



# EQUIPPING FOR... **ELDERSHIP**

## The Role of the Presbytery

*Don Muir, Associate Secretary, General Assembly Office*

**D**id you know there are 45 presbyteries within The Presbyterian Church in Canada? Do you know the name of your presbytery? Do you know how many congregations are in your presbytery?

Presbyteries range in size in terms of square kilometers and the number of pastoral charges within their bounds. The Presbytery of Newfoundland, for example, has three pastoral charges; however, there are more than 400 kilometers of highway between St. John's and the next pastoral charge in Grand Falls-Windsor. The Presbytery of Montreal has over 30 pastoral charges but is spread over a smaller area. Some presbyteries have substantial resources in terms of elders, ministers and financial investments. Others must manage with few people and tight budgets. Nevertheless, all presbyteries are called upon to provide the same sort of ministry.

Presbyteries are made up of ministers and elders. Most of the ministers serve congregations but some are engaged in other ministries. Members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries who serve in qualifying positions are also on the roll. Each pastoral charge elects one elder to represent it at presbytery. Equalizing elders are appointed when there is a need to balance the number of ministers and elders on presbytery's roll.

What does the presbytery do?

The presbytery's primary role is to care for and oversee ministers and congregations within its

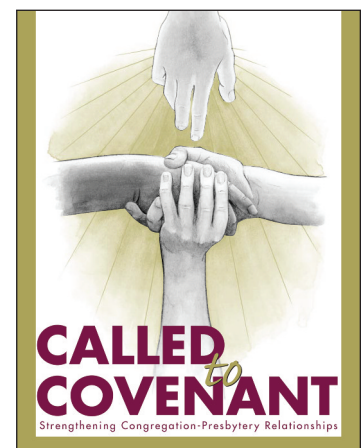


bounds. Here are a few illustrations of what that looks like, especially in relation to sessions. The bracketed numbers are Book of Forms references. This is not a complete list of all references or presbytery responsibilities.

1. Ministers are responsible to presbytery for how they conduct worship and the content of worship. (198)
2. The presbytery is responsible for the care and good order of the churches within its bounds. (200)
3. The presbytery may visit congregations as part of its exercise of care. (199.1)
4. The presbytery may call for and examine session records. (255)
5. Only the presbytery can form a new congregation or permit a church building to be constructed. (200.1)

6. Session must seek permission from the presbytery before selling its property or contracting debt. (200.8)
7. Session must seek permission from a presbytery to change the name of the congregation. (200.9)
8. It is the presbytery that can bring two or more congregations together to form a multiple-point pastoral charge. Often this means one minister serves two or more congregations. (200.9)
9. Similarly, it is the presbytery that can separate congregations that are currently in a multiple-point charge. This allows them to function as single congregations. (200.9)
10. If two or more Presbyterian congregations want to amalgamate to form one congregation, they must ask presbytery for permission. The presbytery would oversee the process in cooperation with the Assembly Council and the Commission on Assets of Dissolved and Amalgamated Congregations. (200.11)
11. If a Presbyterian congregation wants to enter into an Ecumenical Shared Ministries agreement with a congregation from another denomination, it needs to apply to the presbytery for permission. (200.11, 200.13.1)
12. It is only the presbytery that can dissolve (close) a congregation. (200.11)
13. While congregations, sessions and colleges play a large role in identifying and encouraging people who might be called to a ministry of Word and Sacraments, it is the presbytery that, after prayerful examination and discernment, certifies them for ministry and ordination. (202)
14. It is the presbytery that ordains ministers of Word and Sacraments. (233)
15. It is the presbytery that approves calls to ministers and inducts ministers into pastoral charges. (221)
16. In cooperation with the Committee on Education and Reception, presbyteries are involved in the process of receiving ministers and candidates for ordination from other denominations into The Presbyterian Church in Canada. (248)
17. It is the presbytery that dissolves the pastoral tie between a minister and the congregation. Most often, the pastoral tie is dissolved when the minister leaves one congregation to accept a call elsewhere. The pastoral tie is also dissolved with the minister retires, resigns to follow another vocation or is removed from their position as the result of a judicial process. (232, 232.1, 372.2)
18. Ministers are subject to the authority of the presbytery. It is the presbytery that disciplines ministers when necessary. (319.2)
19. If a minister would like to take a leave of absence, an intermission or a maternity or paternity leave, they must seek the permission of the presbytery. (213.3)
20. If a minister is unwell and receives a note from the doctor prescribing a leave of absence, the minister must present that note to the presbytery to request the leave. (213.3)
21. A minister must seek the permission of the presbytery to retire. (245)
22. The presbytery appoints interim moderators as needed. If it is deemed a vacant congregation is not ready to proceed with a call, the presbytery appoints a stated supply minister, an interim minister or a lay missionary. Sessions do not “hire” ministers independent from the presbytery. (213, 213.2, 231.3)
23. The presbytery considers overtures written by sessions and if they are in order, forwards them to the General Assembly with approval, with disapproval or without comment. (68)
24. The presbytery appoints minister and elder commissioners to the General Assembly. (258)

For more detailed information about the relationship between the session and the presbytery, go to [presbyterian.ca/mcv](http://presbyterian.ca/mcv) and download *Called to Covenant – Part 1* and *Called to Covenant – Part 2*.



## Assessor Elders

### Session Starter

*Don Muir,*  
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### Prayer

Merciful God, bless us as we place ourselves in your hands, offering ourselves as a living sacrifice. By your spirit, help us to be effective and caring Christian servants. Transform our minds, so that we may discern your will—what is good and acceptable and perfect. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

### Introduction: Book of Forms section 195.1

The presbytery may appoint assessor elders to sit with a session for general or specific business, with or without vote according to the terms of the resolution of appointment.

### Scripture: Romans 12:13 NRSV

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

### A Brief Commentary

With words like these, Paul explains how Christians living in community are to care for one another.

### Reflection

Individuals, congregations, sessions, presbyteries, synods and the General Assembly are connected through the theology, covenants and polity of our denomination. One of the ways church courts contribute to the needs of today's saints is through the work of assessor elders.

What is an assessor elder?

There are times when a session needs eldership help. An assessor elder is an elder appointed by a presbytery to temporarily assist a session fulfill its responsibilities.



Assessor elders might be appointed to assist in situations such as:

1. When a new congregation is formed, a presbytery may appoint assessor elders to serve as the session until the congregation is ready to elect elders from among its own members.
2. A session may have lost a significant number of elders and need to be temporarily bolstered by the appointment of assessor elders.
3. A session might be struggling with an issue and the elders would benefit by mentoring from assessor elders outside the congregation.

Assessors must be ordained Presbyterian elders in good standing but not necessarily serving on the session of their home congregation at the time of their appointment. When the presbytery appoints assessor elders, it will specify if the elders will have the right to vote, according to the needs of the situation. (See also Book of Forms sections 122 and 122.1.)

### Follow up:

1. Have any of our elders served as assessor elders? If so, what was the experience like?
2. In what circumstances could our session have ever benefited by the appointment of assessor elders?

## What's on your mind?

### Do we have to tell the presbytery?

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I'm often asked a question that begins with something like, "Do we have to tell the presbytery...?"

For example:

1. Our Board of Managers says that if present congregational trends continue, our finances will allow us to continue ministry for about three years. Is this something the presbytery should know?
2. We've been using the term-service model of electing elders for a few years. The session has decided to return to the life-service model. Do we have to tell the presbytery or can we just make that transition on our own?
3. The session has been approached by a yoga instructor who is looking for a place to hold Saturday classes. Do we need presbytery permission to welcome them?
4. Our church wants to build an addition to accommodate an elevator. Does the presbytery need to be involved?

Most of the time, a session may provide pastoral care and leadership to the congregation without checking in with presbytery. The session has responsibilities entrusted to them. Normally, the session conducts elder elections, enables Christian education, receives members, prays with the sick, sets stewardship goals, works closely with the board of managers and so on without needing to seek presbytery involvement.

There are occasions, however, when the session either needs to ask the presbytery for approval or ought to keep the presbytery informed about its activities. Sometimes this distinction is quite clear. Other times it can be a judgement call. Generally, our thinking should be guided by the principle that the presbytery is always responsible for the care and good order of the pastoral charges within its bounds (200).



For example:

1. It is essential for the presbytery to be aware of the health of a congregation, especially if that health is waning. It is hoped the presbytery can help the congregation deal with issues and establish helpful, long-term plans.
2. The Book of Forms (108) states that a session needs to consult with the congregation and receive permission of the presbytery to move to the term-service eldership model. It is silent on what needs to be done to go back to life service. Because eldership is so central to our denomination, it seems advisable for sessions to, once again, consult with the congregation and request presbytery permission to transition the other way.
3. The session is primarily responsible for how church facilities are used so, normally, there would be no need for presbytery permission.
4. Any major renovation of a church should be done with the knowledge of the presbytery. Presbytery permission is required if the congregation needs to borrow money for the project. (151)

Because both ministers and sessions as a whole carry out their work by the authority of the presbytery and are accountable to it, and because a healthy relationship with the presbytery is to be encouraged, it is wise to keep the communication open and full.