



Becoming an Elder

in The Presbyterian Church
in Canada

“What does it mean
to be an elder?”



“What does it mean to be an elder?”

You attend a congregation of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. There are other people who attend who are identified as “elders.” Are you wondering about how they became elders and what being an elder is all about?

You may have encountered elders

- visiting homes, hospitals, or nursing homes
- helping with worship—perhaps reading scriptures, taking up offering, or singing in the choir
- serving communion in a church service

You have likely heard announcements that elders and the minister will be attending a Session meeting or away on a retreat.

*An elder actively serves
the congregation*

Sometimes someone from church may have called you, identifying herself as an elder. Perhaps someone from church has handed you the church newsletter, saying he is an elder.

From such experiences you may know that an elder is a person who

- attends church regularly
- actively serves the congregation
- is part of a larger group, the Session, which includes the minister
- is an older youth or an adult of any gender
- has gifts for leadership and ministry, including pastoral care and oversight

*An elder has gifts for
leadership and ministry*

“Who can be an elder?”

What may not have been evident from your experiences is that elders are people who

- have identified themselves publicly as Christians
- are on the congregation’s membership roll
- have been elected by other church members, and elders and the minister
- have thought and prayed about God calling them to this role

If you are reading this, then you are likely curious about the role of elder; maybe your congregation is seeking more elders and you have been asked to suggest suitable people.

Perhaps you want to help your church and serve God more so you wonder if being an elder is a possibility for you.

Or maybe another elder or your minister has asked you to think about being an elder.

Regardless of the reason, this booklet is written for people who are interested in learning more about how someone becomes a church elder and who might be suitable. It provides information about

- the background of elders in our church
- the role and responsibilities of elders
- personal qualities that are important in an elder
- the process of choosing elders
- how a person “discerns” or decides about becoming an elder
- the commitment elders make

“Why do churches have elders?”

The Presbyterian Church in Canada believes that having elders is faithful to the way the apostles of the New Testament organized the early churches. The word “Presbyterian” comes from the Greek word *presbuteros* meaning “elder.” We are ruled by elders.

Elders formed part of the life of the New Testament church. Most Christian converts were Jews who were already familiar with the role of elder in their own synagogues.

The early references in the New Testament describe elders as assisting church ministers: “Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust” (Acts 14:23). See also Acts 11:30 and 15:22. However, the early church was a church that was in transition; later references (as in Titus 1:4-9 and 1 Peter 5:7) imply that elders were the ministers.

From a scriptural point of view, in the early Christian church, the elders were the church leaders who met, thought and reasoned together with the apostles. Together they led and guided the church. At the Reformation, the office of the elder was given a key role, becoming the basis for the Presbyterian form of government.

The tradition of elder in our church today underlines an important principle: The Presbyterian Church in Canada gives its members significant participation in decision making, recognizing that the entire church is the people of God. The church attempts to seek God’s will through the collective decisions made by God’s people.

*The Lord continues his ministry
in and through the church.
All Christians are called
to participate in the ministry of Christ.
As his body on earth
we all have gifts to use
in the church and in the world
to the glory of Christ, our King and Head.*

Living Faith 7.2.1

“What does an elder do?”

Elders (also called “ruling elders”) play a key role in the life of the congregation. Through membership on Session, they work closely with the minister (also called the “teaching elder”) in

- supervision and oversight of the congregation
- membership and pastoral care
- worship, including participation in the sacraments
- Christian education
- stewardship and mission
- relating to presbytery, synod and General Assembly

Most decisions about the life and work of the congregation are made by Session. With the minister, who acts as the moderator of Session, elders work as leaders—leading the congregation in its fellowship (its ministry to one another) and in its mission (its ministry to the world). Elders seek the will of God for the congregation so they can lead it in the direction they believe Jesus would have it go. They seek to model themselves after Jesus as they listen to people and serve the church.

*Elders seek the will
of God so they can lead
the congregation in the
direction they believe
Jesus would want*

This might seem like a daunting task. However, the church believes that God has given each elder gifts, that the congregation has recognized these gifts, and that each elder has “discerned a call.” By working together and sharing their gifts as a Session and with the minister, elders are able to carry out their many tasks and responsibilities.

“What personal qualities are important in an elder?”

“An elder must be a professing member of the congregation and must be ‘an example to the believers in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity’ (1 Timothy 4:12).”

Book of Forms, Section 106.1

Any person who is a member of the church and who seeks to grow in Christian faith might be a suitable elder. An elder is not expected to be perfect, to have an unswerving faith, to have all the answers, or to be elderly in age! An elder receives training, learns from other elders, and grows as a Christian in the role.

*An elder receives training,
learns from others,
and grows as a Christian
in the role*

You might have the personal qualities to be an elder if you

- are a committed Christian whose faith is central to your life
- regularly participate in the life of the congregation
- show a personal concern for others, inside and outside the church
- have sound judgment for decision making
- can collaborate as a team member
- are able to give time and effort to this role
- live an honest and respectable life that can be an example to others
- are willing to learn about serving and leading others in faithful living
- are knowledgeable about church governance or willing to learn about it

“How do churches choose elders?”

“Election to the eldership is the call of God, through the congregation, for service in Christ’s Church. Since the eldership is a spiritual office concerned with the rule and pastoral oversight of the congregation, only suitable men and women should be considered.”

Book of Forms, Section 132

From time to time a church’s Session determines that more elders are needed for the spiritual wellbeing of the congregation. The Session begins the process by notifying

Elders are needed for the spiritual wellbeing of the congregation

the congregation that new elders are needed and explaining the nomination and voting process. Elder candidates are expected to demonstrate the personal qualities listed in the previous section.

There are two types of ballots, but with either type the election process includes

- the development of a ballot
- a decision by Session
- a decision by the elder candidate
- voting by the congregation

For more details, see the Book of Forms, Section 132.

Therefore, this process requires prayerful discernment by church members, about the spiritual leadership gifts of each church member.

*Through the church God orders this ministry
by calling some to special tasks
in the equipping of the saints
for the work of ministry,
for building up the body of Christ.*

Living Faith 7.2.22

“How do I know if I’m being called?”

Discerning God’s call always involves praying to God for guidance; sometimes it is helpful to read Bible passages, particularly about call or discipleship.

Everyone experiences God’s call and the discernment process differently. For example, some people follow an intuitive decision-making approach while others may be more methodical, writing down some of the specific gifts needed by elders. Personal and congregational contexts also vary over time; people are encouraged to explore the sense of call to be an elder from time to time.

How does one discern whether to say “Yes” or “No” to an invitation to be an elder?

- Learn about the role and responsibilities of an elder.
- Examine your gifts and current personal and congregational contexts.
- Discuss the responsibilities of being an elder with close family members and friends, with your own and other elders, your minister and other church leaders.
- Consider if your community is confirming your sense of call.
- Talk and listen to God; in prayer, ask for God’s guidance.

We are called to work out the meaning of our own lives and to find our true vocation in the love and service of God.

We serve and love God by the service and love of creation especially the care of the needy. Every kind of work that is honest and serves others is a vocation from the Lord.

Calling means the necessity to deny selfish ambition and desire in order to minister to others. In God’s service true freedom is to be found.

Living Faith, 2.3

“What happens if I say ‘Yes?’”

If you discern God’s calling and accept the invitation, then during a worship service you will be asked a set of questions to which you will respond with your promises of service. Then you are “ordained” as an elder—ordained to seek the will of God and to guide the church according to biblical doctrine.

You are ordained as an elder of The Presbyterian Church in Canada and not just as an elder of your own congregation. You also become an elder for life. However, that does not mean that you will always be active as an elder. Circumstances may change; elders need to be willing to resign from active service in their role on Session if they can no longer give adequate time and energy to the calling.

If elders move to a new community and congregation, they are not automatically a member of that Session but must be elected to serve on Session again. Also, since 1997,

some congregations have chosen to have term service for elders: elders are still ordained for life, but they serve terms of six years at a time, a term that may be renewed at the call of the congregation.

An ordained elder seeks the will of God and guides the church according to biblical doctrine

You are ordained as an elder of The Presbyterian Church in Canada

Through the office of ruling elder men and women are ordained to share with the minister in the leadership, pastoral care, and oversight of the congregation.

Living Faith 7.2.4

“What commitment do I make?”

In a worship service four questions are asked of the elders-elect about their commitment:

Do you believe in God the Father, made known in his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom the Holy Spirit witnesses in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments?

Do you accept the subordinate standards of this Church, and do you promise to be guided thereby in fostering Christian belief, worship and service among the people?

Do you accept the government of this Church by sessions, presbyteries, synods and general assemblies, and do you promise to share in and submit yourself to all lawful oversight therein, and to follow no divisive course but to seek the peace and unity of Christ among your people and throughout the Holy Catholic Church?

In accepting the office of Elder, do you promise to perform your duties in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, striving to build up His church and to strengthen her mission in the world?

Book of Forms, Section 449

The language of these questions dates back to earlier days, reminding us of the church’s long tradition of ordaining elders. For an explanation of each question, see pages 15–18 in the booklet *Eldership in Today’s Church* by Stephen Hayes; discuss these questions with your minister or elder.

*In the ordination service,
elders are blessed in the
power of the Holy Spirit*

In the ordination service, elders are blessed in the power of the Holy Spirit and sent out to fulfill their task. The service of ordination may be by prayer alone or with the laying on of hands—a reminder that others will help you in this role.

“What will I be doing as an elder?”

As an elder you look to Jesus for direction, striving to serve and lead the congregation to further the church’s mission and the reign of Christ in the world. It is important to take time to read the Bible and to pray, alone and with others.

Elders attend Session meetings where they participate in decision making related to the congregation. Often educational and devotional components are part of the agenda—a reminder that we are all lifelong learners, and that elders need God as much as anyone else.

Elders help the church in its mission to announce the good news to the world

In Session meetings, many voices are heard as elders participate in discussions about congregational matters. However, outside the meetings and for the unity of Session, elders speak with one voice.

While the Session may regularly deal with sensitive and confidential matters in its meetings, on other matters it can communicate frequently and clearly with the congregation to keep everyone informed.

Depending on the size and activities of a congregation, elders might have responsibilities such as staying in touch with members; representing Session at a committee’s meetings or the congregation at presbytery, synod or General Assembly meetings; participating in search committee deliberations or preparing announcements for worship services.

Being an elder is a spiritual calling that can be challenging, interesting and fulfilling. It is an experience of ongoing learning and faith development and service. Elders use their God-given gifts to serve and strengthen God’s church, helping to lead it forward in its mission to announce the good news to the world.



This information has been compiled from the resources listed below and published by The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

They are available from your minister or from the Resource Centre at the church's national office:

1-800-619-7301 or 416-441-1111

resources@presbyterian.ca

The Book of Forms, 2014

Equipping Elders, 2010

Eldership in Today's Church by Stephen Hayes, 1993

Being a Presbyterian in Canada by Stephen Hayes, 1991

Living Faith, 1984

See also the "Resources for Elders" available at <http://presbyterian.ca/elders>

Online courses and resources available through the Elders' Institute at <http://eldersinstitute.ca>

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