**Term Service for Eldership – 2017 Survey Summary**

Following the format of the survey itself, the following is a precis of comments received.

**Current eldership model**

89 of those who responded are using the life-service model while 85 are using term service. 11 did not indicate which model they employ.

**Life-Service Session Responses**

**Considered term service by remained with life service**

43 life-service session responses indicated they had considered switching to term service but chose to continue with life service. Here are some of the reasons for this choice.

Continuity was a key word. Life-service session value continuity along with the experience and corporate memory that naturally develops with this model. It was also stated that life service tends to encourage deeper relationships between elders and the people of the congregation they serve.

Several responses indicated that their congregations have so few members that the number of potential elder candidates makes the regular rotation of term service impractical. One responder wrote, “There are not enough people willing to serve on session to rotate. For many congregations, there is little difference between life service and term service since the same few candidates are re-elected repeatedly.” One response referred to this reality as a “revolving door”. “We are just holding our own to get enough to serve as elders.” Another wrote, “We are a small congregation and a constant seeking, election and training of elders in a term-service scenario would be too burdensome and consuming of time and energy and persons.” This theme was echoed by others.

Some life-service sessions hoped a time-limited six-year term would attract new elders who would bring to the session new ideas and fresh enthusiasm. Some candidates were attracted by the set term. For others, serving for six years sounded more daunting than an open-ended life service.

One writer observed, “While elders are ordained for life and expected to serve an open-ended term, our polity allows elders to resign from active service at any time.” It is true that elders in the life-service model are welcome to take an occasional sabbatical or to resign when circumstances suggest that decision is in the best interests of the elder or the pastoral charge.

**Term-Service Session Responses**

**What benefits of the term-service model have you experienced?**

The hope that the relative short commitment of term service of six years would encourage more people to commit to the eldership, bring new ideas, different experiences and renewed energy to the ministry of the session was the most frequently stated benefit of term service. “Term Service has strengthened our session. It encourages people who may not be prepared at their stage in life to make a lifelong commitment of service,” noted one person.

Some of the other frequently identified advantages of term service include:

* Allows for graceful retirement or sabbatical from session for elders who lose enthusiasm for this form of leadership
* Gives congregations a regular opportunity to ensure elders are fit to continue in service and not elect those who are no longer able to serve the congregation effectively
* Provides opportunities for more people to discover their gifts for leadership and develops a wider base of experienced leadership in the congregation
* Regular elections encourage more intentional elder training
* Regular elections provide educational opportunities for the whole congregation about eldership and how our congregations are led
* Power blocs are less able to form in this environment

**What challenges of the term-service model have you experienced?**

The challenges expressed here are similar to those that have kept life-service sessions from transitioning to term service. The single most common challenge of term-service was identified by smaller congregations that indicated they have so few people with gifts and willingness to serve as elders that the same people are elected over and over again. In practice, this means term service is essentially the same a life service. Another common concern is the time and energy spent searching for, electing and training new elders. An election every two years is considered too frequent by some congregations. One person wrote, “Conducting elder elections every two years is a time-consuming task in a large congregation! It can be disruptive to congregation giving rise to a “here we go again” attitude.

Some of the frequently identified disadvantages of term service include:

* The difficulty in recruiting new elders, even for a term of six years
* The congregation ends up with a completely new session after just a few elections resulting a lack of continuity and corporate memory
* Elders are lost to the session. They often leave session after six years saying they are tired or have “done their part”.

One elder asked the thoughtful question, “What does it mean to be ordained for life and serve for a term?” Another pointed out that just two terms results in 12 years of service on the session. “That’s a significant commitment and sometimes leads to burnout.”

**Is the term of six years too long, too short or does it work well for your elders?**

51% of respondents indicated the six-year term works well. 25% said the six-year term was too long, 2% said it was too short and 22% were unsure.

The following are a sampling of some of the more frequent comments:

* It is easier to attract people to session when they know the term is limited.
* Our session has always said if something happens and an elder could not fulfill their term, i.e. sick, family issues, then they could pause their duties or step down.
* It often takes newer elders about two to three years to get up to speed and understand how things function so three years would cut off service just as it is starting to bear fruit. At six years you have had enough of an on-ramp to be competent and a window of three to four years to make a difference. If we know our time is limited, we will try harder to achieve our goals sooner. After about six years it is time for a sabbatical to refresh and participate in other aspects of worship and fellowship in the church.
* Six years offer more consistency. Three years is too quick to effectively guide.
* In my experience, a six-year term is a commitment that scares many away from allowing their names to stand for election as elder.

**If you answered “too long” or “too short” to the above question, how many years would be the ideal term of service for your session?**

At term of six years was most popular answer, followed by four years. Two, three and five-year terms were evenly distributed. Three responses were in favour of life service.

**Are you aware of people that turned down the invitation to be elected an elder in your congregation because the six-year commitment is too long?**

37% of those who responded said yes to this question. 63% said no.

**All Session Responses**

**The length of the term, the frequency of elections and the percentage of elders needed to be elected at each election are interconnected. Which of the following options appeals to your session. Option 1 is the current model.**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Option** | **Length of term**  **in years** | **Years**  **between elections** | **Percentage of session**  **needed to be elected** |
| 1 | 6 | 2 | 33% |
| 2 | 4 | 2 | 50% |
| 3 | 3 | 3 | 100% |

Option 1 56%

Option 2 23%

Option 3 8%

None of the above 13%

**What other option(s) does your session recommend?**

Some of the alternative suggestions include:

* Election every year with 33% of the session being elected
* Election every three years with 33% of the session being elected
* Election every four years. No percentage of session to be elected was stated
* Elders are given a choice of a three or six-year term when elected. This might result in some turnover but not the full 100% turnover
* Each session should establish its own term
* In the Indigenous community, life terms are more compatible with the culture

**Other comments:**

* We agree with allowing sessions to set years of service terms that are helpful to their ministry needs (we feel this is already happening due to illness, death or other reasons elder cannot fulfill their commitment) but feel that a maximum of consecutive years should be set to require the turnover on session.
* Different congregations will have different needs and situations so I believe it should be an individual congregation’s decision.
* What is harm in letting congregations establish own rotation?
* I would prefer to remain with the 6-year model, but I would not wish to stand in the way of a different model being available for other congregations that find themselves with different needs.
* Either model allows elders to request a temporary leave from the session.
* If you never have an opening on session, new people can't give their gifts. Knowing there is a finite end is helpful in recruiting. It allows for a change in group dynamics.
* Our session recommends life serve with a rotating sabbatical or Sabbath period of six months to a year as an opportunity for restoration and spiritual growth.