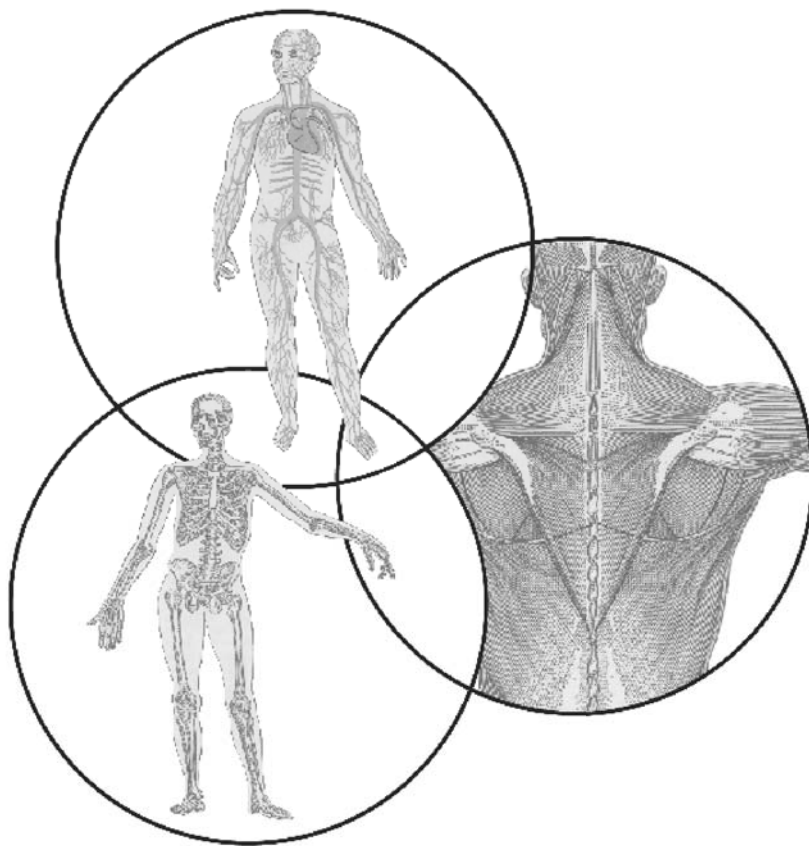


# CONGREGATIONAL FITNESS

**Building the Health and Capacity of Your Church**



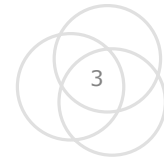
*Brian J. Fraser and James F. Czegledi*

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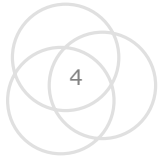
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The Presbyterian Church  
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Toronto, Ontario M3C 1J7

Edited by Anne Saunders  
Designed by DLC Designs  
Printed in Canada



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Foreword</b>	An Imaginative Approach.....	4
<b>Introduction</b>	Building Health and Capacity.....	6
<b>Study #1</b>	The Skeletal System: Finances and Facilities.....	13
<b>Study #2</b>	The Circulatory Systems: Education and Fellowship.....	17
<b>Study #3</b>	The Nervous and Muscular Systems: Worship and Mission.....	22
<b>Study #4</b>	Getting It All Together: Governing for Health and Capacity.....	27



## AN IMAGINATIVE APPROACH

### **Will this approach really work?**

Some evaluators of this study guide questioned our approach, giving us reason to pause. We knew we had developed an unusual resource – a resource that invites people to *imagine* their congregation as a human body and to *play* with ideas about how its various systems work and interact. Indeed it is a stretch of the imagination!

Other evaluators understood. They played along and offered helpful suggestions for strengthening the approach. They convinced us that this analogy would work *if* one were willing to be imaginative and open to new ideas.

### **Our invitation**

Now it's your turn to use this study guide. We invite you to *imagine* that your congregation is like a human body, to *play* with the similarities and to *allow* the Spirit to stimulate new ideas among you.

We've included our own descriptions of how the various systems in the body act and interact, and then we've suggested parallels in congregational life. Now we need you to add your wisdom and common sense.

### **Our hope**

Our hope is that by comparing congregations to the human body, we will stimulate your imagination and give you new perspectives and insights on your church.

A healthy and capable human body grows when there is proper attention to diet and exercise. How we feed the body and build its capacity are key elements in sustaining well-being. When there is disease, we follow a treatment plan – involving medications or therapies – to restore health and energy.

May this study guide enable you to develop and implement a plan to *restore* and *sustain* your congregation's health and capacity to the glory of God and in the service of Christ, whose body we are all called to be.

## BUILDING HEALTH AND CAPACITY

*“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”*

1 Corinthians 12:27

*“For as in one body we have many members, but not all members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ and individually we are members one of another.”*

Romans 12:4-5

### Health issues

If you had a cracked bone in your leg, would you ignore it or seek appropriate treatment?

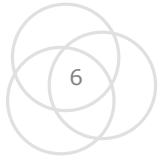
If you sensed that blood was not flowing smoothly to a limb of your body, would you ignore it or seek appropriate treatment?

If you found yourself forgetting important things in life, would you ignore it or seek appropriate treatment?

For most of us, the answers to these questions are easy. We would work to restore our bodies and minds to health.

Furthermore, we would make changes in our lifestyles to do whatever possible to ensure that the injury or disease did not progress or happen again.

More than ever before, there is support from the medical professions for making such choices today. We live in an increasingly health-conscious society. We are encouraged to pay attention to how we care for our bodies. We are aware of the importance of what we eat, how we exercise, and the attitudes we hold towards our health and well-being. We seek medical advice and assistance to maintain health, not just to cure diseases.



This study guide seeks to apply that consciousness to the health and capacity of our congregations. By health we mean the internal strength and well-being of a local church. By capacity we refer to the willingness and ability of a congregation to reach out to its community and beyond.

**Members of the body of Christ**

We are each a member of the body of Christ, an integrated part of a larger system designed to continue the work and witness of Christ in today's world. This powerful image runs throughout Paul's writings and has been a central metaphor for the church within the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions. Each of us is responsible for contributing to the health and capacity of our congregation. *Knowing how* to improve that health and ward off or cure the diseases that threaten it and *taking the appropriate action* are essential callings for all members of the body. We each have a crucial part to play.

**Key systems in the body of Christ**

We suggest that you take a systemic look at the health and capacity of your congregation. The human body is a complex system of interrelated and mutually dependent sub-systems, all relying on each other for health and capacity. So is your local congregation.

Just as there are different human body types, there are also different church body types. When Paul used the metaphor of the Church as the Body of Christ, he did not define what a normal body type was. Neither do we. He was concerned about the health and capacity of each unique community of the early church. Similarly, we are concerned about the health and capacity of each unique congregation of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Imagine the key systems in your body relating to the key systems of a congregation in this way:

The body's *skeletal system* provides strength and support. Its parallel can be seen in a congregation as its *facilities* and *finances*.

The body's *vascular* and *lymphatic systems* provide nurture and combat disease. Their parallels can be seen in a congregation as its *education* and *fellowship*.

The *nervous* and *muscular systems* provide direction and enable action. Their parallels can be seen in a congregation as its *worship* and *mission*.

All these systems working together, well aligned and mutually supportive, enable the whole congregation to work together in Christ's service and offer a healthy witness to the Gospel. This alignment process is the task of governance in a congregation.

### Using these studies

The primary purpose of these studies is to enable leading members of a congregation to *diagnose* their church body's health and capacity and then to *develop a treatment plan* for improving it. We will encourage them to do this by tapping into their own wisdom.

We have designed the four studies of this resource for use primarily by the Session. But, they can also be used with small groups or committees in your church. Each study includes questions to stimulate conversation within the group as a whole and within small sub-groups. Plan about one hour for each study, with five to ten minutes for each group discussion. Allow for the possibility of it running longer if conversations get lively!

We suggest that the initial discussions take place in small groups of three or four, with a sharing afterwards of the resulting insights with the whole group or Session. This process gives everyone the greatest opportunity to contribute. The Spirit works within you and among you. Listen for what it is saying through you and through conversations with each other.

The first study invites you to explore your congregation's skeletal system, its facilities and finances. We begin here because most people take this dimension of health for granted. But your skeletal system provides the framework upon which everything else is built. Its health and capacity is crucial to effective action and direction.

The second study invites you to explore your congregation's vascular and lymphatic systems, its education and fellowship. The programs of education and fellowship carry life-giving content and contact throughout the community.

The third study invites you to explore your congregation's nervous and muscular systems, its worship and its mission. Energy and inspiration flows out from the worship experience to every extremity of the body and gives your faith community its unique presence and impact in the world.



The fourth and final study invites you to explore the ways in which all these systems work together for the good of the congregation and the glory of God in your particular situation. This process of aligning and guiding the church body is what we call the governance of the congregation. This study provides your Session with an opportunity to pull together all the insights stimulated by the first three studies and to use them to enhance the health and capacity of your congregation.

Provide paper, pens, newsprint and markers for all the studies. Study #1 will require copies of the congregation's budget. You may find it helpful in all the studies, however, to also provide copies of the congregation's last Annual Report (i.e. the committee reports), some recent orders of service, and the last church newsletter or letter to members.

**More resources**

This study guide has been written to complement *The Four Awareness Studies* prepared by the Evangelism, Church Growth, and Worship Department of the Life and Mission Agency, The Presbyterian Church in Canada 2004. (Available at [www.presbyterian.ca/evangelism](http://www.presbyterian.ca/evangelism), click on the Resources and Reports link, and download the document)

**Other relevant resources include**

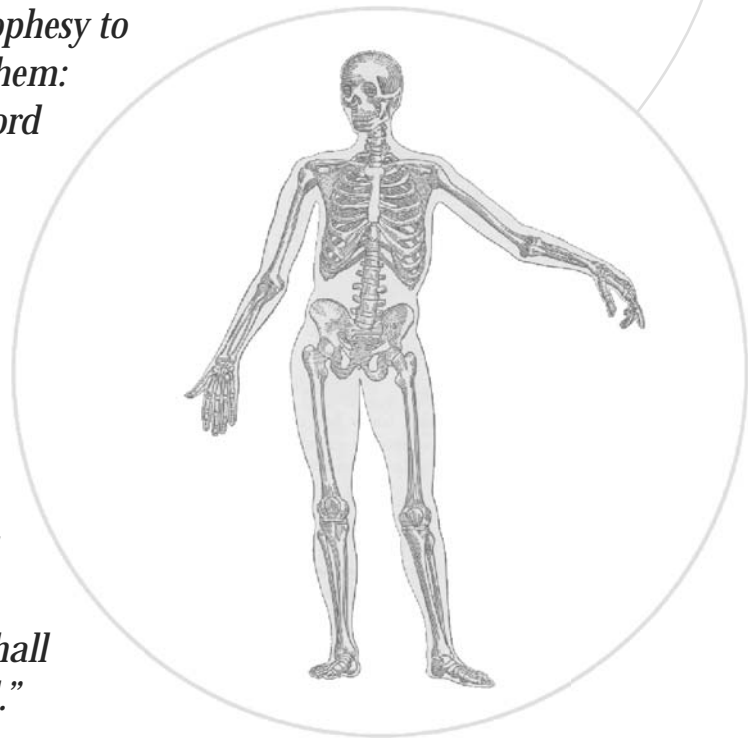
Peter Steinke, *Healthy Congregations*. Washington: The Alban Institute, 1996.

Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church*. Fortress Press, 1996.

*Called To Covenant—Strengthening Congregation -Presbytery Relationships*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 2004. (Available at [www.presbyterian.ca/ocuments/CalledtoCovenant.pdf](http://www.presbyterian.ca/ocuments/CalledtoCovenant.pdf))

## THE SKELETAL SYSTEM: FINANCES AND FACILITIES

*Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.”*



Ezekiel 37:4-6

### **Thinking about the skeletal system**

Let's begin by thinking about our skeleton. It provides the structural support for all our bodily activities. It's often taken for granted and given little attention until something goes wrong. A bit of tender love and care can avoid a lot of problems.

Divide into small groups of three or four people. Provide each group with pens, paper, newsprint and markers. Suggest each group appoint one person as the recorder. Then ask them to use the following questions to explore the role of the skeleton in the human body and the maintenance of its health and capacity. After each discussion, summarize the main points and record them.

### The Skeletal System

- Is the infrastructure for every activity of the body
- Keeps things supported and aligned

1. What are the three most important functions that the skeletal system performs in your body?
2. What are the three most important steps necessary to ensure the health of the skeletal system?

Have the small groups come together and take turns sharing the main points of their discussions.

### Thinking about a congregation's skeletal system

Now it's time to use the information about the human skeleton to stimulate insights about your congregation.

Let's imagine, for the sake of these studies, that the finances and facilities systems in your congregation make up its skeleton. How does your system of acquiring and distributing finances provide a solid structure for the healthy work and witness of your congregation? Are your facilities designed and equipped to serve the ministries and mission upon which your congregation has chosen to focus? These are basic questions in assessing the health and capacity of your church.

### Insights about facilities

In the same small groups and following the same process, discuss the facilities of your congregation using the questions below. Record key points and insights.

1. What are the three strongest features of your facilities?
2. What aspects of your facilities need more attention and what kind of attention do they need?

Have the small groups gather together and take turns sharing the main points of their discussions.

### Insights about finances

For the next discussion, make available copies of the congregation's last annual budget. In the same small groups and following the same process, discuss the finances of your congregation using the questions below. Record the key points and insights.

1. What are the three strongest sources of financial health in your congregation?
2. What are the weakest areas in your budget and what kind of attention do they need?

Have the small groups gather together and take turns sharing the main points of their discussions.

**Your congregation's  
state of skeletal  
health**

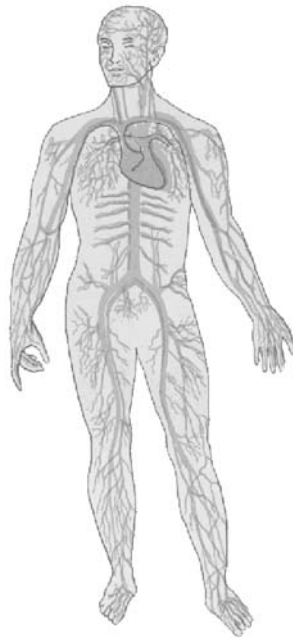
Invite everyone to review their notes. Finish the study off with a discussion of the learning, new perspectives or surprises that have emerged for them in this study. If new insights arise or certain insights are emphasized at this time, note them. Set aside all the notes from this study for use in Study #4.

**Resources**

Kennon Callahan, *Giving and Stewardship in an Effective Church*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992.

Wesley Haynes, Andrew Rudini, and J. Thomas Ryan, *Inspecting and Maintaining Religious Properties*. New York, NY: The New York Landmarks Conservancy, 1991.

## THE CIRCULATORY SYSTEMS: EDUCATION AND FELLOWSHIP



*Let us hold fast to the  
confession of our hope  
without wavering,  
for he who has  
promised is  
faithful. And let  
us provoke one  
another to love  
and good deeds,  
not neglecting to  
meet together...*

Hebrews 10:23-25a

### **Thinking about the circulatory systems**

Let's think now about our circulatory systems: our vascular system and our lymphatic system. The vascular system is full of blood, transporting nourishing elements, oxygen and strengthening agents to every part of the body. It also carries away harmful elements and defends the body from attack, injury and infection. The lymphatic system is particularly focused on providing effective defense mechanisms that filter out disease in the body and eliminate infection and disease. Both systems work very closely together in building and sustaining the body's health.

Divide into small groups of three or four people (i.e. different small groups from Study #1). Provide each group with pens, paper, newsprint and markers. Suggest each group appoint one person as the recorder. Then ask them to use the questions below to explore the role of the vascular and lymphatic systems in the human body and the maintenance

of the health and capacity of these systems. After each discussion, summarize the main points and record them.

1. What are the three most important functions that the vascular and lymphatic systems perform in your body?
2. What are the three most important steps necessary to ensure the health of the vascular and lymphatic systems?

### **The Circulatory System**

- Circulates the blood
- Transports nourishing elements
- Provides oxygen
- Delivers strengthening agents
- Removes harmful chemicals
- Defends against attack, injury, and infection

### **The Lymphatic System**

- Filters out disease
- Eliminates infection
- Defends against toxics

Have the small groups come together and take turns sharing the main points of their discussions.

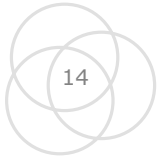
### **Thinking about a congregation's circulatory systems**

Now it's time to use the information about the human vascular and lymphatic systems to stimulate insights about your congregation.

Let's imagine, for the sake of these studies, that the education and fellowship programs are the vascular and lymphatic systems of your congregation. How do they nourish your congregation and eliminate the diseases that threaten its health? There's a basic principle of preventative medicine at work here. The healthier the food you feed to the body, the stronger it will be and the more it will be able to resist the infections and diseases that undermine its health. Our basic nutrient as a church is the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the hope that lies at its heart. We are fed and supported in that hope through the education and fellowship that each congregation enjoys. Now let's see what happens when we play with these ideas.

### **Insights about education**

In the same small groups and following the same process, discuss the education program of your congregation using the questions below.



Record key points and insights.

1. What are the three strongest features of your education program?
2. What diseases infect education activities in your congregation and how can the strengths in the education system eliminate them?

Have the small groups gather together and take turns sharing the main points of their discussions.

**Insights about fellowship**

In the same small groups and following the same process, discuss the fellowship program of your congregation using the questions below. Record key points and insights.

1. What are the three strongest sources of fellowship in your congregation?
2. What diseases infect the fellowship in your congregation and how can the strengths in your fellowship system eliminate them?

Have the small groups gather together and take turns sharing the main points of their discussion.

**Your congregation's state of circulatory health**

Invite group members to review their notes. Finish the study off with a discussion of the learning, new perspectives or surprises that have emerged for them in this study. If new insights arise or certain insights are emphasized at this time, note them. Set aside all the notes from this study for use in Study #4.

**Resources**

Susan Lang, *Conflict and Community*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress 2003.

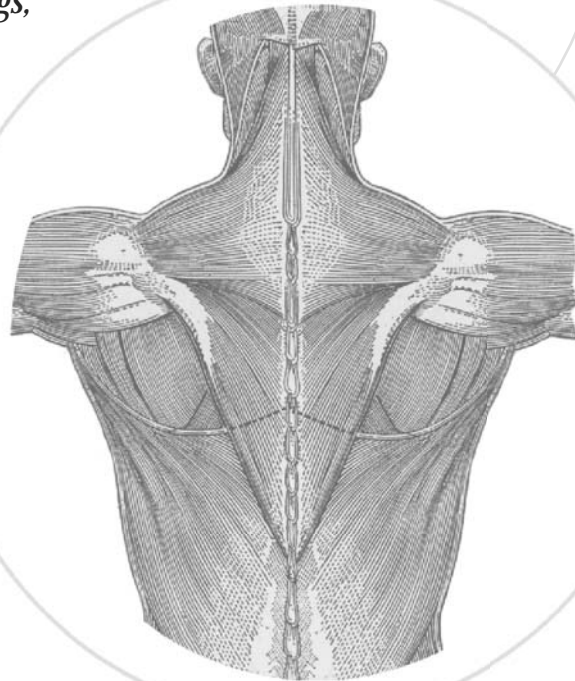
Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change*. Washington: The Alban Institute, 2004.

Speed Leas, *Moving your Church through Conflict*. Washington: The Alban Institute, 2003.

Sara Little, *To Set One's Heart*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989.

## THE NERVOUS AND MUSCULAR SYSTEMS: WORSHIP AND MISSION

*[Christ] himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, through the blood of his cross.*



Colossians 1:17-20

### **Thinking about the nervous and muscular systems**

Let's think now about the nervous system and the muscular system. The basic function of the nervous system is to receive sensory input from the internal and external environments, to integrate that input, and respond to the stimuli. The head, more specifically the brain, receives the messages, does the processing and initiates the responses. It energizes the whole body with its directions. The muscular system moves the body. It implements the directions of the brain and nervous system. It is crucial to capacity for getting things done. Muscles are firmly but flexibly attached to the skeletal system, giving the body's activity solidity and strength.

Divide into small groups of three or four people (i.e. different small groups from Study #2). Provide each group with pens, paper, newsprint and markers. Suggest each group appoint one person as the recorder. Then ask them to use the questions below to explore the contributions the nervous and muscular systems make to the health and capacity of your body. After each discussion, summarize the main points and record them.

1. What are the three most important functions that the nervous and muscular systems perform in your body?
2. What are the three most important steps necessary to ensure the health of the nervous and muscular systems?

Have the small groups come together and take turns sharing the main points of their discussions.

#### **The Nervous System**

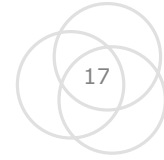
- Receives information from the whole body and outside world
- Makes sense of it
- Determines the appropriate healthy response

#### **The Muscular System**

- Moves the body
- Activates energy by tension and contraction
- Provides connective tissue that aligns all parts of the body

### **Thinking about a congregation's nervous and muscular systems**

Now it's time to take that imaginative leap and apply those insights to your congregation. Let's imagine worship as the nervous system and mission as the muscular systems of your congregation.



Public worship can be seen as the event in which we are most directly connected to Christ as the head of his body, the church. We find direction and guidance for our life, and witness as a church and as individuals in the regular diet of public worship that is at the core of the Christian life. Worship informs and shapes the disciplines of personal and communal devotion that we follow in our daily lives.

The nervous system directs the muscular system. The muscular system gets things done. It moves the body in a coordinated manner in the desired directions as it does its ministries and mission. This is the crux of capacity. This is where the internal health of the system translates into mission and service in the community and beyond.

**Insights about  
worship**

In the same groups and following the same process, discuss the worship system of your congregation using the following questions. Record key points and insights.

1. What are the three strongest features of worship in your congregation?
2. Where can you strengthen the direction provided by worship?

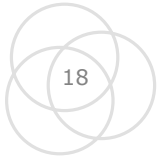
Have the small groups gather together and take turns sharing the main points of their discussions.

**Insights about  
mission**

In the same small groups and following the same process, discuss the mission and service activities of your congregation, using the questions below. Record key points and insights.

1. What are the three strongest features of mission and service in your congregation?
2. Where could the effectiveness of your mission and service be strengthened?

Have the groups gather together and take turns sharing the main points of their discussion.



**Your congregation's  
state of nervous  
and muscular  
health**

Invite group members to review their notes. Finish the study off with a discussion of the learning, new perspectives or surprises that have emerged for them in this study. If new insights arise or certain insights are emphasized at this time, note them. Set aside all the notes from this study for use in Study #4.

**Resources**

Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church*. Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004.

Howard E. Friend, Jr., *Recovering the Sacred Center: Church Renewal from the Inside Out*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1998.

*Public Worship: Something We Do*. Toronto: The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1993. ([www.presbyterian.ca/worship](http://www.presbyterian.ca/worship))

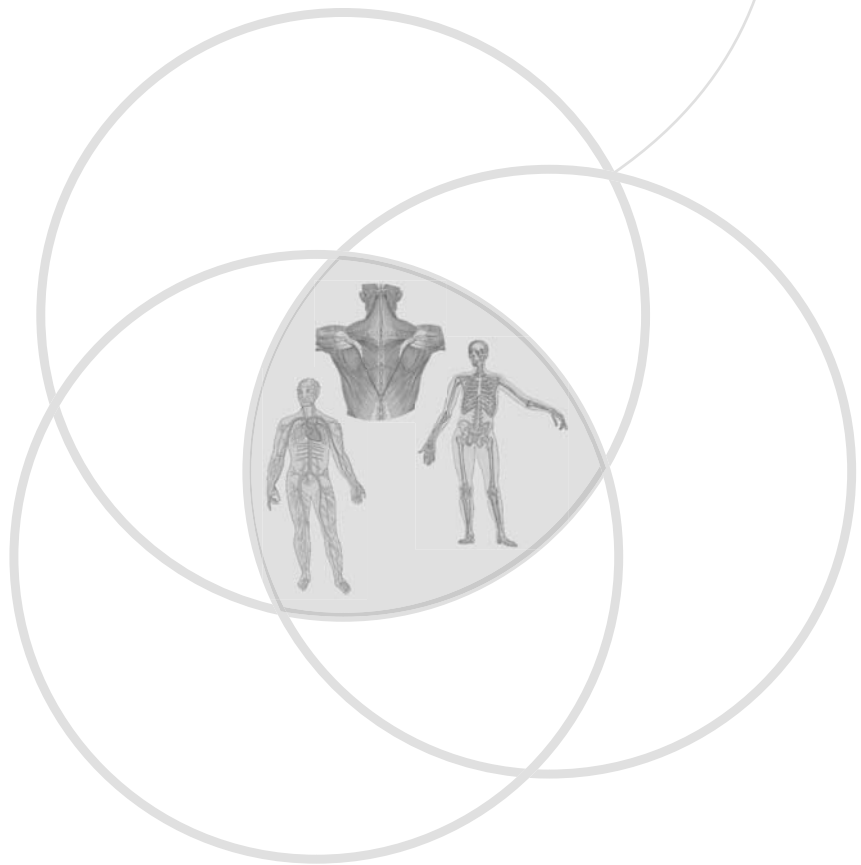
## GETTING IT ALL TOGETHER: GOVERNING FOR HEALTH AND CAPACITY

*And the Word  
became flesh and  
lived among us,  
and we have seen  
his glory, the glory  
of a father's only  
son, full of grace  
and truth.*

John 1:14

*The glory of  
God is humanity  
fully alive.*

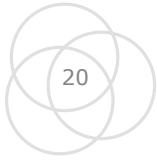
Irenaeus



### **Governing is about alignment and implementation**

Business author Jim Collins once said that organizational health is 1% vision and 99% alignment. He was exaggerating. But he wanted to make a point – we have to *do* something with our vision. Unless we align our resources to implement our vision, it is worse than worthless. Governing bodies in churches must ensure this happens.

Failure to implement breeds cynicism. Cynicism is disappointed idealism. It saps people's energy and corrodes their engagement. Too many congregations in The Presbyterian Church in Canada suffer from



the disease of cynicism. Christ is provoking us to do something positive to restore our health and capacity. And we hope this series of studies will contribute to that effort.

**Thinking about healthy bodies**

Healthy bodies are characterized by systems that are aligned with each other in life-giving ways. The systems are free of damage and disease. They are all linked and working together, contributing their unique capabilities and gifts to the well-being of the whole. The nerves are directing the muscles to hold and move the body in healthy ways. The vascular and lymphatic systems are absorbing and creating nutrients and carrying them to all parts of the body regularly and smoothly, as well as fighting disease wherever it may invade the body. And the skeletal system is firm and flexible with the muscles properly attached and using it to its best advantage. You get the picture!

This is the responsibility of the governing body in your congregation. Within the Presbyterian system, that body in the local congregation is the Session. With Christ and in Christ, the Session makes sure that everything possible is done to increase and sustain the health and capacity of the congregation to engage in the work and witness Christ has given it.

One of the things we hope will emerge out of these conversations is a clearer picture of the ways in which your congregation can improve its health and capacity. So let's turn to that focus.

**Reviewing your insights**

Let's begin by reviewing the insights you've gathered so far. Display the newsprint sheets and papers with notes and insights recorded in group discussions in the first three studies of this series. Set out pens, paper, newsprint and markers.

Invite group members to take some time reading over all the recordings. Invite everyone to work individually when they are ready, writing down all the words and phrases that strike them as particularly important in restoring and sustaining the health and capacity of the congregation.

Then have everyone find a partner with whom to discuss these words and phrases and the ideas they represent. Remind them to listen openly, carefully and respectfully to each other's insights sharing ideas freely without fear of criticism or judgment. Ask each pair to choose and write down 10 words or phrases to report back to the whole group.

Gather together and have each set of partners present their 10 words or phrases. Ask someone to record them on a flip chart and post them where everyone can see them.

When all of the words and phrases have been posted, invite participants to ask clarifying questions or make comments. During this discussion, make sure all the insights are recorded and that everyone has an opportunity to be heard and have their questions answered.

**What's the diagnosis?**

Separate into groups of three. Explore the following questions and record discussion notes to bring back to the whole group.

1. What are the most obvious signs of health in the key systems of this congregation?
2. What signs of disease and misalignment are evident?
3. What can we do to help these systems work well together in their most beneficial alignment?
4. List three health-enhancing ideas.

Gather in the large group and have all the triads share their discussion and particularly their health-enhancing ideas. Record these ideas on newsprint and post them for all to see.

**Who's responsible for the treatment plan?**

Now it's time to focus on a few ideas and develop a plan to implement them. Follow these steps:

1. From the suggestions generated by the groups of three, choose four or five ideas that fit your congregation best. Together articulate clearly these ideas, recording each one on a separate sheet of newsprint.
2. Invite one member of the group to be responsible for developing and implementing one idea. Record their names on the corresponding newsprint sheets. Remember, these people do not have to do everything themselves, but rather they must ensure that everything gets done. *Delegation* is a key governing skill.



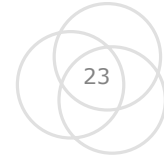
3. Consider people in your congregation who have the passion and gifts to fine tune and implement the health-enhancing ideas being suggested. List names of potential participants on the corresponding newsprint sheets.
4. Plan when and how the people listed in Step #3 will be contacted and invited to participate. Remember a personal approach, by telephone or in person, will be appreciated more than a written note or e-mail. In contacting them, affirm each person's gifts, be clear in what is being asked and what resources are available, and give the person time to reflect on and pray about this opportunity to serve.
5. Decide how to inform the rest of the congregation about what you have been doing. Communication is crucial to health and capacity. Figure out the best ways to convey what you have discovered in these conversations and what actions you have decided to take. Remember, providing the information just once will not communicate it effectively. Find at least three ways and three times to inform the congregation (e.g. in an announcement at worship, in the sermon, and in the newsletter; or in the newsletter, in conversations on elders' visits or phone calls, and in an announcement at worship). Assign responsibility for this communication strategy.
6. Plan how, when and who will monitor the execution and impact of these projects on your congregation's health and capacity. Monitoring and evaluating are like medical check-ups: they are essential to the maintenance and enhancement of well-being.

**Becoming fully alive**

In the second century, the Bishop of Lyons and one of the early church's great teachers, Irenaeus said, "The glory of God is humanity fully alive."

By tending to your congregation's health and capacity in new and improved ways, you can take responsibility for ensuring that your congregation is *fully alive to serve the glory of God*.

We wish you every blessing in your endeavours. We appreciate your participation and look forward to receiving comments and insights from you about your experience with this study series.



**Resources** References and links to the resources are available from the Life and Mission Agency of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 50 Wynford Drive, Toronto M3C 1J7, 416-411-1111 or 800-619-7301 and from The Elders' Institute 6040 Iona Drive, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 2E8, 604-822-0071 or 1-866-794-8888.

Brian Fraser, *Fire in the Sanctuary: Leadership in The Presbyterian Church in Canada*. Vancouver: St. Andrew's Hall, 1983. (Available at [www.standards.edu/elders/resources/docs/fire.pdf](http://www.standards.edu/elders/resources/docs/fire.pdf))

Brian Fraser, *Governing in Christ: Provoking the Potential of Presbyterian Polity*. Vancouver: St. Andrew's Hall, 2005.

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