



# EQUIPPING FOR... **ELDERSHIP**

## Meaning of Membership

Don Muir, Associate Secretary, General Assembly Office

**W**hat does it mean to be a member of a congregation within The Presbyterian Church in Canada?

Whether it happens when you are an infant or an adult, the answer to that question begins with baptism – one of the most joyful moments in the life of any congregation.

*Living Faith*, a subordinate standard of our church, states the following about baptism:

“In obedience to our Lord’s command and example, we observe two sacraments, Baptism and Holy Communion. These are visible expressions of the Gospel given as means of entering and sustaining the Christian Life.

“Baptism is a sacrament meant for those who profess their faith and for their children.

“Baptism is an act of discipleship that requires commitment and looks towards growth in Christ.” (*Living Faith*, 7.5.1, 7.6.3, 7.6.4)

*The Book of Common Worship* reflects further on the significance of this sacrament:

“Baptism is a gift from God and an initiation into the household of God. In baptism we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection and joined to the body of



Christ, the church. It is the beginning of a new life in the world where ethical, social and political decisions are made in the light of our response to God in Christ.

“Baptism is administered, not in isolation, but within the context of a congregation that promises to guide and nurture those baptized as they continue to follow the way of Christ as faithful members of Christ’s church.” (*The Book of Common Worship*, p. 117 and p. 153)

Membership springs from this holy beginning. The baptism ceremony points to the deep and far-reaching meaning of the sacrament. Those who become members affirm their baptism by professing faith in the Trinity. Through vows, members renounce

sin and turn to Jesus Christ, and, in dependence upon the Holy Spirit, express a desire to mature as Christians in the church, seek the guidance of Christ in the Word of God, celebrate Christ's death and life in the Sacrament of Holy Communion and engage in Christ's mission to the world.

Membership is a sign of God's profound grace that reaches out and invites us to be part of the Church. Membership is also a public demonstration of substantial commitment to the Church of Jesus Christ. Whenever an elder or a minister of Word and Sacraments is ordained, the following words are spoken, not just to them, but to the whole body of believers.

“The church is Christ together with his people called both to worship and to serve him in all of life.” (*Living Faith* 7.1.1)

There are important expectations related to membership. Members are expected to attend worship regularly, support the minister, submit to the care and authority of the session, comply with church law, take a lively interest in the ministry of the congregation and provide for that ministry through generous stewardship. (Book of Forms 139, 141, 155)

There are also important responsibilities related to membership. Members call a minister or approve the sale of church property, for example. In cases like these, a congregation enters into a legally binding contract that requires the approval of their members.

Similarly, members who have publically declared Christian faith and promised their support for the church, are granted the right and responsibility of serving as elders and electing elders. The eldership is a vital and essential office within The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Women and men are ordained to share with the minister in the leadership, pastoral care and oversight of the whole congregation – both members and adherents. (*Living Faith* 7.2.4) The leadership of a community is chosen by the membership of the community.

Our congregations not only embrace members but adherents, too. According to recent figures submitted by congregations, there are approximately 88,000 members and 52,000 adherents connected with 840 congregations across Canada.

What is an adherent? The General Assembly adopted definition states that adherents are “... those who associate themselves with a congregation through participation or support without making a formal membership commitment.” (A&P 1989, p. 262)

Congregations are strengthened by adherents who give generously of their time, talent and treasure to the mission and ministry of the church. The whole denomination is blessed by their presence and participation in the life of the church. Nevertheless, it is a significant and wonderful moment when the adherent takes the step of becoming a member.

Although encouraging people to consider membership is often left to the minister, Book of Forms 110 is a reminder that the whole session has the privilege and responsibility of seeking out, preparing and admitting persons to accept the privileges and responsibilities of membership.

Making a profession of faith can be an important act of discipleship and a major step in a person's faith journey. The whole church is enriched when individuals grow in their understanding of Christianity and share more deeply in mission and ministry of Christ's church.



St. Paul's Presbyterian Church in Bramalea, Ont., welcomed 50 new members in April 2017.

## Being part of a denomination

### Session Starter

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### Prayer

Living God, as we meet this day, we ask you to clothe us in compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience and forgiveness that we might serve your Church in a spirit of love and harmony. In the name of Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

### Introduction: Book of Forms section 129

The session is subject in all its proceedings to the review and direction of the presbytery and higher courts of the church.

### Scripture: Colossians 3:15 (NRSV)

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body.

### A Brief Commentary

There is a lot packed into these few words. It invites the reader to be open to the peace of Christ ruling the heart (thoughts and actions, perhaps) within the unity of the body—the Church.

### Reflection

We are members of the Church of Jesus Christ. It is a church that spans time and space. It is a church that has known moments of breath-taking glory, moments of humiliating shame and everything in between. By the grace of God, this church continues to glorify God and to follow Jesus Christ in the guiding strength of the Holy Spirit.

Our particular branch of the holy catholic Church, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, is governed by ordained elders: ruling elders, usually called “elders”, and teaching elders, usually called “ministers.” Ruling and teaching elders are called by God and set apart for the leadership, pastoral care and discipline of the church. We accomplish this through bodies we call courts—sessions, presbyteries, synods and the General Assembly. Each court is made up of ministers and elders.



Sessions care for the members and adherents connected with congregations. Presbyteries are responsible for the congregations and ministers within their bounds. Synods oversee the ministries of their presbyteries. The General Assembly has authority to make decisions affecting the entire church.

We trust God to lead us through the discussions, prayers and decisions of our courts. Ministers and elders promise, upon ordination, to accept the government of this church. They promise to share in and submit to all lawful oversight of the courts. In the spirit of Colossians 3:15, they seek the peace and unity of Christ.

Sometimes as ministers and congregations, we forget about the authority of the courts. We make decisions as if congregations and ministers are independent from all others. For example, sometimes we omit or forget the legal step of consulting the presbytery that is responsible for the care and good order of congregations when selling property, borrowing money or engaging and dismissing ministry personnel. It is the presbytery that erects and dissolves congregations, calls and dismisses ministers and more. We are not isolated congregations and ministers, rather we are blessed by belonging to a large family that cares for and supervises Christian ministry in an attempt to ensure all is done decently and in order within a spirit of faith, hope and love.

### Follow up:

1. What has our relationship with the courts of the church been like?
2. How might this relationship be strengthened?



## What's on your mind?

### What are the primary duties of a clerk of session?

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An email pops up on my computer:

“I’ve been asked to accept the position of Clerk of Session. Is there a job description you can send me?”

The Book of Forms lays out the essentials of this office. Of course, in practice, the job can expand in many directions – both official and unofficial. For example, because a clerk of session often has an in-depth understanding of the character of the congregation as well as the personalities of the elders, the clerk can provide the minister with valuable guidance and wisdom when it comes to navigating new directions in ministry. It is also common for the clerk of session to emerge as a leader amongst the elders and end up serving as a sounding board not only for ministers, but also for other elders and members of the congregation. The clerk may become a friendly confidante to the minister. It may be the session clerk who makes announcements during worship on behalf of the session, although any other elder of the minister could do this.

That said, here are a few notes that may help a session clerk more completely understand their role and responsibilities.

Book of Forms section 118 provides a summary of session clerk duties:

The session appoints a clerk, whose duty it is to take regular minutes of the session’s procedures and hold the same in a permanent record, to take charge of all session documents and to prepare and issue all extracts of minutes and papers authorized by the session (See Book of Forms sections 18–24).

The session elects its own clerk from among the elders. (Book of Forms 18 and 19)

The clerk is the keeper of session records although the session may authorize the minister to look after the baptismal and professing members rolls. (Book of Forms 20 and 20.1)

The clerk is the legal extractor of notes from session records. For example, if the presbytery requests information about a session decision, it is the clerk who will provide that information. This would normally include the date and place of the meeting, a list of elders present, and the decision requested. The clerk will also write other letters as requested by the session. Presbytery, synod and General Assembly normally communicate with the session through the clerk. (Book of Forms 23–24)

The clerk records the minutes of each session meeting. Some clerks unnecessarily record entire discussions that take place. While significant background facts may need to be included in the session records at times, it is primarily the decisions of the session that are to be noted. It is the minister’s responsibility to ensure the minutes are correctly kept. (Book of Forms 25, 27, 123)

The minister usually prepares an agenda for each session meeting. Some ministers prefer to collaborate with the session clerk on this.

The clerk of session might be asked to maintain a directory of members and adherents connected with the church, but someone else could do this.

The role of the clerk is a very important part of the efficient and effective running of the session and congregation. We thank God for those who accept this gracious and faithful work.