

Term Service Transitions

Session - Presbtery Relationship: Session Starter 28

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Term Service Transitions

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Dessert Retreat:

Every January, our session has what I like to call a Dessert Retreat, playing on the idea of a desert retreat, but more delicious. It's simply an evening together where we meet to renew our calling, worship together, encourage one another and share table fellowship. It was during our most recent Dessert Retreat that we transitioned term service elders for the first time.

The election of elders in the late fall yielded elders-elect willing to heed the call of the congregation and the call of God. As our session has opted for term service for elders, one third of our elders were stepping off session. Our Dessert Retreat provided an ideal opportunity for this transition.

Prayer:

We opened the meeting with prayer. This reminded us that we are part of something

larger. God is at work in this world and in our church. We have the privilege to join in God's purposes and plans. We are called to serve in ministry. We need God's grace to sustain us.

Opening Songs:

Our opening songs included some contemporary praise songs: "Here I Am to Worship" and "My All in All." The first song talks about God's light coming to us in our darkness, resulting in true spiritual worship. This has an epiphany theme in it. The second song carried on our call to worship God, with a reminder that Jesus is worthy. Ultimately it's not about us, but about God. We wanted this sense of worship to pervade our meeting.

Elders in Transition:

At this point, we welcomed everyone to the meeting and identified those in transition, elders

stepping down and elders-elect coming on session. We noted that for some, this will be their last session meeting for a while; and for others, their first.

Sharing and Thanksgiving:

During a time of sharing and thanksgiving, we reflected on the service of our elders whose term was coming to an end. We focused on each person with open sharing. Many expressed thanks for working together, for friendship, and for unofficial mentoring that had occurred. Some shared funny incidents that happened throughout the years. It was both encouraging and hilarious. Our purpose wasn't to puff people up or make them proud, but simply to appreciate the gift of that person.

Retiring Elders Respond:

Prior to the meeting, we gave retiring elders some questions to think about:

How long have you been an elder in the Presbyterian Church in Canada?

What will you remember about your time serving on session?

What advice or words of wisdom do you have for newly elected elders?

We asked each elder to respond. This time was filled with encouraging, touching and humorous words. Through the responses, we could see that a lot of time, effort, prayer, care and compassion went into serving in ministry. We were stronger as a community of faith because of the contributions of that particular elder. In the end, we reminded the elders stepping off session that they were still elders, called to serve the body of Christ for the rest of their lives. It's exciting to know that many of our elders stepping off session will continue to be involved in the ministry of our church, perhaps at a grassroots level.

Reinforced with Scripture:

This time of fellowship needed to be reinforced with scripture. Prior to the meeting, we printed out Bible verses and had elders read selected passages from the Bible. These included:

<i>Proverbs 11:12</i>	<i>Acts 15:37-40</i>	<i>1 Corinthians</i>
<i>Proverbs 18:2</i>	<i>Galatians 6:9</i>	<i>15:57-58</i>
<i>Mark 14:4</i>	<i>Philippians 1:17-18</i>	
<i>Luke 20:46</i>	<i>Philippians 2:3</i>	
<i>John 13:14</i>	<i>Colossians 3:23-24</i>	

These passages from the Bible were specific reminders of what it means to serve in ministry. Some passages called us to persevere in times of trouble. Other passages told us not to take ourselves too seriously, but to take God seriously. Still other passages reminded us not to become proud. After each passage was read, we took some time to discuss how those verses applied to our service to God and to our church.

Overview of Eldership:

The final section for our Dessert Retreat involved an overview of eldership led by our Minister in Association, The Rev. Don Muir. Don brought forward some biblical images and insights into spiritual leadership through Moses (Exodus 18:13-27), Jesus (John 21:15-17), and Peter (1 Peter 5:1-4).

By reciting *Living Faith* 7.2.1-7.2.4, we were reminded what we believe about ministry, and particularly the ministry of elders. We looked at the different courts of The Presbyterian Church in Canada: General Assembly, synod, presbytery and session. We talked about how we can make good decisions by discerning the will of God.

Finally, we examined issues related to voting, unity, dissent and confidentiality. The key point was that the session discusses privately with many voices but speaks publicly with one.

Additional Music:

At different times during our Dessert Retreat, we added a song or hymn. These included:

Be still for the presence of the Lord

Hymn 575: Lead me Lord

Hymn 651: Guide me O thou great redeemer

Hymn 662: Those who wait on the Lord

May these ideas be helpful in your own church to provide healthy transitions in session. Perhaps you might do something similar. Perhaps the material presented here will lead to new ideas. Whatever the case, let's remember that we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. And ultimately, we stand on the broad shoulders of God.