



For Elders

November/2005

Inside

- **Making Decisions in the Church by Discerning God's Leading**
- **Six Thinking Hats: Making good Decisions at your Session Meeting**
- **Term Service For Elders - How is it working?**

Writers: Dorothy Henderson, Don Muir
Editorial Assistance: Keith Knight
The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 2005



Making Decisions in the Church by Discerning God's Leading



Writer: Dorothy Henderson
adapted from *Discerning God's Will Together*, Morris and Olsen,
Alban Institute, 1977

Discerning the will of God—where God is leading—is somewhat of a holy mystery. Often we discern God's presence only as we look back. As Christians, but particularly as Christians in the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition, we place high value on the collective wisdom of community. The following community process, adapted from a book by Morris/Olsen, makes use of “best practices” from other Christian traditions, particularly the Jesuits and Quakers.

This process is helpful for congregations who are attempting to make decisions that are consensual, constructive and, most importantly, in keeping with where the congregation senses God leading.

Most members of the congregation become directly involved in this process in the interview step (#5: Listening), but I have discovered, in using this process with many kinds of groups, that most people want to understand the various steps of the process and where the process is leading. It is helpful to prepare a chart that outlines the 10 steps and points out to participants where you are in the discernment process, especially if they have not been involved in steps 1-4.

Recruit a wise leader. Then, follow the discernment steps from 1 to 10.

- 1. Framing:** Describe what discernment is needed. The subject for discernment should be clearly stated and agreed upon by a group. The **key question** is: “God, what are you guiding me/us to do about ...?”
- 2. Grounding:** The **key question** is, “What is the guiding principle by which the discernment will happen?” The grounding step explains *how* the discernment process will proceed. For instance, a guiding principle might be that a small portion of the congregation would be polled in order to discern the larger opinion of the whole congregation. Or, a different guiding principle might be that a small group of the congregation and a small group of community leaders might be consulted. Or, a more generic guiding principle might be, “To seek God's will together.”
- 3. Shedding:** Shedding means naming and laying aside anything that will deter the person or group from focusing on God's will. The **key question** is, “Do I have ideas or feelings that interfere with me listening for God's will?” This means setting aside private agendas, pet causes and grievances so the discernment process can proceed. In a group, people may be invited to write their grievance on paper which is kept private, but then be invited to say together, “I will put aside this grievance to search for God's will.”

- 4. Rooting:** The **key question** is, “What biblical images or texts come to mind for this particular issue of discernment?” Invite the participants to suggest images, themes, stories or people in scripture that make connections with the issue they are considering.
- 5. Listening:** The **key question** is: “What voices do we need to hear?” Listening is essential to discernment. Listening may include gathering information and conducting interviews with people *inside* the group and *outside* the group. Listening should include working with groups and individuals and also encouraging private prayer.
- 6. Exploring:** The **key question** is: “What are possible options or paths which might be followed?” It is important to refer back to the guiding principle established in #2 step. This step (#6) is like brainstorming. Each option is offered like a trial balloon but no evaluation takes place.
- 7. Improving:** The **key question** is: “How can we make each option the best it can be?” If a list of 20 options has been generated, try to group them or choose four or five which seem most acceptable to the group. Invite the group to work together to “better up” each option, adding detail for clarity, or describing advantages. (Note: In the process of majority rule, the goal is to find the lowest common denominator. However, in the discernment process, the goal is to make each option the best it can be. This helps all participants to have a win-win feel in the process.)
- 8. Weighing:** Weighing lets the discerning person or group move toward a preference. Weighing moves toward closure and bringing the process to a conclusion. The **key question** is: “Upon which option or path will the Spirit rest?” There are several methods of weighing. Choose one of the following:
 - a: From the Jesuits, borrow the practice of drawing a line down the middle of a page and listing the pros and cons of each option.
 - b. Using the image of biblical fruits, list the likely fruits (positive outcomes) of each path.
 - c. From John Cassian, apply the five-way test to each option:
 1. Is it filled with what is good for all?
 2. Is it heavy with the fear of God?
 3. Is it genuine in the feelings that underlie it?
 4. Is it lightweight because we want to look good or because we want to do something new?
 5. Has excessive pride diminished the luster of our dream?
 - d. From the Jesuits, borrow the practice of placing each path (option) near the heart. Is there consolation—a sense of peace and movement toward God? Is there desolation—a sense of dis-ease and movement away from God?
 - e. From the Bible, read the passage from John 14: 1-3 where Jesus offers to go ahead and prepare a place for us in God’s house. Imagine entering God’s

house and meeting Jesus at the door. As you walk with Jesus through the house, open a door, one at a time. Each room reveals one option. What do you see? What does Jesus say?

After using one of these weighing options, do not vote on the options. Based on the discussion, the leader may express what seems to be the preferred path, "From listening to you, I believe you are sensing that this is the path down which God is leading us."

The leader gives the group two options:

1. I sense we are ready to move toward a consensus. **OR**

2. I sense that we need more time to think and pray about this matter.

(If the group is not ready to respond or the leader is in some way challenged by the group, the leader may suggest that more time is needed and may suggest another meeting.)

9. Closing: The group has used different activities—listening, exploring and improving—to move toward discovering a new view. By keeping the process open, there is always the possibility for new insight and wisdom. But we cannot keep matters up in the air forever. The following steps may now be taken to bring closure:

Test for consensus using the tradition of the Quaker clerk. Ask participants to choose one of the following levels of response:

- 1) I like the path as stated. (Consensus)
- 2) I'm concerned, but will support this path. (Consensus) This person might be saying, "If I were making the decision alone, I would express it differently, but I will not stand in the way of a group that thinks this is where God is leading us."
- 3) I am uneasy for these reasons, but will stand aside. (Consensus)
- 4) I cannot support this direction. (Non-consensus)

If more than one person chooses option 4, it is probably wise to stop the process and give people more time. It *is* possible for one or two people to hold the entire group hostage by declaring themselves to be unmovable in position 4. This is not helpful or wanted. The leader may ask the non-consensus people if they are able to move to the position of standing aside so as not to block the rest of the group. The reasons for not supporting the path are recorded.

If there is some non-consensus in the group, the leader should now ask, "Do we need to proceed at this time, or can the decision wait for the future?"

If a group is divided, but needs to proceed, select one of these seven options:

- 1) Look at the guiding principle again (step 2), test for indifference and repeat the steps of the discernment process at a later time.
- 2) Take time for further prayer and reflection.
- 3) Cast lots. There is some biblical precedent for casting lots (Acts 1:26). This may be especially helpful if there are two or three almost equally viable options. The group agrees to write the options on slips of paper and agrees to abide by the one chosen.
- 4) Appoint one person to decide for the group.

- 5) Vote by majority rule. This may be a viable option in a large group, but this option should only be considered if there is a sense that everyone in the group has been heard and understood. Voting always brings with it the sting of winners and losers.
- 6) Count only the “yes” votes. This is particularly helpful when a specific number of people are needed to start a project or ministry. Work with those who have energy and passion for it.
- 7) Drop it. If the group cannot see where God is leading, celebrate the time you have had together, but drop the discerning process and move on to other things.

- 10.** Resting: The key question is: “How does it feel? Is this a comfortable place to be?” Invite the participants to rest the decision near their hearts as they look for consolation or desolation. Does the decision bring peace and draw the group closer to God and each other, or does it result in distress and move the group away from God? Does the decision feel close to the heart of God?

How to use this article

I've used this process many times and found it useful in some of the following situations:

- Defining a path for the future
- Deciding whether or not to start a new program/mission endeavour
- Choosing a church school curriculum
- Evaluating the current programs of a church

Although it is somewhat time-consuming (it took us two meetings), at the end of the process, people felt confident that the decision was a good one and was shared by a broad base of people. More to the point, the people involved in the decision-making believed that they sensed the leading of God's hand.



Six Thinking Hats: Making Good Decisions at Your Session Meeting



A summary by Dorothy Henderson

With thanks to the Rev. Dale Woods of Brandon, Manitoba for his contribution of an article on the *Six Thinking Hats*

How to use this article

Option 1: Have minister(s) and elders read it, then agree to have the moderator or chair person be the “blue hat” for one particular issue. Have the six coloured hats and their brief descriptions available (see p. 2) so people can be reminded of what each stands for, or, if your session is adventurous, have six coloured hats on a central table with the hat band giving the brief descriptions for the meaning of each hat.

Option 2: Have one member of session read the article (or perhaps even the book) and make a presentation to session. Use the process in an “easy” decision such as whether or not to hold an elder’s retreat. Talk together about whether it was a helpful process and how often it might be used.

Some issues that may be helpful to discuss with the *Six Thinking Hats*

- Term service
- Programs for your congregation
- Pastoral care procedures
- How to involve new people in leadership
- Whether or not to hire a new staff person
- Whether to do a mission trip or pave the parking lot
etc. etc.

Have you ever left session meeting asking, “What did the others *really* think or feel?” Or have you ever heard, “I feel this is a warm and friendly church,” but there is little evidence to back that up. Making decisions in session can be complex and difficult. *The Six Thinking Hats* by Edward De Bono reminds us that thinking is a skill and can be improved.¹

In a session meeting you will not want to over-structure the use of a system such as this, but it is helpful to have some procedures that ensures a wide usage of the different types of thinking required to make good decisions.

¹ *Six Thinking Hats*, Little, Brown and Company, 1999

Why would you use the *Six Thinking Hats* in a session meeting?

- The biggest enemy to clear thinking is complexity. Using the *Six Thinking Hats* breaks down a complex issue into manageable parts.
- It can be playful and fun. Who says decision-making should be deadly serious?
- Instead of having all kinds of thinking going on at the same time, the hats allow us to focus on one particular type of thinking at a time.
- It ensures that one type of thinking doesn't dominate all discussions.
- It allows for the different thinking styles of people to be used.

De Bono suggests that our decisions may be limited because our thinking process is too limited. To broaden our understanding of thinking, De Bono describes six thinking hats.

Each hat has a different purpose. Each hat brings a different element to the discussion.

Each person has a preferred hat—a preferred thinking style. Learning which preferred styles are present in a group helps the group be more tolerant and understanding. Bert is not just a negative person. Bert is a person who prefers to use the black hat. But that is okay, because Annie prefers to use the yellow hat and Doris is a green hat thinker. We need all types of hats to make good decisions. Being aware of the six hats helps to ensure that everyone's thinking style is included.

The six hats are:

1. Blue hat: Organizes the thinking process
2. Green hat: Generates new ideas and encourages creativity
3. Yellow hat: Is hopeful and positive, sunny, optimistic
4. Black hat: Covers the negative aspects, why something cannot or shouldn't be done²
5. Red hat: Allows the emotional view of an issue
6. White hat: Presents the facts, is neutral and objective

Sequence for using the hats

The colours of the hats relate to their function and may be used in any order after a group is used to working with them. However, at the beginning, it is probably better to use them in a specific order.

The blue hat is most commonly used by the chairperson who negotiates with the group which order to use.

As the group is learning to work with the hats, follow this order:

Green

Yellow

Black

Red

White may be used at any time.

²As I (Dorothy Henderson) was reading and editing this article, I was aware of the fact that many people with dark skin object to having the colour black used for stereotyping ideas or concepts as negative, critical, the-glass-is-half-empty type of people. Of course they should object! I would too. If I were using this in a church group, I would simply change the "black hat" to "purple hat" but because I want to be faithful to Edward De Bono's concepts, I've used black in this article.

In a meeting, says De Bono, we can become aware of which hat is being worn and be free to ask for another hat to expand our thinking. “We’ve had a lot of black hat thinking today, but how would we view this issue if we were to wear a yellow hat.”

Details on each hat

1. Blue hat: Is the conductor of the orchestra of thinking

Blue hat thinking oversees the whole thinking process and keeps the big picture in mind. Blue hats provide the overview. The blue hat person:

- provides focus, which is needed for a good discussion
- may remind us when we need to switch hats to add to our depth of understanding
- suggests when we need to stop
- looks at how we feel about the discussion so far
- may point out that we’re stuck at the creative process (green hat) and need to go to facts (white hat)
- concludes the discussion or meeting

Blue hat thinking usually falls to the role of the chairperson but may be done by group: e.g. “Let’s go around the table and see where you think we are at this time.”

2. Green hat: Generates new ideas and encourages creativity

Green hat thinking:

- finds ways to do things differently
- is concerned with change
- looks for ways to do things more simply or better

Green hat thinking is about movement: Where will this idea take us? This is the time to generate provocative or reversal ideas. For instance, what would happen if people took offering out of the offering plate instead of putting it in? Creative pauses should be built into work on a regular basis so introverts have time to consider and reflect.

Although critical thinking is not part of this stage of thinking, it is appropriate to ‘shape’ new ideas. For instance, someone might reflect that the proposed idea might work well in a large church but, since you are a small church, how could it work?

3. Yellow hat: Is hopeful, positive, sunny, optimistic

Once ideas have been generated, they are usually followed up with yellow hat thinking. Yellow hat thinking:

- allows for development of an idea
- offers a positive assessment of the idea
- supports the benefits and values of the idea
- asks, “What good might come from this idea?”

The yellow hat should not be confused with “feeling good” about an idea. (That belongs under red hat.) The yellow hat should be able to provide support for the idea. For instance, “I think a stewardship program will work in our congregation because I heard that this same program worked in twelve other congregations across Canada.”

When assessing possibilities that come from an idea, categories can be used to rate the idea. For instance, you might rate the ideas as a)proven b)very likely c)based on experience and what we know d)good chance e)an even change f)remote or long shot.

Yellow hat thinking looks at opportunities, visions and hopes.

4. Black hat: covers the negative side of the idea, why something cannot or should not be done

This is the hat of critical judgment, a chance to play the “devil’s advocate.” This hat helps to identify why something may not work. It is not to be confused with red hat thinking: e.g. “I just don’t like this idea.”

Black hat thinking:

- gives logic
- allows people who disagree with the idea to voice their opinion without being judged as the pessimist in the crowd
- allows people to look at an issue from another point of view
- gives people a specific time to view their negative thoughts so that negativity doesn’t take over the entire meeting

When it comes to using the black hat some observations need to be made. First, it is always more immediately gratifying to point out the weaknesses of something than to point out the strengths. Once the weaknesses have been pointed out, nothing further needs to be done. There is immediate gratification. But, if an idea is supported, there is no gratification until the idea is worked out. Generally speaking, it is easier to see the negative than the positive and once the negative is stated, expressing the positive is an uphill battle. It is best to express the positive first (the yellow hat) and then allow the black hat. Everyone should be asked to think of the positive aspects first and then consider whatever difficulties or weaknesses there might be. Black hat thinking can then try to help the positive ideas by asking questions like: Can this idea work? Are there any benefits to doing this? Is this worth doing? Does this support our mission or vision?

Black hat thinking is not to be confused with being argumentative. It is simply the objective attempt to put the negative elements on the table. It should not be confused with expression of emotions, which falls under the red hat. In case of new ideas, the yellow hat should always be used before the black hat.

5. Red hat: Gives the emotional view to an issue

The red hat is the opposite to the white hat. Our emotions are a necessary part of the thinking process, not an intrusion into “let’s just have the facts.” Since emotions are always present, it is helpful to have a formal

and neutral way for people to express them. Here is an example of red hat thinking: “Don’t ask me why, but I think two services would be a big mistake.”

Red hat thinking:

- asks for hunches, intuitions, impression without any particular reason or basis
- allows people to express their emotions rather than bury them or take them out to the parking lot
- allows emotions to be expressed during the meeting but not take over the meeting
- allows people to speak about their emotions without having to justify them

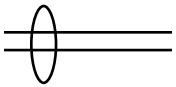
6. White hat: Neutral, objective, only the facts

This hat calls for the facts in a neutral way without any arguments. It is harder than it might seem to give facts without making an interpretation. For instance, someone might say, “The giving in the congregation is down 25% because people don’t like the new hymn book.” Being down 25% may be a fact, but the rest is interpretation that needs to be checked out.

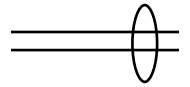
White hat thinking:

- separates believed facts from checked facts
- no interpretation or point of view should be attached to a fact
- puts forward as many facts as possible
- does not use facts to support already preconceived ideas or assumptions.

The key to white hat thinking is to be neutral and present information much the way a computer would.



Term Service For Elders



We asked, “How is it working?” We received a positive response

Writer: Don Muir

Background



In 1997, after some 45 years of overtures and prayerful debate, the General Assembly approved changes to the polity of The Presbyterian Church in Canada that opened the way for congregations to adopt the practice of term service for elders. In the 1994 Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly (see pages 276-277), the Clerks of Assembly aided the discussion by reminding commissioners of arguments for and against term service that were originally introduced in 1981 and 1988.

Using some of these arguments as a basis for a survey, I invited term service sessions to answer it as a way of attempting to judge how many of the hopes and fears expressed in the 1980's have become reality. Twenty sessions scattered across Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, and British Columbia replied. Three of them have an average Sunday worship attendance of less than 75, nine reported an average between 75 and 150, while five see more than 150 in the pews on Sundays. The surveys were answered by ministers in some cases, by clerks of session in others, and by session consensus in still others. The result is a collection of opinions from various perspectives that provide a glimpse into how this relatively new session model is working in our denomination.

I am grateful to all those who took the time to participate in this exercise.

Survey Response Summaries

The following are the eight “true or false” statements of the survey coupled with a summary of replies.

- 1. Term service has encouraged some, who were not prepared to make a life service commitment, to let their names stand for election to the session.**

Periodically congregations seek to call and elect new elders. Some candidates are prepared to accept such a call for an indefinite period while others are not. Every responding session indicated it has elders who are serving because term service was an option. Not prepared to make a life commitment, they are willing to serve for a defined period of time. It follows that their spiritual gifts may not have been available to these sessions if life service was the only possibility.

2. Term service has provided a way for elders, who no longer wish to serve, to retire gracefully from the session.

Occasionally an elder no longer feels s/he has the time or energy to serve the church as an elder but can't find a gracious way to step down. Some may feel guilty about "abandoning" colleagues to carry on session responsibilities without them. Others don't want to create the impression that they are angry and leaving under a cloud of controversy. The survey indicates that all the responding sessions who have gone through a complete term service cycle agree that it provides an opportunity for elders to bow out gracefully. One respondent indicated that the end of a term "... created a natural reflection point allowing them to evaluate the appropriateness of continuing".

3. Term service keeps elders in closer contact with the congregation, and therefore more able to bring fresh ideas to the session.

Only nine of the respondents indicated the above statement is true in their church and 4 others were unsure that term service had any affect on bringing session and congregation closer together. A few concluded that term service does nothing to keep elders in closer contact with the congregation. One stated that the situation was "not any different from previously elected elders". There seems to be no clear consensus on this statement.

4. Term service has undermined the stability of our congregation because of the frequent changes in leadership.

One of the original fears of term service is that it would have a detrimental effect on the life of the congregation because of its frequent changes in leadership. According to the survey, this fear has proven to be unfounded. While the regularly changing leadership provides some challenges such as time spent in elder training and bringing new elders up to speed on the work of the session, overall there is sufficient continuity that the leadership remains strong and stable.

5. Term service has changed the way elders make decisions because they know they will need to be re-elected to stay on the session.

This statement has political overtones. It suggests that elders who enjoy serving on the session and hope to be reelected may make decisions based on what will curry the favour of the congregation and not on what the Word of God teaches or as the Holy Spirit guides. This statement was received with a resounding "False".

6. Term service for elders has encouraged “special interest groups” in the congregation to vote “their people” onto the session.

This statement also bears political overtones, implying that cliques within the congregation might take advantage of the regular elections of term service to elect like-minded elders to become their voice on the session. Although one congregation indicated that they found this to be true and another admitted such a thing could happen, the rest of the respondents clearly indicated that this had not been part of their experience.

7. Introducing term service produced divisive anger and resistance in some of our elders.

Three respondents indicated that introducing term service caused anger and resistance among the previously existing session. One of these stated, “A very small percentage of our session of forty was unhappy with the change and resigned at the first opportunity. The new blood and fresh ideas and enthusiasm far outweigh any problems with the two-year election process.” The rest of the responses give the impression such a change was happily welcomed. Someone wrote, “One of the elders who supported and promoted term service is well respected by the other elders in the congregation. He introduced the idea gradually with clear explanations, so it was readily received by all.”



8. Term service has caused the session to spend an unfortunate amount time and energy on elder training and development.

The general consensus is that while it does take time to train new elders every two years, it is time well spent. A respondent wrote, "The process no doubt demands time. Elder training is more or less continual. We consider this a plus rather than unfortunate." Another wrote, "We see training and development as an important ongoing activity." It was also noted that congregations become increasingly educated on the calling and role of the elder when they participate in elections every two years.

Other Comments

Those who received the survey were invited to contribute any other thoughts, positive or negative, about term service. Many did. What follows is an honest assessment of term service. The comments come from different churches. I have taken the liberty of editing some of the comments so that I could include as many as possible. My apologies to the authors.

Comment 1: After doing some visioning we have realized that we are at a place that calls upon the too few to do too much too often. Term service forces us to look beyond the too few and helps us to see beyond them to those others who also have gifts but have not been asked.

Comment 2: I would say that our experience has been very successful - we have been able to elect several younger elders who would not have considered life service. This has made for a more healthy balance on session. There is time given to elections which takes away from other time, but it also puts a focus on the session that otherwise isn't there. More than the time for elections is the establishment of a new dynamic of trust where new elders feel free to speak and older elders feel less threatened. With new elders has come new energy, ideas and dynamism.

Comment 3: Term service has been a positive experience for my two small congregations... We have found the regular influx of "new" elders a wonderful excuse for ongoing eldership training. One of the unforeseen benefits we have experienced is that the sessions now more closely reflect the church backgrounds of the congregations. Few of our session members were raised in the Presbyterian Church. We are from a variety of denominations - Lutheran, Baptist, Roman Catholic, Anglican, United. As the moderator, that has kept me on my toes because I can't assume a certain background. I would not willingly go back to the "time before" term service. And I don't think very many of my people would either. I know one of the comments

made about term service is that it would be a problem for congregations with a smaller "gene pool" but we haven't found it to be much of an issue. I think our smaller numbers are offset by the greater awareness in small congregations that everyone has to pitch in if this church family is going to survive. We were amazed (although we probably shouldn't have been) at how moving and affirming it was for session members to be re-elected by the congregation. The first time it happened, we had several people in tears. Pretty powerful stuff.

Comment 4: The value of term service for our church has outweighed the problems.

Comment 5: There is some anxiety expressed by the session as they near the time for the next election. The session will need five more elders. What if they can't get any? There appears to be only a handful of people not currently on the session who have the spiritual gifts and are willing to serve the church in this way. In the last two elections the session was looking for a set number of new elders. In both cases, we fell short. Term service has forced the session to look at the gifts of people. Some have gifts to serve as elders but don't want to do so.



Comment 6: We instituted term service eldership in 1999, but this year decided to discontinue the practice and have reverted back to lifetime service. It (term service) did allow older elders to retire gracefully and several did. However, we did not find that it encouraged new people to sign up. In fact, what people told us is that six years sounds like a long time (ironically it sounds longer to people than open-ended service). In 1999 when we instituted term service we had 36 elders on session. In 2005 when we discontinued the practice we had 24 and were in desperate need of additional elders. We just had an election and are now up to 29 and hope that we will come back up to our complement next year. The five people who stood for election this time are younger members of the congregation and did not see open-ended service as a deterrent.

Comment 7: Term service has over-all been a positive thing for our church. It has resulted in more people becoming aware of the workings of the church, and has the benefit of "new blood" and new ideas. If there has been a drawback, I can only think of one: It results in people being almost eager to leave after their term, when they might well stay longer if they had come on "for life". Still, in my experience, term service has regularized elections. They were being held sporadically and sometimes yearly with people resigning. Now it is more regular and workable. People sign on for six years and make those six years work. New and inexperienced elders have been a blessing rather than a problem. The interesting challenge has been in developing a session that is enjoyable to meet with, so that the meetings don't seem simply dry and boring. New elders have assisted in doing just that, bringing new life to discussions and new directions to our work.

Comment 8: Over the years we have had many queries about how this is working for us and each time we are more than happy to be able to heartily endorse the concept.

Comment 9: Transition to term service occurred immediately following the induction of the new minister, so there was greater openness to the change. It still involved much discussion around the strengths and concerns of term versus life - but session showed a real desire to understand and accept the change.

Comment 10: Term service has been a good thing for our congregation. It means if we make a mistake and bring someone on the session that does not have the gifts, the maturity in Christ, we have a graceful way for them to leave the session. Other elders who are not finished their term, but for health or personal

reasons would like to leave session before their term is up, have felt freer to go off and take some time of not serving. The leadership base is broader and there is a greater sharing of the leadership of the church, because more people have served for some time. I have been fortunate to have many strong spiritual leaders with gifts to serve. Aging elders have been willing to come on for a term or part of a term, and share their gifts. The church has been glad we've had term service. I'd encourage other smaller churches to consider this route.

Comment 11: Moving to term service was not a contentious issue for our congregation. We agreed as elders that we would take one year to study the issue with no hidden agendas. At the end of the year elders would vote and that would be the direction we would go in. Over that year we studied the purpose of the session, the pros and cons of our present session and what benefits term service might bring. After session voted in favour of term service we let the congregation know of the decision and asked any who were against it to write to the session and if persuaded by the arguments we would reconsider or have a congregational meeting to discuss it. We received one letter. It is possible to say that more time is spent on developing new elders but the reverse of that is that every time elders go off of session you now have 6-8 very knowledgeable people back in the life of the congregation. Often these people keep serving in various areas without adding the role of elder to their work. New people bring new ideas and a changing leadership can convey the sense that people become leaders because they have the gift of leadership, not because they have been in the congregation for 40 years so it's their turn. In life-long service people serve until they die which is a strange way to transfer leadership.

Comment 12: If this transition (from life service to term service) was being done again it probably should have been done over a period of time rather than all at once. To go from eighteen elders down to nine was probably too much, too quick. This change left us with five experienced elders plus four new elders. It also presented some of the outgoing elders with an opportunity to second guess and question some of the decisions of the new session.

Comment 13: The elders know they only have a short time (six years) to serve so are willing to "give it all they've got" in that time - not expecting to be re-elected because of their age.

A Few Conclusions

When I sent out this survey, I had no idea what sort of response I would get. After reading the replies, my impression is that almost all the responding sessions are glad they adopted term service and believe it has strengthened their Christian ministry.

In some cases term service seems to do what its advocates hoped it would do; encourage those who are not prepared for life service to offer God-given gifts, fresh enthusiasm and new ideas to sessions for a defined period of time. It takes time to hold biennial elections and train new elders, but both session and congregation can benefit from this regular reminder of what it means to be called by God to serve in this ministry. The fairly frequent need for new elders does not seem to upset the stability of the congregation's ministry and can cause sessions to look beyond the existing session for those who have gifts for eldership but were never before asked to serve in this way. Term service provides a graceful exit for elders who feel they need a break or are no longer able to contribute to this level of ministry. These "retired" elders can be a blessing to their congregations. As elders leave the session, they are able to apply the experience, knowledge and skills gained to other ministries of the church. Term service can regularize the elder election process. When term service is in place it can fit into, and become an important part of, the life cycle of a congregation.

Sessions have discovered that some eldership candidates consider a six-year commitment daunting rather than inviting and are more willing to accept the life term. It may be that the life term is considered a term from which they may more easily resign at any time. The survey notes that gifted elders leave the session as soon as their term expires. The point made is that in the life service model, they might have led the church for a longer time. Of course it is permissible for elders to stand for reelection as soon as their term ends. Obviously the introduction of term service risks a degree of stress and disruption within sessions when some embrace the model while others resist it. Sessions contemplating adopting term service are cautioned to move slowly, to weigh the pro and cons carefully, to talk about it often before a final decision is made. Generally, those who persevere feel the benefits of term service outweigh the growing pains.

According to this survey most of the hopes of term service, as predicted nearly 25 years ago, seem to have come to fruition while most of the fears have not. The survey shows that term service can work in both large and small congregations, but it is not necessarily suitable for all. Since only the sessions that adopted term service replied to this survey, it is conceivable that other sessions contemplating this change abandoned the attempt when they met with resistance or decided it would not work in their particular situation.

Book of Forms - references to term service

108. Elders once lawfully called to the office, and having gifts of God meet to exercise the same, are ordained for life. They may serve in the office for life unless deposed or suspended in process of discipline. They may, however, at the call of a congregation in which the session has instituted term service for elders, fulfill the duties of the eldership on the session for periods of six years, but may stand for reelection at the end of each six year term.

108.1 Any session desiring to opt for term service for elders should consult with the congregation and must notify the presbytery of its intention and receive that court's permission.

108.2 In congregations that have instituted term service for elders, one third of the session shall be elected every two years.

108.3 Elders may resign the active exercise of the office at any time during their term of service. (Declaratory Act 1985, p. 261-62 [was section 108.1])

