

PC Pak/May/2005

For

Elders



- **So . . . you're a General Assembly Commissioner**
- **Pastoral Care and the Sanctuary, Session Starter Number 3**
- **For Elders Subject Index**

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The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 2005

So . . . you're a General Assembly Commissioner

What is the General Assembly?

Prior to 1875 there were several brands of Presbyterianism in Canada. They tended to be separated by an array of theological differences and attitudes towards the relationship between church and state. By 1875, the several brands merged to form The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Wasting no time getting down to business, our denomination held its first General Assembly in historic Quebec City that same year. Ever since then, through war and peace, depression and prosperity, social and political change, ministers and elders have faithfully gathered to seek the will of God for our church at this annual event. Usually the Assembly begins with worship on the Sunday evening of the first full week in June. Meetings and fellowship opportunities continue until the following Friday. As the highest court of the church, the General Assembly deals with matters of doctrine, worship, disciple and government affecting the our denomination from coast to coast.

What is a General Assembly commissioner?

The General Assembly consists of 1/6th of the total number of ministers and members of the Order of Diaconal Ministries whose names are on the constituent rolls of the presbyteries of the church, and an equal number of elders. This maintains a valuable balance between clergy and laity. Each presbytery is responsible for selecting the designated number of ministers and elders to attend the General Assembly according to the 1/6th formula. For example, the presbytery to which I belong has approximately 24 ministers (including one diaconal minister) on the constituent roll. 1/6th of 24 means 4 ministers and 4 elders are eligible to attend. The elders may be those who represent congregations at presbytery meetings, but any elder on a session is permitted to serve. Those who are commissioned to attend the General Assembly are called commissioners.

What are the responsibilities of a General Assembly commissioner?

Before the Assembly:

Register: Each commissioner will receive a registration form to be completed and returned to the General Assembly Office at 50 Wynford Dr., Toronto.

Read Binder: Each commissioner will also receive a binder in early May. The binder will contain reports and recommendations slated to come before the General Assembly as well as resources designed to help each commissioner make the most of the General Assembly experience. It is important to try to read through the entire binder. The more you read and understand before the Assembly, the more meaningful the occasion will be and the better prepared you will be to serve the church well.

Presbytery

Preparation: Each presbytery ought to arrange a meeting for commissioners in order to help them become familiar with the procedures format, and reports of the General Assembly. Each commissioner should be asked by the presbytery to report on certain aspects of the assembly.

During the Assembly:

- Be Briefed:** The Monday of Assembly week provides commissioners with an opportunity to attend briefing sessions. (See the resource section of the binder for more information about how to enroll in briefing sessions.) The purpose of the briefing sessions is to meet with some of the authors of the Assembly reports and recommendations so you can raise questions about what you have read. As you read the reports, it would be helpful to jot down questions you would like to ask.
- Vote:** During the Assembly, commissioners will have opportunities to address and vote on recommendations as they are brought before the court. Each commissioner receives a voting card. This is a great privilege and responsibility as commissioners work together to discern God's will. The resource section of the binder includes some information about how the meetings are conducted.
- Freely:** It is important for commissioners, their congregations and presbyteries to remember commissioners gather to seek prayerfully the will of God for our denomination. Consequently, commissioners must be allowed the freedom to vote on issues according to their conscience after listening to any debate that may lead up to the vote being taken. Sometimes presbyteries, congregations or sessions ask commissioners to carry to the Assembly pre-determined ideas about how to vote, especially on controversial issues. Commissioners should never feel bound to do so. Rather they should feel free to vote according to what they believe is right at the time the decision is debated and voted on.
- Committees:** The Assembly has a few committees to which some commissioner will be appointed. A letter will be sent to those commissioners in May informing them of their appointment.
- Ecumenical Visitors:** The Assembly welcomes special guests called ecumenical visitors. They may be from international or partner churches with whom we have staff and programmatic relationships. Some may come from other denominations or church councils. Each of them brings a richness to the meetings of the Assembly.
- Enjoy:** The Assembly opens with worship, usually in one of the local churches. Commissioners and others join to celebrate our faith. Each morning, the local committee leads worship where the Assembly meets. There will also be fellowship opportunities throughout the week for you to take in.

After the Assembly:

- Rest:** Go home, relax, ponder.
- Report:** Commissioners are expected to supply a report on their week at the Assembly. This might take the form of a written report to be included in the minutes or an oral presentation at a presbytery meeting, or both. Naturally, you won't be able to report everything that happened so it would be wise to focus on items that particularly interested you, will have a direct impact on your presbytery, or were of great importance for the church as a whole.

Pastoral Care and the Elder's District

Session Starter Number 3

Prayer:

Loving God, we give thanks for our congregation and the people you have placed under our care. Help us to lead them with humble faith and infectious joy. In times of discord, enable us to provide a patient, wise, forgiving and healing presence. In times of harmony, may we soar on wings like eagles. As we meet together as a court of your church, we pray that the meditations of our hearts, the words of our lips, and the actions of our hands will be pleasing in your sight. This we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

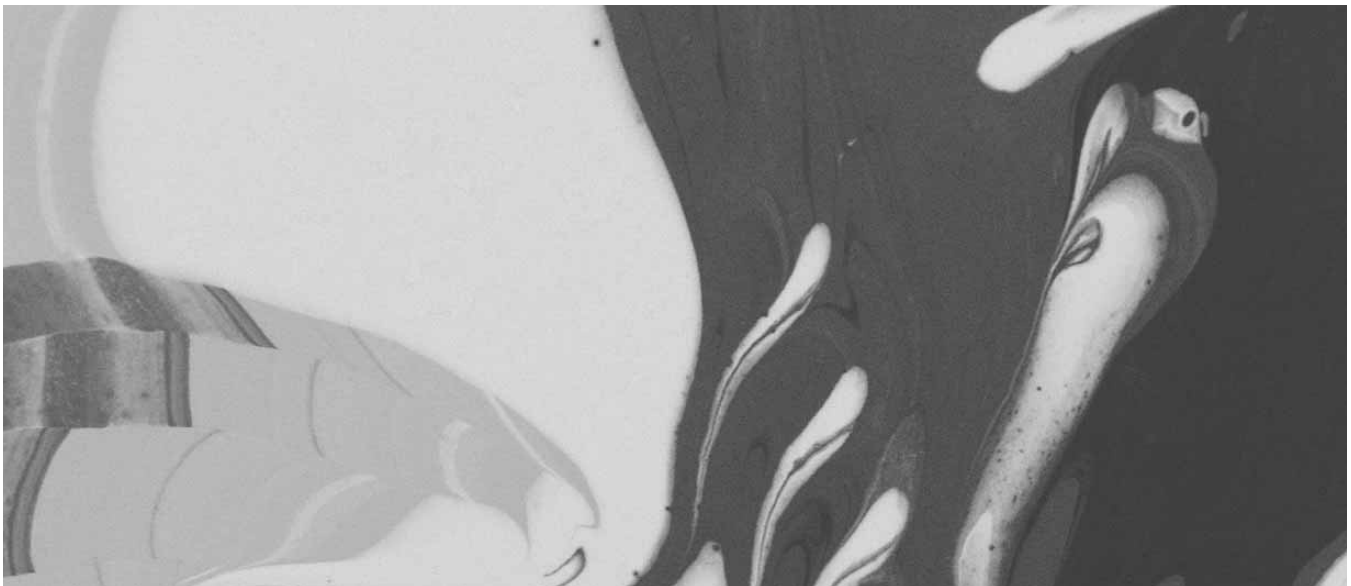
Introduction:

Chapter 3 of the Book of Forms deals with matters relating directly to the ministry of sessions within The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Section 109.4 states,

The session shall assign the names of all members and adherents to the elders who shall keep a list of the names and addresses of those assigned to them, and shall cultivate a personal relationship with those persons through visiting, counselling and encouraging them in the Christian life.

This is the third *Session Starter* in a series on pastoral care and the session. Today we reflect on elder districts. As stated in previous "starters", pastoral care should not be left solely to the minister. It is something everyone within the congregation must strive to share. As spiritual leaders, however, elders have a special responsibility to see that members and adherents receive the care they need. Clustering them into districts under the attention of elders is one way this care is provided. In Romans 12: 9-16 we discover just one of many biblical descriptions of what it means to share Christian love within community.



Scripture: *(Invite an elder to read the following passage.)*

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Romans 12:9-16

A Brief Commentary: *(Invite another elder to read the following commentary)*

Christian love possesses a power to transform every sort of human relationship. By the grace of God, it reaches beyond the restrictive limits we often set for our love and embraces an ever-widening circle of people and situations. In this snippet from Paul's letter, he recognizes affliction, privation, persecution and sorrow as part of the human condition, but urges Christians to love and care for each other in practical ways that push through the superficial and encourage individuals to genuinely rejoice and mourn together.

Reflection:

The elder's district has been an essential element in the life of Presbyterian congregations for a long time. Why do we have them?

Louis Tamminga, a Christian Reformed Church pastor, described the importance of districts in his book, *A Handbook for Elders*. He wrote, "Having your own district enables you to develop a personal relationship with a limited number of parishioners. ...you accompany them on their pilgrimage. You get to know them, you share their sorrows and joys, and you witness their struggles toward growth. ... In order to be a spiritual blessing to your people, you must become acquainted with them. ... When they have particular problems and personal pain, they will appreciate your concern and empathy. In times of good fortune, they will appreciate your interest."

John R. Cameron, a Presbyterian minister, wrote a booklet entitled *Not by Constraint* at a time when the session of the church he was serving struggled with the question of pastoral responsibility. The booklet reflects considerable input from the elders. About districts, he wrote the following.

"People in all aspects of their lives need to know by experience that the church cares about them and celebrates with them. In many cases the elder is the only instrument of care, and such caring serves as tangible evidence that God cares.

"As an elder you are called to develop relationships of 'friendship with a difference' within the church family. An elder is a friend who seeks to build caring relationships by supporting and encouraging those assigned to him or her.

"Establishing and maintaining this kind of relationship requires time, patience, diligence, practice, tact, openness, and a willingness to listen. The relationship between you, the elder

and the people is a two-way relationship. As you seek to know the people, they must learn to know you. This means sharing yourself, receiving and responding to their concern and interest in you.

"In order to do this you will need to get to know each person in every household assigned, both members and adherents, children, youth and elderly. Learning to call each person by name whenever you meet, in the home, at church or on the street, is a simple way to indicate personal interest in them."

Subsequent *Session Starters* will explore ways of developing relationships with the people in your districts.

Question Suggestions:

(Together or in small groups, invite the elders to discuss the following questions.)

1. How important are elder districts to this congregation?
2. How do elder districts stretch our understanding and application of Christian love?
3. How can elders rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn?

For Elders

Subject Index

This resource, designed for the education and encouragement of elders, has been produced quarterly since May 1997. The salmon-coloured cover is recognizable in every PC Pak which is mailed to congregations through its minister. If your congregation does not have a minister for any reason, the PC Pak will continue to be sent to the church.

This Subject Index records themes covered across the years by *For Elders*. Periodically an updated catalog is sent out so sessions will know what is available.

Back orders may be obtained from The Bookroom at 50 Wynford Dr., Toronto, M3C 1J7 at a cost of \$3 per issue. Orders of 10 or more cost \$2 per issue. The Bookroom can be reached at 416 441-1111 or toll free at 1-800-619-7301. Please make as many copies as you like.

Each issue of "*For Elders*" is also available for free on the Church Offices web site (www.presbyterian.ca). After arriving at that site, scroll down until you see the large "Resources" heading. Under that heading you will find a sub-heading called "PC Pak (For Elders, CCCY, Book Reviews & Equip) alphabetically listed below. Click on PC Pak. You should now see the resources available by the month they were released. I encourage you to explore all the resources, but if you are especially searching *For Elders*, click on that title for the month of interest and a printable copy will open for you. Acrobat Reader is required and can be downloaded from www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html.

If you have questions or suggestions, call Don Muir (extension 223) or Dorothy Henderson (extension 271).

SUBJECT INDEX

As of February 2005

Indexes

Chronological Index (August 2001)

Subject Index (August 2001)

You Were Asking Index (November 1999)

Bible Studies

Studies for session meetings (August 1997)

Elders in the Beginning! (November 1997)

Boards of Managers, Communication with

Board of Managers and the Session (May 2000)

Christian Education and Work with Adults

2000-2001 *FLAMES* Focus — Children, Youth, Young Adults (May 2000) – 2 sheets

How Child-friendly is our Congregation? (May 2000)

Elders and Christian Education (February 2001) – 2 sheets

FLAMES: Year of Education (November 2004)

How Adults Learn (November 2004)

Creeds, Confessions and Subordinate Standards

Living Faith — Ministry and Elders (May 1997)
Westminster Confession of Faith, The (November 1997)
Westminster Confession of Faith, More on (February 1998)
Apostles' Creed, The (February, 1998)
The Nicene Creed (May 1998)
The Scots Confession (November 1998)

Elders' Institute, St. Andrew's Hall

Establishment of an Institute for Elders at St. Andrew's Hall (February 1998)
An Update on Our Progress (June 1999)
News from Institute for Elders' Education (February 2001)
News from Institute for Elders' Education (May 2001)

Evangelism and Faith Sharing

Evangelism — What is it? (May 1998)
Evangelism on your doorstep (May 1998)
Helping People Share Faith — Easily and Naturally (May 1998)
What People Need From Church (November 1999)
Growing as an Elder (August 2000)
Overcoming the E word (February 2001)
The Missional Church: a model for Canadian Churches? (August 2002)

Justice

The Session and "Jubilee" (November 1999)
Elders — Leading in Justice (February 2000)
How Your Congregation Can Become a Jubilee Community (February 2000)
New Jubilee Publications from the Ecumenical Coalition for Economic Justice (February 2000)
Year Two of Jubilee Resources (February 2000)
Canadian Churches for Justice and Peace - CJJP (August 2001)

Leadership and Decision-making

Creating a Mission Statement (November 2000)
Elders - Leaders or Managers? (November 2000) – 2 sheets
Goal-oriented Planning for Congregations (November 2000)
The Session and Decision-making (November 2000)

Mission, the Session and

How to Build a Congregational Mission Plan (June 1999)
Videos on Mission Themes (June 1999)
Ways That Elders Can Encourage the Mission Interests of Children and Youth (June 1999)

Who is Christian Mission? (June 1999)
FLAMES Initiative Mission Tours (August 1999)
Global Mission in the 21st Century (August 1999)
Mission Through Special Gifts (August 1999)
New Mission Partnership: Cuba and Canada (August 1999)
Session and Mission, The (August 1999)
Support Mission Experiences (August 1999)
Mission Resources: Education for Mission (November 1999)
Oikocredit: A New Way of Looking at Mission (August 2001)

New Elders — Special Edition — A Booklet for New Elders

The first seven pieces were contained in the February 1999 booklet

- Canadian Presbyterians: A Profile
- Growing in Grace and Spirit: Faith Development of Church Leaders
- How We Organize Ourselves: Presbyterian Church Government
- Ordination to the Eldership
- Our Understanding of Mission
- Role and Responsibilities of Elders
- What Happens at a Session Meeting?

Prayer and Devotions

Opening prayer for a session meeting (May 1997)
Prayers for elders (written by elders) (August 1998)
Daily devotions for ruling elders (August 1998)
More prayers for ruling elders (November 1999)

Presbyterian Governance and Terminology

Presbyterian — What is it? (May 1997)
Words and their Meanings for People New to The Presbyterian Church in Canada (May 1997) – 2 sheets

Resources

Elder Development Resources (May 1997)
Our National Presbyterian Museum (February 2002)

Roles, Responsibilities, Training and Self-Care

What is the Job of an Elder? What is the Job of a Session? (May 1997)
Elders Speak Out (at General Assembly Open Space groups) (August 1998) – 2 sheets
Regular, On-going Training for Elders (August 1998)
How Well are we Doing? A Detailed Self-Evaluation Tool for Sessions (November 1998)
Are You Over-burdened? (August 2000)
Ideas for Celebrating! (August 2000)

Knowing Each Other (August 2000)
The Elder as a Leader (August 2000)
Christian Theology for Presbyterian Elders (February 2001)
Eldership and Lifelong Learning (February 2001)
"Called to Covenant": Enhancing and Understanding Pastoral Oversight (August 2001)
The ABC's of Becoming a More Effective Elder (August 2002)
Choosing New Elders (May 2003)
Youth Elders:
 Youthful Elders: An Interview with Tim, age 19 (May 2003)
 Interview with Deb Schlichter, youth elder 25 years ago (May 2003)

Spiritual Life/Christian Doctrine

The Spiritual Life of Elders (August 1997)
"Following from in Front: A devotional guide on Christian spiritual leadership" (May 1998)
Taking Care of Yourself Through Prayer (August 2000)
Books on Spirituality (November 2001)
Experience Spirituality in our Tradition (November 2001)
Is Spirituality Presbyterian? (November 2001)
Spiritual Direction (November 2001)
Spirituality and Pastoral Care (November 2001)

Stewardship

Session and Stewardship (February 1998)
Stewardship Resources (February 1998)
The M Word - Talking About Money (A special booklet - February 2002)
 Components of a Financial Stewardship Program
 Opening New Doors of Giving
 Growing Generous People
 Quotations for Bulletin Boards and Church Bulletins
Presbyterian Sharing.... faithful Christian stewardship (November 2002) - PART I
 Congregations and the Session
 Christian Principles of Giving Bible Study for Session
 Commonly Asked Questions About Presbyterians Sharing
 Where Does the Money Go?
 Calculating the Presbyterian Sharing... Allocation
Presbyterian Sharing.... faithful Christian stewardship (February 2003) - PART II
 Presbyterians Sharing... Quiz
 But it's hard to raise funds for *Presbyterians Sharing...*
 Raising awareness of *Presbyterians Sharing...* - How do we get started?
 Telling the story of *Presbyterians Sharing...*
 Resources for telling the story of *Presbyterians Sharing...*

Term Service for Elders

Term Service for Elders (August 1998)

Visitation and Pastoral Care

Visitation Log (May 1997)

Effective Listening (November 1997)

Elder's Visit, The; Getting Started (November 1997)

Plan for a Home Visit (November 1997)

Pastoral Care to Students (February 1998)

Book Review: Group Work with Elders (Seniors) (May 2000)

Pastoral Care—a part of an elder's responsibility (May 2001)

Pastoral Care — a special booklet (May 2001):

 Pastoral Care, What Is It?

 Letter

 Pastoral Care for Children

 Pastoral Care for Youth

 Pastoral Care for Students Away from Home

 Pastoral Care for Young Adults

 Pastoral Care for Middle Adults

 Pastoral Care for the Sick

 Pastoral Care with the Elderly

 Some Resources for the Study of Pastoral Care

Care and Feeding of Clergy (August 2001)

(See also Workshops – Four part series November 2003)

Milestones Check-List for Elders

Welcome and Hospitality

Ushering as a Ministry (May 1998)

Creating a Friendly Church: The ministry of hospitality (November 1998)

Workshops, Retreats, and Session Meetings

Sample Elder Development Workshop Agendas (May 1997)

Pre-Conference/Pre-Retreat Questionnaire for Elders (August 1997)

Session Retreats (May 2002)

 Back to Basics

 Leading and Learning

 Running a Great Session Retreat

 Spiritual Life Retreat

Four-part study for "elder training workshop":

- Ruling elders: who they are and what they do (August 2003)
- How elders do their ministry/work (November 2003)
 - Session Meetings
 - Pastoral Care

-
- Engaging in God's Work
 - Ruling Elders in the PCC
 - Congregations by size - How sessions function in various sized congregations
 - Elders and their relationship with other church leaders

13 Worship/Studies for Session Meetings (August 2004)

- #1: Believing in God
- #2: God as Trinity; One God or three?
- #3: God, the Creator
- #4: Evil in the world; God's care
- #5: People – made in the image of God
- #6: Jesus Christ: God with us
- #7: Jesus Christ – making us one with God (atonement)
- #8: The Resurrection of Jesus Christ
- #9: The Holy Spirit
- #10: Justification by faith
- #11: Sanctification (to make holy)
- #12: The Church
- #13: Life Everlasting

Session Starters:

- Number 1 – Pastoral Care and the Sanctuary (February 2005)
- Number 2 – Pastoral Care and the Feeding of Sheep (February 2005)
- Follow-up study/reading for Pastoral Care and the Feeding of Sheep (February 2005)