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# Engaging in God's Work:

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## Ruling Elders in The Presbyterian Church in Canada

### Part 1: Ruling Elders: Who they are and what they do

#### Introduction

We are Presbyterian. Our name comes from *presbuteros*, the transliteration of the Greek word "elder." Ruling elders are members of a congregation's session, and are ordained members of the congregation who work in partnership with the teaching elder to lead, guide and support a congregation. Teaching elders are ministers ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Sessions and teaching elders are accountable to presbytery. The authority of Jesus Christ is exercised within our structure. We Presbyterians call the four levels of our structure "courts"—session, presbytery, synod and General Assembly. Each court, leading up to General Assembly, gives successive definition as to how our denomination should be engaged in Christ's work in the world.

#### How the Presbyterian Church got its name

The Presbyterian Church in Canada gets its name from its form of government which declares that we are a church governed by ruling and teaching elders. In this sense, we are different from—for instance—our Roman Catholic or our Lutheran friends. There are other denominations whose name speaks of their government. Episcopal churches take their name from *episcopos*, a transliteration of the Greek word for "bishop." Episcopal churches are governed by bishops. Another form of church governance is called "congregationalist" in which the power for all decision-making rests entirely with the congregation. Such congregations may be linked loosely with like-minded churches and form a regional or national "assembly" for mutual support. An example for this would be the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada.



#### Discuss this:

- Your neighbour finds out that you are a ruling elder in your congregation and asks, "What are elders? We don't have those in our church." How would you answer?
- Obviously, Presbyterians believe that there are more advantages than disadvantages to having a church governed by elders. Talk with others about the advantages. What are the disadvantages?

#### Sing:

Hymn #491, (God bless your church with strength), *The Book of Praise 1997*

#### Importance of ruling elders in The Presbyterian Church in Canada

Most decisions about the life and work of the congregation are made by the session of a congregation. The session consists of its minister or ministers, active members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries (if there is one working in the congregation) and ruling elders. Ruling elders therefore have a tremendous responsibility and many opportunities to do the work of Christ. The leadership provided by the elders (ruling and teaching elders working together), should help a congregation move ahead in ministry. If elders are ready to face the challenges of a new culture and to seek to minister the Good News of God's love in Christ in ways that truly speak to that new culture, the future is as bright as the promises of God.

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**Discuss this:**

- What do you consider to be the pressing issues of the "new culture" of today?

**Sing:**

Hymn # 590 (We have this ministry), *The Book of Praise*, 1997

**Resources for the Journey**

Sometimes, unfortunately, elders lack the courage, wisdom or knowledge to make good decisions and to lead the congregation forward in God's work. At these times, the congregation falters. There are resources available to help give elders a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities.

- *The Book of Forms* has a good description of the role of the ruling elder but some elders may find the legal-type language of *The Book of Forms* challenging.
- The Rev. Stephen Hayes, a Presbyterian minister in Ottawa, Ontario, has written a short, clear book *The Elder in Today's Church*.
- Use *The Role of the Elder*, an "Elders' Institute in a Box" course by Erin Crisfield.
- "For Elders," an educational resource, has been included in the quarterly PCPak since 1997.

All of these resources are available in the Bookroom, 800-619-7301; [bookroom@presbyterian.ca](mailto:bookroom@presbyterian.ca).

- A detailed, helpful paper on *The Ruling Elder*, giving historical and theological information, was presented to the 1996 General Assembly by Ministry and Church Vocations (Acts and Proceedings, 1996, pp. 350-362). Many sessions studied this paper. An updated version was presented to the 2003 General Assembly as part of a larger paper on the theology and practice of ministry. It is published in the 2003 Acts and Proceedings.

These materials are essential reading. But most elders are busy people. Their church responsibilities compete for time with family, business and community involvements. These pages that you are reading are a short, concise, and, hopefully, helpful overview of who ruling elders are and what they do.

**Create something:**

- Gather beautiful paper, pencil crayons and pens. Write a short note or letter of advice or encouragement to a new elder. If, however, you are a new elder, jot down questions that you would like to ask an experienced elder.

**Connect with other elders:**

- Talk about how long you have been an elder. Ask other elders to share memories of how they were invited to be an elder.

**Sing:**

Hymn #585 (Christ, you call us all to service), *The Book of Praise*, 1997

**Read Scripture:**

John 13: 1-17

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## Elders as servant-rulers

Ruling elders in The Presbyterian Church in Canada are elected by members of the congregation, approved by a session, and ordained by the moderator (minister) who is both a teaching elder and member of presbytery. In the ordination service, elders are told that all ministries of the church proceed from and are sustained by the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ furnishes the church with officers, among whom are ruling elders. (For the full text see *Book of Forms*, section 412 or *The Book of Common Worship*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, p. 392.)

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



### Connect with other elders:

- Turn to someone close to you and talk about one new idea that came to you after reading this section.

### Sing:

Hymn # 635 (Brother, sister let me serve you), *The Book of Praise*, 1997

## Elders are rulers

These two sides of the elders' work are clear. In the political climate of our time, elected representatives tend to take positions based on polls and/or consider it their responsibility to reflect the views of their constituents. In this climate, Christians (including elders) sometimes consider elders to be congregational representatives. They believe that the elders' job is to express and defend the views of members of the congregation or to be representatives of factions within the congregation. While elders are leaders (rulers), they are, first and foremost, servants of Jesus Christ. Although they are chosen by the congregation, their authority to be rulers comes from Jesus Christ. Their task is to seek to understand the will of God for the congregation and to lead the congregation in the direction they believe Christ would have it go. Elders are not spokespersons for the congregation; elders are rulers who provide thoughtful supervision and oversight to encourage growth in the Kingdom of God.



### Read Scripture:

- Matthew 19:16-30

### Discuss this:

- The previous paragraph lifts up the importance of listening carefully to God's leading. Explain to others ways that you have found to be helpful in learning to listen to where God may be leading the church.

### Make a commitment:

- Pause and pray. Think about one new thing you would like to do to enable you to listen more carefully to God. If you are an extrovert, you may prefer to talk to someone nearby rather than reflect silently.

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## Elders are servants

As well as being rulers, elders are also servants of the congregation. They are called to serve Christ by serving the congregation and, through the congregation, serve a world that needs to learn about God's love. That means elders cannot simply ignore the will of the members. Elders cannot govern arrogantly, as if they were above other members. Elders must listen to the voice of the people and to offer pastoral care while providing strong leadership. As servants, they are to cultivate personal relationships with the people of the congregation in order to encourage them in their Christian faith. Elders are not dictators; they are servants.



### Sing:

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

### Read Scripture:

- Mark 10: 35-45

### Create:

- Draw a symbol that represents what you believe to be true about being a servant.

## Need for Balance

Both sides of the "servant-ruler" are important.

If we emphasize only the servant aspect, the authority of the elders becomes lost. It is important to remember that the authority of the session does not come from the people but from Jesus Christ.

If we emphasize only the ruler aspect, there is a danger that the session may become aloof and autocratic. Elders are responsible to God, but are called to serve the congregation with the same self-sacrificing love that Christ displayed.

In order to establish good order within the congregation, elders must strive to be both ruler and servants.

Section 106 of The Book of Forms says that the eldership "is a spiritual function as is the ministry" and the qualifications for the office are those laid down "in the express word of God, and namely the Canons written by the Apostle Paul." This understanding has been passed on to us from the Reformers. An elder is expected to be a person of good character who is an example to others of how to live in their "speech, conduct, love, faith and purity." (Book of Forms 106.1)

In the May, 2003 issue of "For Elders," there is a helpful guide for choosing new elders. The author writes: "I was not looking for 'the perfect elder.' I was looking for people who had...a cluster of gifts." Since the congregation has the privilege of electing elders, members are enjoined to uphold the elders and to respect their decision-making gifts.



### Read Scripture:

- John 15:1-15

### Create:

- On a sheet of paper draw two sides of the same coin. Label one "servant" and the other "ruler." Draw a sketch or words that describe these two words for you as an elder.