is to establish a positive personal relationship between an elder and the people in the district, it seems clear that the beginning of that process will require a lot of work. It takes a great deal more work to develop a relationship than it does to maintain one. It is possible that when a district is first assigned to an elder, the district may include people with whom that elder already has a good relationship. That makes the job easier. But in our transient society, it often happens that an elder is assigned people she does not know. Certainly when new members come into the congregation and are assigned to an elder, the elder is not likely to know them. In such cases, the beginning of the relationship is of great importance.

Home visits

In this early stage, a home visit can be quite helpful. We can learn a great deal about people by visiting them in their residence. Family pictures often provide an opportunity to learn about their background, their history, their present family, their extended family. Other items in the home may give clues to their interests. A home visit may give the elder an opportunity to meet the children, to ask if they are attending church school or youth group and to find out how they like it. Obviously, some home visits are going to be more productive than others, but it is hard to think of a better way to begin a new relationship than to visit people where they live. The access that elders have to the homes of their people is a valuable tool that should not be taken lightly.

Some people are easy to visit and welcome elders into their lives and their homes. In these circumstances fostering genuine friendship tends to happen naturally. Other people may want to keep their elder at a distance for a variety of reasons. For example, there may be a conflict between the elder and people in a district. If this is the case efforts should be made to deal with the conflict and seek reconciliation. Of course there are those who are highly private and do not desire close ties with an elder. As much as possible sessions should strive prayerfully to match elders with members in a way that will be helpful to both parties.

Other ways to stay in touch

However valuable home visits are, they are not the only means of developing personal relationships with the members of his district. Many elders indicate that finding time to carry out this aspect of their responsibilities as an elder is extremely difficult. There is no doubt that, for many of us, the world we live in is much faster than the world used to be. Today an elder with children at home must cope with the huge increase in activities for children; the role of chauffeur can swallow up huge chunks of a parent's time. That is a problem which parents/elders didn't face fifty years ago. Some elders have heavy work responsibilities which cannot be ignored. So how can elders do the pastoral work that falls upon them without abdicating their responsibilities at home or at work?

As noted above, building relationships takes more effort than maintaining them, and most of us cannot drop everything to work at it. No one should expect an elder to build several new relationships all at one time. If, for example, an elder has a district of eight families, scheduling one visit a month will enable the elder to visit all his/her families within a year, even if emergencies require cancellation of some visits.

Some elders might consider inviting families to his/her home. People want to know about their elder as well as wanting their elder to know about them.

Some elders might invite three or four families to his/her home at the same time. Small groups like this provide opportunities to allow several people to get to know each other. Such a setting may lend itself to the elder asking open questions about their relationship with God and the church ("How did you become a member of this congregation?" "How do you experience God's love in your life?" "What should this congregation look like in five years?"). Questions like these can often lead to interesting conversations and provide valuable insights which will improve the elder's ability to provide pastoral care. Generally speaking, it is wise for the elder to be the first to answer the questions. In the first place, that lets the people know that you are going to be as open with them as you

want them to be with you. In the second place, the first person to speak sets the tone. If the first responder gives a one-sentence answer, the odds are that everyone else will give one-sentence answer. By speaking first, the elder gives the rest of the group an idea of how detailed an answer to give. Social gatherings of an entire district (BBQ, potluck dinner, mini-golf) gives the people a sense of belonging and an opportunity to get to know each other. That can often make pastoral care easier and more effective.

Using technology

It is also important to recognize the value of modern technology. The telephone is a handy tool; in one evening an elder can talk briefly to everyone in her district (assuming she can find them home.) Even leaving a message on an answering machine reminds people that the elder is thinking about them. And the use of e-mail should not be ignored. Some time ago, when e-mail was in its infancy, an elder in a large church asked his session to assign him a district of people who had e-mail. The session did, and that elder used e-mail very effectively to develop personal relationships with the people in his district.

Sunday pastoral care

The Sunday worship service is also a valuable opportunity, particularly if there is a fellowship time after the service, to provide pastoral care. An elder can visit with people in his district over a coffee cup. A simple question like "How are things going with you?" can be helpful if a personal relationship has already been established. Sharing how you were impacted by the sermon may help the other person do the same. Looking around for the members of your district also helps you realize which members of your district are not present. Keeping notes about that may help you to detect a pattern of absence before it becomes a real problem. Few things turn people off a church more than having no one notice that they have stopped attending!

This part of the elder's task is done individually, and therefore it can and should be done in ways which fit the elder's personality and schedule. When fulfilling this area of responsibility becomes a real problem for an elder, she should seek help. Perhaps the minister can provide assistance, or perhaps the session needs to call in someone from the outside to help elders deal with such problems. Since pastoral care is a vital part of the ministry of the church, it is wrong to simply allow it to go undone.

Note: For more ideas about Pastoral Care, see the May 2001 issue of *For Elders*.

Share with others:
Take time to tell others what pastoral care methods have worked well for you.

Read scripture:
Read together I Cor. 12:27-13:8 which speaks of caring for all parts of the body of Christ in love.