

Presbyterian Church Government

Pastoral Care and the Value of Visiting— Session Starter #12

What's on Your Mind?

Dorothy Henderson, **Team Leader**
*The Vine Helpline: Connecting people,
places and programs*
dhenders@presbyterian.ca, ext. 271
Don Muir, **General Assembly**
dmuir@presbyterian.ca, ext. 223
The Presbyterian Church in Canada
1-800-619-7301

Presbyterian Church Government: A brief review of how we organize ourselves

As one family under the lordship of Christ, Christian communities have organized themselves in a variety of ways to provide effective worship, pastoral care, discipleship, and service. While some Christians follow a model in which all decisions regarding theology and polity are decided by the individual congregation (congregational) and others abide by a hierarchical system of priests and bishops (episcopal), the presbyterian form of government is based on eldership. Teaching elders (usually referred to as ministers or pastors) and ruling elders (usually referred to as elders) share in the care and oversight of the ministry of Christ at every level of our church.

There are four “courts” in our presbyterian system. Most of the important decisions that affect the church are made as women and men prayerfully meet to discern the mind of Christ.

Session

Sessions are made up of elders and minister(s)*. Elders are women and men who have been elected by the local congregation and ordained. The session provides for the overall ministry of the congregation, including pastoral care, worship, Christian education, stewardship, and mission. It has representation at the presbytery. The minister acts as the moderator.

Retired ministers and ministers without a pastoral charge are placed on the appendix to the constituent role.

Presbyteries support and oversee their congregations and ministers. While scheduling varies according to geography and need, presbyteries normally meet several times each year. The moderator may be a minister or an elder. There are 45 presbyteries in Canada.

Synod

Each synod is made up of several presbyteries and provides general supervision for them. Ministers and an equal number of elders make up the membership of this court. Some synods operate camps and offer educational and training events. Synods normally meet once a year. The moderator may be a minister or an elder. There are eight synods in Canada.

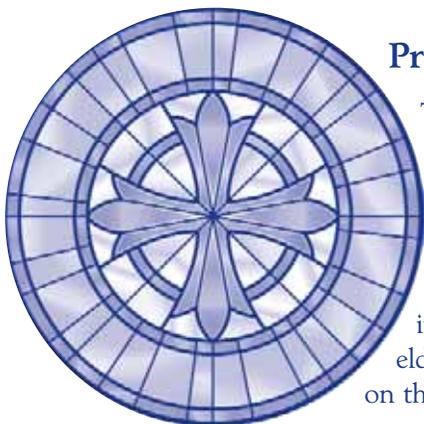
The General Assembly

The General Assembly meets annually during the first full week of June. It is the highest decision-making body of our church. An equal number of ministers and elders are commissioned by presbyteries to attend. It votes on matters of theology and polity that affect the whole denomination. It receives, discusses, and makes decisions on reports from committees, petitions, overtures, references, and appeals. Its decisions are made carefully. Some issues require study over a number of years. The General Assembly elects a moderator, a minister or an elder, who presides over the Assembly and continues in an inspirational and ceremonial role for the following year.

* The term ‘minister’ includes Minister of Word and Sacrament and Member of the Order of Diaconal Ministers.

Presbytery

The constituent role of each presbytery is made up of ministers and elders from each congregation within its bounds—one elder for each minister on the constituent role.



Presbyterian Church Government: What happens at a session meeting?

. . . they returned to Lystra, then on to Iconium and Antioch. There they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith And after they had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe.

Acts 14:21-23

For two thousand years, the church has prayerfully chosen elders to lead and serve communities of faith. Though we live in an entirely different part of the world, in a radically different age and speak a completely different language from those elders in first-century Antioch, elders continue to provide much the same ministry. Together, we continue to lead and serve the people God has placed in our care.

The session consists of the teaching elder (Minister of Word and Sacrament), active members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries in the congregation, and ruling elders. The minister (of Word and Sacrament) moderates the session meeting. If there are two or more ministers, they may take turns moderating. While the minister is called by the congregation, she/he is actually responsible to the presbytery that inducts her/him into the work of the congregation. Elders are elected by the members of the congregation and this is seen as a call from God through God's people. Ordination into the eldership is a solemn event. Elders promise to submit to the courts of the church at all levels as part of their ordination vows. They carry out their duties in accordance with the scriptures and the Book of Forms.

Section 109 of the Book of Forms says that "It is the duty of those who are called to the eldership to meet regularly with the minister for the purpose of establishing good order and providing for the pastoral care of the congregation." There

are differences between a session meeting and a meeting of a secular organization. The session meeting opens with prayer and scripture. Many elders say the devotional and educational part of a session meeting helps them to remember that they are God's children, serving Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. The session prays and works together to ensure that pastoral care, worship, Christian education, stewardship (material and spiritual), and mission are carried out effectively within the congregation. It seeks out and admits members and makes arrangements for baptisms. Some sessions order their agenda so that a different aspect of the congregation's life is stressed at each meeting, allowing for more in-depth discussion.

The session is usually a 'closed court'. That means that only session members may attend and minutes are not available for distribution. Occasionally, the session may need to talk about confidential business that could lead to misunderstandings and hurt if made public. Further, the session often discusses plans that may or may not take place. If unfinished plans were known, they could stir up false hope or unnecessary angst within the congregation. Sessions may provide a summary of the minutes to the congregation. This summary should only include decisions made but not identify the movers and seconders of motions nor the list of those in attendance since it is the session as a whole that takes responsibility for its work.