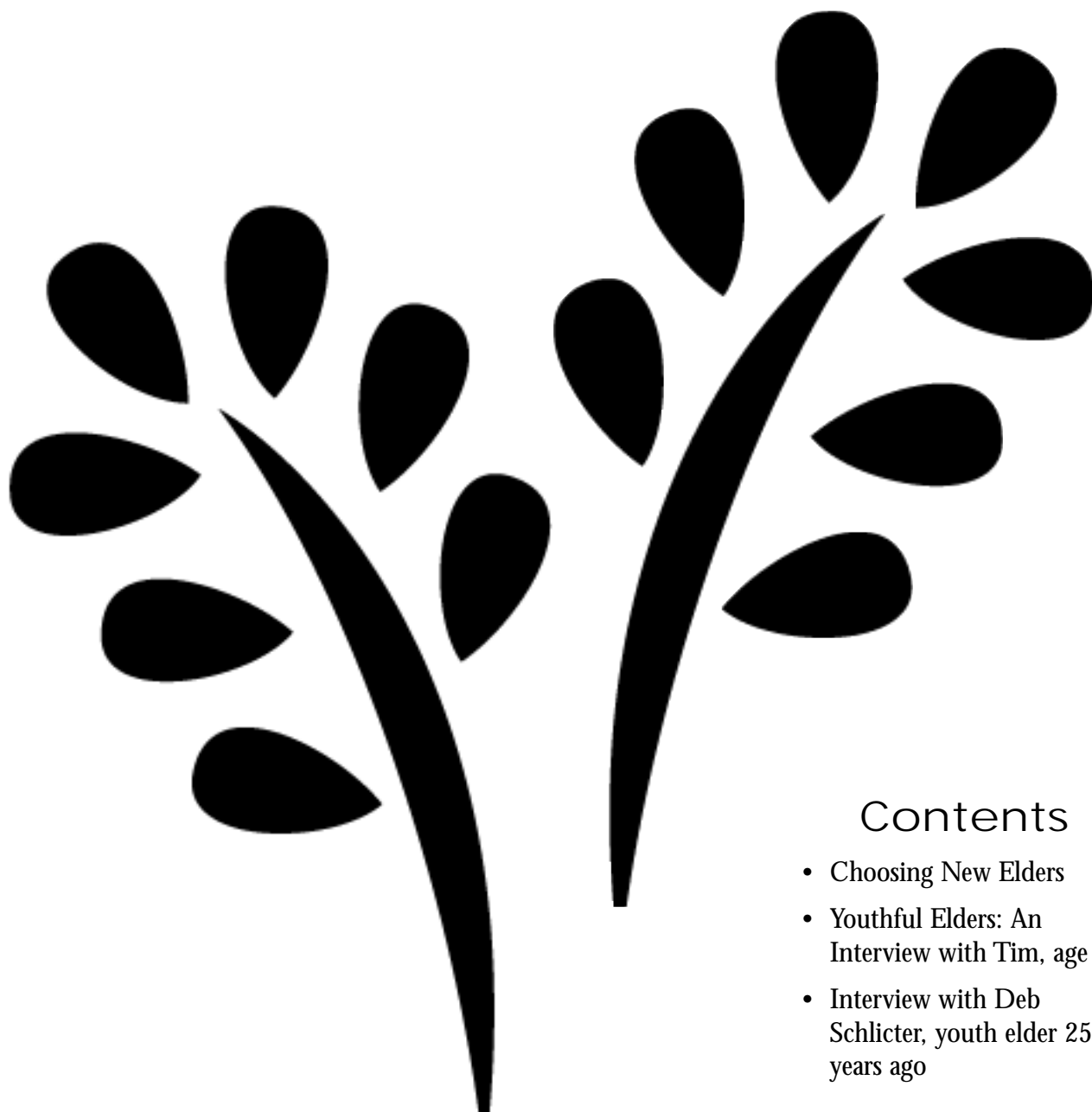


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For Elders



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Choosing New Elders

New elders are added to a session when a congregation or session determine that more leaders are needed for the spiritual wellbeing of the congregation. Recently, our congregation decided to add new elders to the session. As a member, I received a list of all members in the congregation and was invited to nominate several people.

God calls people to eldership. Part of that process is that others see gifts of leadership in people in the congregation. But how was I to choose? I knew that elders must be professing members of the congregation. I knew that they should have gifts for this service, but how was I to decide from a long list of 608 members, many of whom I did not know? Even if I belonged to a congregation with 150 members, how would I decide who had gifts to be an elder? Here's what I did. If you think this was a helpful process, feel free to use it, too.

- Step one:** I read the *Book of Forms*, our Presbyterian guideline for how-to and procedures. In sections 105-113, all the duties and responsibilities for elders are outlined.
- Step two:** I got out my hi-lighter, grouped and categorized the gifts that are collectively needed on a session. These I called "Gifts for the ministry of eldership."
- Step three:** With my congregational list in one hand and my list of gifts from step 2 in the other, I went down the congregational list. I paused by each person I knew and, if I saw in them any of the gifts listed on my sheet, I put a check beside that person's name.
I was not looking for "the perfect elder." I was looking for people who, by the end of the process, had a cluster of checks by their name, a cluster of gifts. These I nominated.

Gifts for the ministry of eldership

- A person of good character who is an example to others of how to live in their "speech, conduct, love, faith and purity." *Book of Forms 106:1*
- A person who is free to meet regularly. (Although I thought one woman in our congregation was a good candidate, I did not put a check beside her name for this item because I know she currently cares for both her elderly mother and grandchild. Regular meetings would be impossible for her.) *Book of Forms 109*
- A person who is able to see the "big picture" of life in the church. This person can look beyond the details of individual programs and issues and see an overview of the congregation. This person can answer, "What is best for the whole congregation?" *Book of Forms 109.1*
- A person who has concern for the property and facilities which the church owns or in which people gather for worship. *Book of Forms 109.2*
- A person who is good at discerning the character of other people, who understands systems and how they work, who has a good knowledge of leadership styles and when they are needed for specific tasks. *Book of Forms 109.3*
- A person who enjoys administration because it helps in the smooth operation of a congregation. *Book of Forms 109.4 & .5, 110.5, 110.7, 112.1*
- A person who is comfortable and natural in sharing his/her faith. *Book of Forms 109.4, 112.2*

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- A person who is grounded in and respectful of the Reformed faith, tradition and government, even though he/she may not have grown up in that tradition. *Book of Forms 110, 112.7*
 - A person who has gifts for teaching others about the Christian faith and the Presbyterian tradition. *Book of Forms 110.1, 112.5*
 - A person who appreciates, understands and enjoys the sacraments—baptism and communion—and is willing to take part in the rituals of the church. *Book of Forms 110.4, 111.1*
 - A person who is trustworthy and can hold confidences. *Book of Forms 110.6, 110.8*
 - A person who relates well to people of all ages, is a good listener, can ask clarifying questions, and offer support. *Book of Forms 110.2, 110.8, 112.6*
 - A person who is open to God's Spirit leading the church in new ways and new directions. *Book of Forms 111.1*
 - A person who is skilled or gifted at personnel matters and in building good teams. *Book of Forms 111.2, 112.3*
 - A person who cares for the beauty and order of worship. *Book of Forms 111*
 - A person who has knowledge about and is engaged in activity in the local community. *Book of Forms 113*
 - A person with a strong sense of financial stewardship and deep commitment to responsible financial management. *Book of Forms 113.2, 113.5, 113.6*
 - A person with a strong sense of the global mission of the Christian church. *Book of Forms 113.1, 113.6.1*

By Dorothy Henderson

Youthful Elders: An Interview with Tim, age 19

Tim Hildred is 19 and a member of the session in a congregation of 600 members. His parents were ordained with him. Tim has three younger siblings. He answered a series of questions designed for youthful elders.

1. How old were you when you became an elder?

I became an elder at the ripe old age of 18.

2. How did you become an elder? Who were the people instrumental in inviting you?

I was elected an elder as far as I can tell. I'm not clear on process, but one day I got a call saying that the church wanted me as an elder. In terms of instrumental people, my parents were fairly instrumental I s'pose. For the most part it was my decision, though. I was the one who would be accepting responsibility, and so I made the decision. Seemed fitting.

3. Was it a struggle for you to decide if you wanted to become an elder at such a youthful age? Why or why not? In what way did you feel that God was inviting you to do this?

Struggle, perhaps, is not exactly the right word. I was unsure of what being an elder meant both in terms of my daily life and in the life of the church, and this was intimidating. However, it seemed important that I be a voice on session with even slightly different perspectives. For this reason I felt accepting was what I had to do. To be there even as a reminder of different times seemed like a worthy job.

4. What was your first session meeting like? What were your first reactions to some of the responsibilities given to you?

My first session meeting was a little overwhelming. My session is a pretty informal one, I'm told, but even so, there were forms to be followed and I had no idea why or often what they were. Which is not to say I felt disadvantaged. Quite the opposite, in fact. Sometimes I feel like my youthful "naivety" comes in handy. I feel like it allows me to see with more clarity, at least in my own mind, some of the issues at hand during the meeting, without all the packaging of forms.

5. How did (do) older people respond to you on session and in the congregation?

I don't know, and I'm not even really sure it matters. I get mixed feelings at times, which is fine by me. I figure I am going to do my thing regardless. I was elected a young elder, which does not change the fact that I am a young person. This may well be a wrong or self-serving perspective, or at least seem that way, but part of being a young person and even a young elder is the growth and maturation process that is growing up. I worry sometimes this puts people off, or frustrates people, but it is who I am, and what I am going through, and won't be over, I'm sure, until the day I die.

6. Do you consider it important for churches to have youth elders? Why? Why not?

I worry that having a "youth elder" might become some sort of token. I think elders should all be elected based on the same principles, and not at all based on a quota. So rather than instating a youth elder, it might be more helpful to just consider a broader range of ages for the eldership, or elderhood. Which ever is correct. People make good elders for various reasons, and young people have many comparable qualities to the more mature.

7. Most sessions that have a youth elder, have only one, while the other elders are mature—in many cases—quite mature. What is your opinion of having just one youth elder on the session?

I think I may have accidentally answered this question above, but this is a great chance to reiterate. The eldership is a representative body, so it seems only right to me that it be composed of a cross section of the church. So maybe the worry shouldn't be about "youth elders", but also "young family elders", and "early middle age elders" and "midlife crisis elders".

8. What do you consider some of the most difficult issues you have had to face as a youth elder?

I don't feel like I've faced issues that were specific to my being a youth elder. Maybe I have without knowing it... Who knows? It was a pretty tough thing to take when my ministers were at one point feeling unsupported, because of all the support and love they give. That was upsetting to be sure, so difficult in one way.

9. What are some of the pleasures you have enjoyed as youth elder?

I've talked to more and different people I may not have otherwise. My family hosted what may have been the most rockin' party of all time. It has given me a neat perspective on leadership. A veritable box of chocolates!

10. If you met a young person who was trying to decide if he/she would like to be an elder, what would you say? What advice would you give?

I think I would just tell them to think long and hard about the choice. If they feel called, they feel called, and my advice is only good for so much.

Interview with Deb Schlicter, youth elder 25 years ago

Deborah Schlicter is a member of the session of Knox Presbyterian Church, Waterloo, Ontario. She is married with three children, two teenaged sons and a young daughter. Deb answered a series of questions designed for youthful elders.

1. How old were you when you became an elder?

I became an elder when I was 18 years old, just before I turned 19 (1977).

2. How did you become an elder? Who were the people instrumental in inviting you?

I'm not exactly sure what the process was. All I remember is that the minister at Knox, Walter McLean, somehow made it happen. I guess it must have also been approved by session. I remember the ordination service but I don't remember how I got there!

3. Was it a struggle for you to decide if you wanted to become an elder at such a youthful age? Why or why not? In what way did you feel that God was inviting you to do this?

I don't remember struggling with this issue. I had been fairly active at Knox as a youth leader and choir member, and very active at high school in Inter-School Christian Fellowship (ISCF) both at the school level, in our community and at the provincial level, so I felt that becoming an elder was a natural extension to what I was already doing. I believed that God was leading me in this direction and affirming my leadership abilities.

4. What was your first session meeting like? What were your first reactions to some of the responsibilities given to you?

Fortunately, I was able to attend an elder's workshop at Crieff Hills Retreat Centre before I attending my first session meeting. I remember some of the reactions I received at the workshop. Many people asked "are you a youth elder?", implying that I was something less than a full elder. I remember thinking the questions were a bit odd but I didn't know that this was unusual!

The workshop gave an overview of the duties and responsibilities of an elder so I was ready to go when I got to session. I do remember spending the first year listening and observing a lot, just trying to keep up with everything. I don't think I said very much until I felt more comfortable.

I started on the Stewardship, Mission and Outreach committee, which felt like a natural fit for me. Very soon, I was the chair! Visitation was more awkward for me. I had about 10 families to visit and many of them did not attend church on a regular basis. It took some time to get to know people and after a while, it felt more comfortable.

5. How did (do) older people respond to you on session and in the congregation?

Most of the time, session and congregational members accepted me for who I am. I remember only one episode when I helped serve the minister during communion, that someone in the congregation said that a senior elder should do that task. It could be that I was blissfully unaware of reactions.

6. Do you consider it important for churches to have youth elders? Why? Why not?

I think that age should not be a deterrent if someone shows the right qualities. It does help to have a broad range of perspectives on session and it does give a loud message that youth are part of the church today, not just in the future.

7. Most sessions that have a youth elder, have only one, while the other elders are mature – in many cases – quite mature. What is your opinion of having just one youth elder on the session?

I guess I wouldn't want session to think they need to have a "token" youth, just like there shouldn't be "token" women on session. With only one youth on session and a very large age gap, it may prove difficult for the youth to feel comfortable on session. It would be better to have different age ranges on session (rather than very young and very mature) – this would hopefully be more representative of the congregation.

8. What do you consider are some of the most difficult issues you have had to face as a youth elder?

It took me awhile to feel confident enough to speak up and share my thoughts and ideas. There was always the question in my mind whether I would be taken seriously or not because of my age. I think the difficult times were when I wanted to speak up but decided not to because I didn't feel I could express myself clearly or as eloquently as some others could.

9. What are some of the pleasures you have enjoyed as youth elder?

There have been many pleasures. I have gone through many stages of life as an elder – young single person, getting married, and having children (I think I have been the only elder at Knox who was given a baby shower!). I am now past my 25th year so I guess I can no longer be considered a youth elder!

10. If you met a young person who was trying to decide if he/she would like to be an elder, what would you say? What advice would you give?

My advice would be to give it some serious thought as it takes time and dedication and it is not something to be entered into lightly. Everyone has skills and abilities to offer in service but not everyone should be an elder! It is important that they feel "called" by God.

Telling the Story of *Presbyterians Sharing . . .*

Worship

Mission is grounded in worship. Make mission and the content of the church's mission a frequent part of the sermon, hymns, prayers, litanies and dramatic presentations.

Offering

Make connections between the gifts of money and the ministries supported through *Presbyterians Sharing . . .* In prayers, thank God for these ministries and ask God to bless them.

A suggestion: From time to time, during the offering, have the treasurer bring forward the cheque that will be sent for *Presbyterians Sharing . . .* In the prayer, thank God for the people who have generously given their money and pray that the ministries supported through these gifts will be blessed.

Presbyterians Sharing . . . Sunday

The last Sunday in September of every year is designated as *Presbyterians Sharing . . .* Sunday. Take this opportunity to have a special focus on *Presbyterians Sharing . . .* Worship resources, sent to every congregation in June of each year, may be used for this service.

Mission Study

Provide significant opportunities for engagement with the gospel message and how it relates to mission. This is a good way to build a high level of interest and commitment to mission.

Visiting speakers

Invite mission staff to share their stories with your congregation. Where possible, invite church office staff to come and talk about their areas of ministry. (Contact the Mission Interpretation Coordinator to make these arrangements.)

Reports to the congregation

Take many opportunities to share stories of the mission and ministries of *Presbyterians Sharing . . .* This may happen at various times and places – in the sermon, church school classes, a Moment for Mission in Worship, at the beginning of a committee meeting or board meeting, new members' class.

This may happen in written form – in the church bulletin, or as an article in the congregation's newsletter. One Presbyterian congregation has appointed a person to write a *Presbyterians Sharing . . .* /stewardship snapshot every week for use as a bulletin insert.

Mission Displays

Create displays on bulletin boards and on table tops.
Be creative! Use pictures, words, objects.
Place displays in places where people will see them.

Mission Fairs

Set aside a day or weekend to communicate what you are doing in mission and to celebrate it. Include the work of *Presbyterians Sharing . . .* and PWS&D.

These times usually include speakers, audiovisuals, displays or booths that tell about some aspect of mission. They might include a dinner or after-church luncheon.

Build this up as a significant event in your congregation. Make it energizing and fun. It will be most effective if a majority of the congregation participates.

Opportunities for more direct involvement in mission:

(These programs are coordinated through the Mission Interpretation Office. Call 1-800-619-7301; 416-441-1111, Ext. 259, or email bnawratil@presbyterian.ca.)

Twinning – Congregations may twin with groups or congregations where we have mission partners, in Canada or abroad. A resource is available to help congregations discern whether they wish to enter a twinning relationship.

Mission Tours – Two types of mission tours are offered: exposure tours and work tours. The Mission Interpretation Coordinator will work with the congregation on all steps of the process:

- choosing the destination and connecting with the mission staff who will host the tour
- before the tour: discernment process, Bible study, preparation details and orientation
- after the tour: debriefing and follow-up