



A Guide for Congregations Considering Membership within The Presbyterian Church in Canada



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Welcome to The Presbyterian Church in Canada!

Throughout its history, The Presbyterian Church in Canada has welcomed groups of Christians into its membership. The church is richer for the diversity of Christians and congregations that proclaim the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit together. Those who unite with the denomination are blessed by fellowship, support and ministry with thousands of Presbyterians across Canada. This brochure will introduce you to the denomination, its governance and some documents and policies to be aware of when considering membership within The Presbyterian Church in Canada.



Who We Are

Dependent on the power of the Holy Spirit, we proclaim the love and good news of Jesus Christ through word and action. As a reformed church, we rely on the truth and inspiration of the scriptures for God's guidance. We believe in the Trinity, that is, God revealed in three persons, Creator, Saviour and Comforter.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada has congregations across Canada with members of many national and racial backgrounds. Currently, Presbyterian congregations worship in Arabic, Cantonese, Cree, English, Efik, Filipino, French, Ga, Hindi, Hungarian, Ibo, Korean, Mandarin, Ojibwe, Portuguese, Punjabi, Spanish, Taiwanese, Twi and Urdu.



A gathering of people interested in starting new worshipping communities.

Governance

Book of Forms

The legislation that governs our church is contained in the Book of Forms. The Book of Forms has been written over many years and continues to be revised when the church discerns legislation must be changed to reflect our understanding of the mind of Christ for our denomination. There are four levels of governance that are also called courts: session, presbytery, synod and General Assembly. The Book of Forms is available online at presbyterian.ca.

The Session (Book of Forms 105-138.1)

Presbyterians are one of the few denominations in the world known mainly by the way it governs itself. The word Presbyterian comes from the Greek *presbuteros* that means “elder.” We are a church governed by ordained elders. In each congregation there is a teaching elder, commonly called the minister or pastor, as well as a number of ruling elders, men and women who share the leadership, pastoral care and oversight of the congregation with the minister. Together, they are called the session.

Women and men are called to the office of ruling elder by an election process (Book of Forms 132-133.3) to share the leadership, pastoral care and oversight of the congregation with the minister. Being an elder recognizes the person’s gifts to lead and serve in this way. It is not meant to be a position of prestige or privilege. As noted in 1 Peter 5, elders are not to “lord it over” those in their care, but to be “examples to the flock.” At their ordination, elders make vows professing their faith, accepting the standards and governance of The Presbyterian Church in Canada and promising to build up the church in the grace of Jesus Christ.

Sessions function either with or without term. Service without term means that, once elected, an elder does not normally stop serving in the congregation except for reasons of health, a move to another congregation or resignation. Term service means elders are elected to serve for a specified time and may stand for re-election at the end of each term. All elders are ordained for life. (Book of Forms 108)

The session normally meets privately; however, others may attend the meeting upon invitation for a specific reason. This privacy is to maintain confidentiality and session solidarity. Session solidarity means once a session has made a decision, even if some elders disagree with it, the session stands as one with the decision and members of session will not publicly or privately contradict one another. A session discerns with many voices but speaks publicly with one voice.

The session designates one elder to be the representative elder to attend presbytery meetings (the next higher court) with the minister.

The Board of Managers (Book of Forms 158–173)

The board of managers is another congregational body. It is elected at the annual congregational meeting and cares for such things as the church buildings and finances and drafts an annual



The Session at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Fredricton, N.B., conferred the title of Elder Emeritus on John Astle, in recognition of faithful service to the congregation as an elder.

budget, normally in consultation with the session. The board is under the supervision of the session and the two groups are expected to work closely together. In some congregations the work of the board is provided by a finance and maintenance committee of the session. (Book of Forms 113.6.5)

The Deacons' Court (Book of Forms 135–138.1)

Some congregations elect a deacons' court instead of a board of managers. They may also be called upon to care for those in financial need.

The Presbytery (Book of Forms 176–258.6)

The presbytery is a meeting of the ministers and an equal number of ruling elders from the congregations within the presbytery. The presbytery's primary purpose is to care for and oversee the congregations and ministers within its bounds. The ministers and elders are placed on the constituent roll of the presbytery. There may also be retired ministers or ministers without a congregation on the appendix to the roll who are permitted to speak at the meetings but may not vote. Meetings are held as needed.

Most presbyteries are organized on a geographical basis. There are two non-geographic presbyteries. The presbyteries of Western Han-Ca (from Vancouver Island to Winnipeg) and Eastern Han-Ca (from Winnipeg to Newfoundland) are formed on the basis of Korean language and culture.

The moderator (chair) of the presbytery is chosen each year from among those on the constituent roll. The moderator's primary role is to ensure good order at meetings. The presbytery appoints a clerk who serves as an administrative officer, records meeting minutes, manages correspondence and the like. Every member of the presbytery is to be treated equally.

Congregations and ministers are accountable to the presbytery. They are expected to support the presbytery and submit to its authority. The courts of The Presbyterian Church in Canada serve a legislative function by dealing with church legal matters and regulations and by providing pastoral oversight to the congregations.

The Synod (Book of Forms 259–276)

Synods roughly follow provincial boundaries, except in Ontario and the Atlantic provinces. The synod can oversee the work of presbyteries and congregations within its bounds that often includes youth and camping ministries and regional church workers.

The General Assembly (Book of Forms 277–312)

The General Assembly is the highest court of the church. It consists of 1/6th of ministers and an equal number of representative elders. Those who attend Assembly are called commissioners in that presbyteries commission them to attend the Assembly to discern and vote on matters according to their conscience and in the light of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Every day of Assembly begins with worship.



The General Assembly meets annually and its work is carried forward during the year by the various agencies of the church, such as the Assembly Council and the Life and Mission Agency.

Congregational Membership

(Book of Forms 139–157.1)

With the approval of the congregation's session, any person who confesses that "Jesus is Lord" and seeks to follow Christ is welcome to become a member of a Presbyterian congregation. If the person is not baptized, they need to be baptized to become a member. The baptism of an adult involves a profession of faith and results in the person becoming a professing member of the congregation. Members promise to place themselves under the authority of the session and seek the peace and welfare of the church. (Book of Forms 139-148)

When infants or children are baptized, they are considered covenant members. As they grow up, they are encouraged to profess for themselves the vows made on their behalf by their parents or guardians. In this way they become professing members.

Professing members have the right to call ministers, be elected as elders, deacons or trustees, elect elders or deacons, vote on the selling of church property and have right of appeal to the higher courts of the church. Covenant members do not have such rights but may, upon the age of maturity, vote at congregational meetings on financial matters if they themselves are financial contributors.

Another category of those attending Presbyterian churches are those who may or may not be baptized, are not professing members, but have adhered (attached) themselves to the congregation by way of regular worship and participation in congregational events. They are not eligible to be elected as elders or call ministers. If they are supporters, they have the right to vote on financial matters affecting the congregation. They are referred to as adherents.

Congregations Joining The Presbyterian Church in Canada

When a group of Christians desires to become a congregation of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, they need to apply to the clerk of the local presbytery. The presbytery will speak with the leadership and members of the congregation about The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Instructional sessions should be arranged so that the group understands the benefits and responsibilities of becoming a member congregation of the presbytery and of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

If the presbytery decides to welcome the group as a new congregation, it will establish it at a special service of worship. The presbytery will also appoint assessor elders who, for a time, will help lead the congregation as it becomes accustomed to the ways of The Presbyterian Church in Canada and is prepared to elect elders from its membership.

The congregation is assessed a financial amount to support the ministries of the presbytery and synod. These assessments



Children at Knox Presbyterian Church in Vankleek Hill, Ont.

are mandatory. The congregation is also urged to financially support Presbyterians Sharing, the national budget of the denomination that maintains the work of the church nationally and internationally, including important mission endeavours, through an allocation set by presbytery and approved by the congregation. Without such support, the work of our denomination would, in many crucial respects, cease to function.

Congregational Relationship with the Presbytery

As indicated above, the presbytery oversees ministers and congregations. The genius of Presbyterian governance is that we are governed not by individuals but by councils or courts. We believe good decision-making is best achieved through consultation, co-operation and group discernment and should never be subject to the will of one person.

The presbytery establishes new congregations and approves all places of worship. Even existing congregations are considered new congregations of The Presbyterian Church in Canada when they apply to join this denomination. Once a congregation becomes a part of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, the congregation may not leave. The minister and individual members may choose to leave, but the congregation, once established, is under the authority of the presbytery and can only be dissolved by the presbytery.

Church Property

The property of a congregation is held in trust by that congregation through trustees appointed by the congregation. If a congregation decides to expand its facilities or build a new building and, in the process, incurs a debt, prior approval of the presbytery must be obtained. (Book of Forms 151) The design of significant renovations or new buildings must be submitted to the Church Architecture Committee and be approved both by that committee and the presbytery.

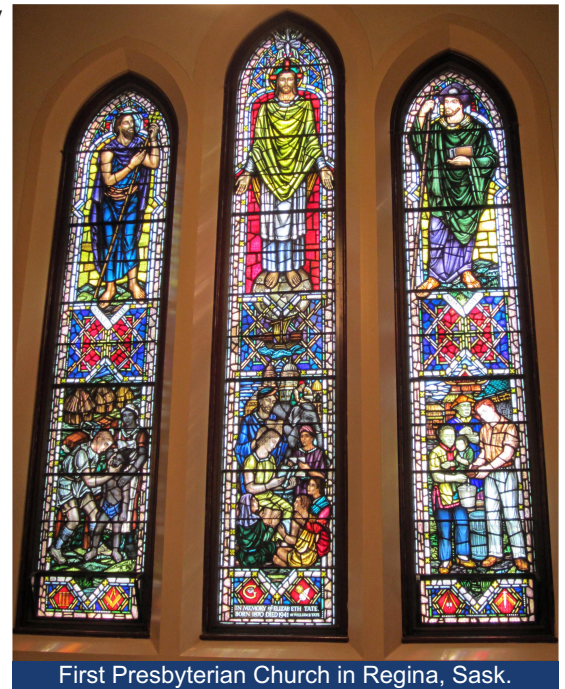
What happens to the property if a congregation is dissolved? When that decision is made by the presbytery, all assets (church building and contents, manse, bank accounts and investments), vest with the Trustee Board of The Presbyterian Church in Canada to be used as determined by the denomination.

A Few Other Policies

(See online versions at presbyterian.ca)

The church has a number of policies that are designed to encourage us to live together “decently and in order” as the apostle Paul advised. (1 Corinthians 14:40) One very important policy is the Policy on Sexual Abuse and/or Sexual Harassment. This policy is a means whereby individuals who allege they have been sexually abused or harassed within the church can lay a complaint before the church.

Another important policy is called Leading with Care and seeks to make the church a truly safe place for both young and old. In recent years the church also adopted a Policy on Racial Harassment and another on workplace harassment.



First Presbyterian Church in Regina, Sask.

Ministers Joining The Presbyterian Church in Canada

The Presbyterian Church in Canada has a long history of welcoming ordained ministers in good standing in other branches of the Christian Church. For such ministers, entry into the ministry of Word and Sacraments of The Presbyterian Church in Canada is a two-step process. In overview, it involves the following:

The minister applies for eligibility for reception as a minister of The Presbyterian Church in Canada through the denomination's Committee on Education and Reception. If the minister's application is approved, the minister is declared eligible for reception, with or without conditions. Once the minister has fulfilled all conditions, the minister is permitted to move to the second step.

The minister seeks a call to a ministry of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. When a congregation extends a call to the minister with the approval of the congregation's presbytery and the minister accepts the call, then the minister is inducted and the minister's name is placed on the constituent roll of the presbytery.

The minister writes to the presbytery of The Presbyterian Church in Canada within whose bounds they are living, and asks the presbytery to endorse their application for eligibility for reception. Ministers who live outside Canada apply directly to the Committee on Education and Reception, without the involvement of one of the denomination's presbyteries.

Ministers of an ethnic congregation who wish to become part of The Presbyterian Church in Canada follow this same process, beginning with endorsement of their application for eligibility for reception by the presbytery they are seeking to join.

A minister's work is overseen by the presbytery and the minister is accountable, not to the congregation, but to the presbytery, for carrying out their duties. Serious complaints about the work of the minister that are not resolved face-to-face with the minister may be submitted in writing to the session. The session forwards the complaints to the presbytery. Because ministers are accountable to their presbytery, sessions are not authorized to decide the outcome of complaints against their minister.

The stipend of the minister is guaranteed by the congregation to be at least the minimum set by the General Assembly or the higher minimum level set by some presbyteries. A minister may be called by the congregation to part-time ministry (but not less than half time) and thus the stipend and benefits would be pro-rated. The congregation is also required to pay the health and dental insurance and pension premiums that form part of the call. The congregation and minister will be required to pay a certain percentage of the stipend toward the pension plan of the church. Some congregations voluntarily pay provincial medical premiums wherever they exist.

Calling a Minister

When a congregation seeks to call a minister, the presbytery appoints a minister to serve the congregation as an interim



Young adult consultation at national office in Toronto

moderator to help facilitate the call process. During this process, the interim moderator is, in effect, the minister of the congregation. When the congregation is ready to call a minister, the interim moderator will help establish a search committee from the session, board of managers and other groups in the congregation who will work with the session to produce a congregational profile. This profile is a kind of snapshot of how the congregation sees itself and its needs. Once the need for a minister is advertised, applications will be received and it will be up to the search committee to make decisions about who appears best suited to lead the congregation. It is customary for a search committee to select only one person to recommend to the session.

The minister selected to “preach for the call” will normally meet with various groups in the congregation and preach at a worship service. A congregational meeting is held and a decision made by the professing members in attendance on whether to call the minister. If the vote is in favour of calling the minister, this decision is forwarded to the presbytery. If the presbytery sustains the call, it forwards it to the candidate’s presbytery. The candidate’s presbytery will consider the call. If it also sustains the call, a date can be set for the induction of the minister in the congregation. If the person is not yet ordained, an ordination service will be held first, either separately or at the same service as the induction.

Finally...

We are delighted you are interested in being part of this denomination and pray this document will be helpful to you. This is introductory information only. We recommend that you learn more about this denomination by accessing the website as well as any courses given by presbyteries on Presbyterian church history and governance. There are many helpful resources available online at presbyterian.ca.

Important Documents and Policies

These are a few of the documents and policies available at presbyterian.ca. Further information is available through from presbytery or the Clerks of Assembly at 1-800-619-7301.

Standards of Faith

Scriptures of Old and New Testaments, Living Faith (available in English, French and Korean), Westminster Confession of Faith, other standards are noted in Book of Forms ‘Historical and Confessional Base’.

Governance

Book of Forms

Sexual abuse policy

Policy on Sexual Abuse and/or Sexual Harassment describes the denomination’s zero tolerance policy and procedures for dealing with allegations of abuse.



High school students at St. Andrew's Hall in Vancouver learning about discernment and vocation during spring break, 2019.

Safe church policy

Leading with Care, A Policy for Ensuring a Climate of Safety for Children, Youth and Vulnerable Adults in The Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC).

Workplace harassment

Policy that describes harassment and how it is dealt with in the church.

Racial harassment

Policy specifically designed to deal with racial harassment in the church.

Church property act

The Act to Incorporate Trustee Board of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, which stipulates that all church property vests with the Trustee Board if a congregation ceases to exist. (Once established, there is no provision for congregations to leave The Presbyterian Church in Canada with their property)

Amalgamation or Dissolution of Congregations

Sometimes a congregation wants to unite with another Presbyterian congregation. Sometimes a congregation may need to be closed. The Policy for the Amalgamation or Dissolution of Congregations assists with these decisions.

Stipend policy

Each congregation must provide to its minister at least the minimum stipend set by the General Assembly each year, or the higher minimum level set by the presbytery, if any (prorated for part-time service).

Church pensions

Every minister must be a member of the PCC pension plan. Every congregation must submit to the PCC the employer portion of pension and must collect and submit the minister's portion.

Health and dental policy

Every minister (and optionally, other church staff members) receives health and dental benefits that are paid for by obligatory congregational payments. Some restrictions apply.

Congregational financial obligations

Presbyteries and synods may gather funds from congregations to support their budgets.

Presbyterians Sharing mission fund

Congregations are expected to contribute to the national church budget. Recommended congregational allocations are provided from the national office through the presbytery.

Calling a minister

Calls must be arranged and approved by the presbytery. A resource entitled Calling a Minister is available.

Payment when presbytery dissolves pastoral tie between the minister and congregation

The Policy on the Dissolution of Pastoral Ties provides the basis for stipend continuance payments that are the obligation of the congregation in the event a ministry comes to an end for lack of funds or because the presbytery has discerned that the pastoral relationship is no longer viable.



The Presbyterian Church in Canada
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1-800-619-7301 or 416-441-1111
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Clerks of Assembly, ext. 226
Financial and Support Services, ext. 320
Pension and Benefits, ext. 287
Ministry and Church Vocations, ext. 264

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