That Book of Forms 108–108.3 regarding term service for eldership be amended as follows and remitted to presbyteries under the Barrier Act (Clerks of Assembly, Recommendation No. 1, p. 261, adopted, p. 31):

108. Elders, once lawfully called to the office, and having gifts of God to exercise the same, are ordained for life. They may serve in the office for life unless deposed or suspended in process of discipline. They may, however, at the call of a congregation in which the session has instituted term service for elders, fulfill the duties of the eldership on the session normally for periods of six years but may stand for re-election at the end of each term.

108.1 Any session desiring to opt for term service for elders should consult with the congregation and must notify the presbytery of its intention and receive that court’s permission.

108.2 In congregations that have instituted term service for elders, normally one third of the session shall be elected every two years. Sessions opting for an alternative term shall establish a consistent term of service and frequency of election, which shall be subject to approval by the presbytery.

108.3 Elders may resign the active exercise of the office at any time during their term of service. (Declaratory Act 1985, p. 261, 52)

You are asked to approve or disapprove this change.

The report related to this proposal is as follows (A&P 2019, p. 260–61, 31):

Re: Review length of term service for elders

In 2017, an overture asking the church to review the sections of the Book of Forms that deal with term service for elders (108–108.3) was referred to the Clerks of Assembly. This overture expresses the concern that congregations find it difficult to recruit new candidates when one-third of the session is re-elected or replaced every two years and encourages flexibility related to the length of the term of service. The overture, therefore, recommends that a term of less than six years but not less than three years, be permitted.

The overture sparked a review of this eldership model. Before considering changes to the current legislation, the Clerks were granted permission by the 2017 Assembly to conduct a survey to receive comments from sessions about the value and challenges of term service and how this model might be amended. The Clerks received 185 replies. They came from sessions as well as from individual ministers and elders. To see a summary of this survey, go to presbyterian.ca/elders and open the Election ordination and Admission of Elders menu.

Survey responses made it clear there is a significant diversity of views regarding the length of service terms. Some indicate the current six-year term is too long and discourages candidates from considering the office of elder. Others maintain a six-year term is appropriate since it can take a couple of years for a new elder to learn about the role before becoming effective in it. Still others feel a six-year term is not long enough because session experience and corporate memory are lost by frequently changing membership. Among respondents who currently employ the term-service model, 56% are satisfied with the status quo, 44% desire flexibility.

Presbyterians understand the election to eldership to be the call of God, through the congregation, to assist the minister with the leadership, pastoral care and oversight of the congregation. The governance of the denomination at every level relies on the faithful exercise of this spiritual office. The survey results indicate that sessions are weighing the profound significance of this divine call with the pragmatic realities of life in the church today. While most survey responses favour maintaining the status quo for term service eldership, there is a clear voice calling for more flexible terms.

After considering the survey results and believing this flexibility may encourage and strengthen some sessions, the Clerks of Assembly proposed legislation to the 2018 General Assembly and invited sessions and presbyteries to comment on it. The proposed legislation maintains the six-year term as the norm while providing the opportunity for
a session, in consultation with the congregation and with the approval of presbytery, to select a term that suits the needs of its congregation. The amendments are underlined and struck-through in the proposed legislation included in the recommendation below.

The Clerks are grateful for all who provided comments on this proposed legislation. Responses were received from 28 sessions and 10 presbyteries.

**Session Replies**

Twenty sessions expressed support for the proposed legislation. One term-service session wrote, “We appreciate the flexibility provided for sessions to choose the length of term and frequency of elections for elders that works best for their congregation.” Another commented, “We appreciate the recognition of the diverse nature of congregations presented in this paper. The idea that congregations may adjust terms to suit the needs and character of the specific worshiping community is one with which we agree.”

Four sessions expressed support for maintaining the six-year term. One of these stated the conviction that the proposed amendments “…degrades the understanding of ordination as something life-long, which is tied to the execution of the work for which one is ordained.” Another stated, “We would suggest that a lack of appreciation of the calling is at the root of this issue and that reducing of the length of the term of service is addressing the wrong issue.”

Two sessions not employing term-service determined they were not able to comment due to lack of direct experience with that model of eldership. One session noted its decision to maintain its current six-year term of service. Another session took the opportunity to emphasize that in “small rural churches there is simply not enough personnel” to support the kind of “turnover” of term service. One more described how it organizes its session within a six-year framework.

**Presbytery Replies**

Nine of the ten presbyteries expressed support for the proposed legislation and commented on how it empowers sessions to make decisions that best serve the needs of their congregations. It is understood that any session wishing to change its current term of service would consult with the congregation and seek presbytery approval before implementing the change. The only presbytery that did not endorse the legislation indicated it wants to maintain a six-year term with half the session being elected every three years.

One respondent commented on what he took to be unclear wording or possibly unhelpful archaic terminology in the first sentence of section 108. The Clerks, therefore, propose a grammatical amendment to the first sentence by moving one comma and deleting the word “meet”.

The Clerks of Assembly offer the following recommendation to amend Book of Forms 108–108.3.

**Recommendation No. 1**

(adopted, p. 31)

That Book of Forms sections 108–108.3 regarding term service for eldership be amended as follows and remitted to presbyteries under the Barrier Act:

108. Elders, once lawfully called to the office and having gifts of God meet to exercise the same, are ordained for life. They may serve in the office for life unless deposed or suspended in process of discipline. They may, however, at the call of a congregation in which the session has instituted term service for elders, fulfill the duties of the eldership on the session normally for periods of six years but may stand for re-election at the end of each six year term.

108.1 Any session desiring to opt for term service for elders should consult with the congregation and must notify the presbytery of its intention and receive that court’s permission.

108.2 In congregations that have instituted term service for elders, normally one third of the session shall be elected every two years. Sessions opting for an alternative term shall establish a consistent term of service and frequency of election, which shall be subject to approval by the presbytery.

108.3 Elders may resign the active exercise of the office at any time during their term of service. (Declaratory Act 1985, p. 261. 52)