



CALLED *to* **COVENANT**

Strengthening Congregation-Presbytery Relationships

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The Presbyterian Church in Canada

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A resource produced by the Life and Mission Agency

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How to Use This Resource

The Called to Covenant project was designed to strengthen the relationships between congregations and presbyteries. In response to numerous requests for help in recent years, the project engaged the church in research and consultation about pastoral oversight, congregational planning and crisis intervention.

This two-volume resource is the fruit of that process. It offers the church theological reflection and discussion on these areas of its life, as well as tools and processes that have been found to be helpful in parts of the church.

In 2004 the General Assembly agreed to commend this work to the church with the following recommendation:

That sessions and presbyteries be encouraged to continue working to strengthen the covenantal relationships they share making creative use of the resources developed by the Called to Covenant project.

(Acts and Proceedings, 2004, p. 410)

We encourage sessions and presbyteries to explore this two-volume resource fully. They should feel free to adapt it for their own particular circumstances.

We pray that this work will help sessions and presbyteries to understand and support one another in their respective ministries.

Life and Mission Agency

Introduction

Covenantal Relationships

In The Presbyterian Church in Canada covenantal relationships exist between presbyteries, congregations and ministers. They are rooted in our relationship with God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — and in our understanding of who and whose we are. The congregation calls a minister, and the congregation and minister covenant to work together in ministry. The presbytery is responsible to care for the wellbeing of congregations and ministers within its bounds, by providing support and a means for accountability. Presbyteries, congregations and ministers must strive continuously to live out these covenants faithfully. When their efforts bear good fruit, the church is strengthened for its participation in Christ's ministry to the world.

How faithfully is The Presbyterian Church in Canada living out these covenants? The evidence is clear that improvement is critically needed. One has only to trace the many requests from across the denomination for ways to address perceived injustices and to strengthen the relationships between congregations and presbyteries. Each year, the denomination asks the General Assembly for direction with matters of concern to it. These requests come in the form of overtures from sessions and presbyteries, additional motions from commissioners to Assembly, and reports of special commissions to Assembly. A quick survey¹ of the minutes of General Assemblies over the 16-year period between 1983 and 1999 revealed 141 requests concerning pastoral oversight, accountability, conflict and planning: clear testimony to the fact that issues of living in covenant relationship have been on the mind of this church.

The Called to Covenant Project

The Called to Covenant project of the Life and Mission Agency was designed in response to needs identified within our denomination to strengthen congregation-presbytery relationships. This four-year project had a mandate to carry out a process of consultation, research and reporting, in consultation with the Clerks of Assembly. A ten-member working group from central Ontario was appointed, augmented by seven corresponding members from across Canada so there were members from all the synods (See Acknowledgements in the Resource Book). The Rev. Dr. Tom Gemmell served as project coordinator from October, 1999 until health concerns necessitated his resignation in March, 2003. Subsequently the Rev. J.P. Ian Morrison served as coordinator until the conclusion of the project in September 2004.

The Design of the Project

What beliefs, attitudes and behaviours will help the church to live out its covenant relationships faithfully? The project design phase identified several key areas for improvement. Some will require changes in mind, heart and will. Others will require the strengthening of skills and abilities. To live faithfully in covenant, presbyteries, congregations and ministers must be willing to engage in ministry as a team that involves ministers, lay people and church courts. They must be willing and able to examine the values that direct their actions (their lived or operative values) and to set and monitor goals that are workable. Further, presbyteries, congregations and ministers must be open to challenging and reaffirming or changing their understandings of ministry. Finally, they must be willing and able to address problems and face conflict with a Christ-centred confidence.

To help the church grow in these areas, the project was designed with a number of goals. Firstly, the project seeks to help increase the willingness of presbyteries, congregations and ministers to engage in accountability that is creative, caring, fair and edifying to the church. In addition, the project intends to strengthen presbyteries in their role of providing pastoral oversight to ministers and congregations. The project seeks further to stimulate discussion of a congregation's ministry as a team that involves minister, session, committees and board of managers with accountability one to another for defining, planning and reviewing its ministries. Finally, the project seeks to stimulate discussion about how to handle conflict in the church constructively, and to help presbyteries to intervene effectively when congregations are in crisis.

To accomplish these goals, the project has sought to discover and develop means for enhancing the understanding of pastoral oversight among presbyteries, congregations and ministers. The project has focussed on discovering and developing tools and procedures: for presbyteries to provide pastoral oversight to ministers and congregations; for congregational leadership to define, plan and review the ministries of their congregations, with the assistance of their presbyteries as needed; and for presbyteries to intervene effectively when congregations are in crisis. Finally, the project is communicating what it has learned, discovered and developed with congregations and presbyteries across the denomination.

Defining the Issues

The first phase of the project involved church-wide consultation to gather data and identify key issues. In this information from the church, the dynamics of healthy covenantal relationships between congregations and presbyteries were described. So too were concerns in three areas which have remained focal points for the project: regular pastoral oversight of congregations and ministers by presbyteries, planning and accountability, and crisis intervention by presbyteries. The consultation also revealed that several presbyteries have been using a number of strategies to strengthen covenantal relationships within their bounds.

Studying the Responses

The second phase involved contacting sessions and presbyteries for feedback related to the key issues and strategies involved in strengthening congregation-presbytery relationships. The Called to Covenant working group was grateful for the number of thoughtful, insightful responses received from across the church. A total of 130 sessions and 14 presbyteries responded. Feedback from the church supported the continued focus on the three key areas identified through the consultation process (regular pastoral oversight, planning and accountability, crisis intervention), while providing valuable insights and suggestions.

The working group was also greatly assisted by the input and feedback of those who gathered for the two church-wide consultations. Clerks of presbyteries, synods and Assembly also contributed to the project through discussions at two of their clerks' consultations. Other ideas have come from the working group's research into strategies developed by other denominations. (See Acknowledgements page for list of contributors and respondents.)

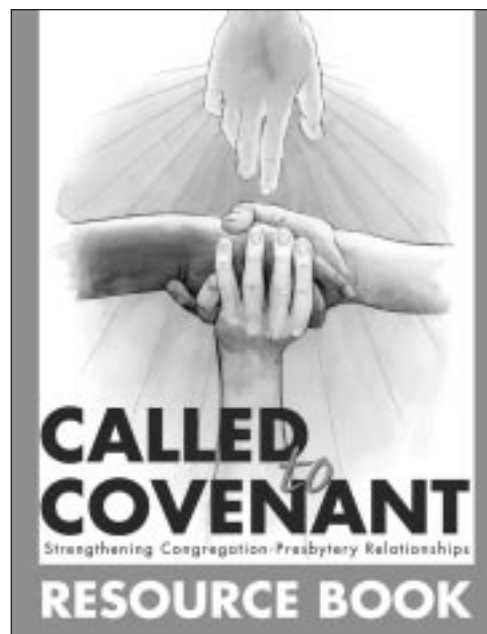
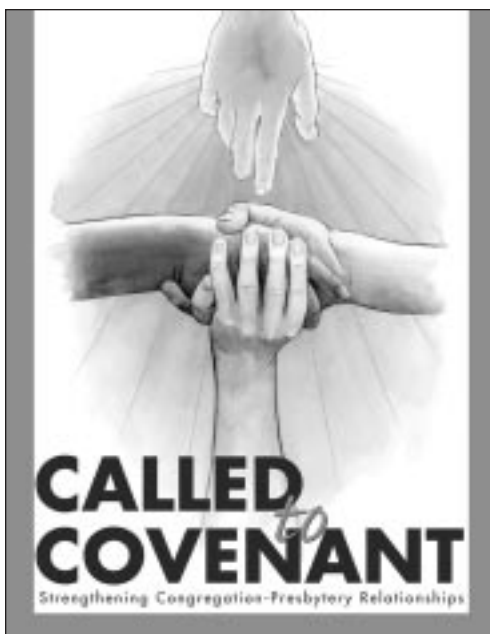
Discovering and Developing Resources

The third phase of the project has been the development of this two-volume resource. Book 1 contains discussion of the following topics:

Chapter 1	Called to Covenant:	The Biblical and Theological Basis for Call and Covenant
Chapter 2	Called to Care (1):	The Ministry of Regular Pastoral Oversight by Presbyteries
Chapter 3	Called to Be and to Do:	The Ministry of Congregational Planning
Chapter 4	Called to Care (2):	The Ministry of Crisis Intervention by Presbyteries

The accompanying resource book provides practical tools for congregations and presbyteries to use and adapt.

This two-volume resource is envisaged as a smorgasbord of approaches that are available to address the concerns and issues that exist in our covenantal relationships. Rather than being regarded as a one-size-fits-all resource, they are intended to inspire creative use, adaptation and invention within the myriad ministry contexts found in this branch of Christ's church.



CALLED *to* COVENANT

The Biblical and Theological Basis for Call and Covenant

"The days are surely coming when I will make a new covenant.... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."²

"This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."³

"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all...."⁴

"We, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another."⁵

"Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received."⁶

The covenantal relationships that we affirm within The Presbyterian Church in Canada are rooted in our identity as Christians, in the reality of who and whose we are. We believe that we have been called into relationship with the Triune God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We understand that this relationship is our primary purpose. As the Shorter Catechism says: "Our chief end is to glorify and enjoy God forever."⁷

From scripture we learn that it is God who has initiated this covenant with us, acting in baptism, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to graft us into the body of Christ.⁸ Through baptism, we share in all that God has accomplished for us in Christ, and we become united with him. It is God who has given us the gifts enabling our response: the gift of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit to teach us and remind us of Christ and to intercede for us, and the spiritual gifts to share Christ's ministry.⁹

As baptized Christians, we become part of a unique community of faith. We become God's own children, part of the people God has set apart.¹⁰ Thus our calling into covenant relationship with God places us in covenant relationship with others in the church, the community of 'those who have been called out.'¹¹ The church is described as Christ's body.¹²

Within it, we are as intimately connected and dependent on one another as the members of one body. We are instructed to look not only to our own interests but also to the interests of others, having the mind of Christ and practising his self-giving love.

The church is Christ together with his people called both to worship and to serve him in all of life.¹³ Through the church, the Lord continues his ministry. There is one ministry, the ministry of Christ, and one minister, the Lord Jesus Christ. All members of the church are called to participate in Christ's work in the world, and all have been given gifts by God to do so. In union with Christ, the church prays for and works toward the healing and salvation of the world.

While Christ calls all Christians to share in his ministry, he also recognizes that there are specific and necessary forms of leadership and responsibilities within the ministry of the church.¹⁴ Christ orders ministry for the continual renewal and nurturing of the church by gifting and calling individuals to serve particular offices of ministry. In The Presbyterian Church in Canada, these offices are ruling elder, congregational deacon, diaconal minister, and minister of word and sacraments.

Since the church is Christ together with his people, there are no individual ministries. Ministries are corporate in nature. Whenever Christians act to serve others in loving devotion to God, Christ's ministry takes place. All ministries are Christ's ministry, given flesh among particular people in a particular place and at a particular time.

Affirming and Reaffirming Covenants

The church affirms the covenantal relationships that form its identity each time it worships God. Whenever God's people offer praise and seek the reconciling presence of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we acknowledge the covenants into which God has drawn us. At the same time we acknowledge the church's constant need for reform.¹⁵ While the only faithful response to God's call is obedience, the church's life in every age is marked by failure and sin. In disobedience we resist and refute our reliance on God and on one another as members of Christ's body, denying these realities of our existence. Nevertheless, guided by the Holy Spirit in worship, the church offers confession and repentance and reaffirms its commitment to the covenantal relationships God has made. The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper are special times when these foundational covenantal relationships are reaffirmed and celebrated.

Within the life of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, there are other significant occasions when particular kinds of covenantal relationships are affirmed in worship.¹⁶ When individuals become members of a congregation by profession of faith, they voice their desire to renounce evil and sin that separate them from the love of God. They also indicate their intention to turn to Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, and to seek to mature as Christians in the church, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

When a minister is inducted by the presbytery to become the minister of a congregation, a statement (called "The Preamble") is read summarizing what our church believes about Christ's church and ministry. Both minister and people declare their faith in the Triune God. The minister promises to exercise care for the teachings of the church. The minister promises also to share in the governing of the church and submit to its lawful oversight. Finally, the minister promises to conduct himself/herself publicly and privately "as befits the gospel of Christ". For their part, the people promise to receive this minister "as from Christ". They promise also to support the ministry generously. Finally, they pledge themselves to be "co-servants with their minister under Christ". Following prayers for faithfulness in keeping these promises, the minister signs "the formula", a statement kept by the presbytery testifying to belief in the things declared in the preamble and ordination vows.

The church affirms the covenantal relationships that form its identity each time it worships God

The dual responsibility of presbyteries for congregations and for ministers means that the relationships they share are three-way covenants

When elders are ordained in a congregation, both the elders and the people declare their faith in the Triune God. The elders promise to accept the teachings of the church. They promise also to share in the governing of the church and submit to its lawful oversight. Finally, they promise to perform their duties in the grace of Christ to build up the church. For their part, the people promise to receive the newly ordained persons as elders “chosen by God through the voice of the congregation to lead them in the way of Christ”. The people promise further to encourage the elders and to respect their decisions.

Corporate Ministry Within the Courts of the Church

The covenantal relationships we affirm within The Presbyterian Church in Canada find expression in many aspects of our life together, including the way we make decisions and govern ourselves. We believe that the Spirit of God moves and is discerned within the community of believers. Therefore one of the ways this denomination seeks to exercise corporate ministry is by governing itself through church courts: sessions, presbyteries, synods and General Assemblies.¹⁷

These bodies are in interdependent relationships of responsibility and accountability to one another. For instance, sessions have responsibility for the congregations that they govern. At the same time, they are accountable for the exercise of their authority to the presbyteries to which they belong. In a similar way, presbyteries have responsibility for the care and good order of the congregations within their bounds and are answerable to the synods to which they belong and to the General Assembly.

The interdependence between church courts means that the ministries of any court are broader than the particular decisions it makes and the particular actions it carries out. In fact, the ministries of any court include the ministries of all those under their care. For example, the ministries of sessions include the ministries of all persons under their care. Equally, the ministries of presbyteries include the ministries of all the congregations within their bounds and all the ministers, members and adherents¹⁸ of those congregations. In fact, presbyteries exist primarily to serve the congregations within them, to equip them for their ministries. Without congregations, we would not have presbyteries.

This structure places church courts in a hierarchy, but never places individuals in a hierarchy. In fact, the same individuals often serve in courts at different levels. Within any particular court, all members serve as colleagues. Each one has an equal voice and vote, “to take away all occasion of tyranny.”¹⁹

Minister-Congregation-Presbytery Covenants

Within our church structure, presbyteries have the responsibility of care both for congregations and for ministers. Presbytery responsibility for congregations authorizes it to take a number of significant actions in the life of a congregation: to constitute or dissolve a congregation; to dissolve a session or to augment it with assessor elders from other congregations in the presbytery; to approve or disapprove a congregation’s call to a minister; to appoint a minister to a congregation for a term; to dissolve the pastoral tie between a congregation and a minister. Presbytery responsibility for ministers authorizes it: to grant an individual permission to prepare for ministry and to seek a call in this denomination; to ordain a minister; to permit a minister to accept a call from a congregation; to induct or appoint a minister to a particular ministry within the presbytery; to permit a minister to resign or retire; to place a minister on a leave of absence; to investigate a complaint or charge against a minister; to discipline a minister.

The dual responsibility of presbyteries for congregations and for ministers means that the relationships they share are three-way covenants. Such covenants typically begin with the

desire of the congregation and the minister to engage in ministry together: the congregation agrees to call the minister and the minister wishes to accept this call. Once the presbytery of the calling congregation gives its approval of the call and the minister accepts it,²⁰ the presbytery inducts the minister. That person becomes the minister of the congregation and the moderator of its session. However the minister does not become a member of the congregation. Instead, the minister becomes a member of the presbytery to which the congregation belongs. The presbytery holds the minister's credentials and is responsible for the care, guidance and, if necessary, discipline of the minister. The minister serves as the presbytery's executive within the congregation, particularly with respect to matters relating to worship.²¹

The ending of such a three-way covenant requires the action of presbytery. Reasons for presbyteries dissolving pastoral ties between congregations and ministers include: the minister wishes to accept another call, to retire, to pursue some other employment or activity, or is unable to continue for health reasons; the pastoral relationship between the congregation and the minister has deteriorated; the presbytery is disciplining the minister for misconduct; the congregation can no longer afford to support the minister. Regardless of the reason, the presbytery is required to give the congregation and the minister appropriate notification and opportunities to address the question of dissolving the pastoral tie before it makes its decision.

The Value of Congregation-Presbytery Relationships

Our presbyterian way of governing ourselves possesses a number of strengths. In the first place, it provides a structure, time and place for the Spirit of God to be at work within Christian community and to be discerned by it. There is a deep organic unity between the membership of the church and its government, and between the supervising body in each congregation (the session) and the supervising body that embraces each congregation (the presbytery).²²

Further, relationships of responsibility and accountability mean that all decisions are not made at one level. The requirement to hold discussions and to make some decisions in both the congregation and the presbytery may provide for a healthy 'standing back' from the issues. This in turn may permit better decisions for the common good.

Moreover in very tangible ways, the fact that we are accountable to one another can serve to keep us honest. Ministers and congregations know that they are accountable to the presbytery for the way they conduct their ministries, and there may be times when this fact serves to influence their behaviour for the better. At the same time, also in very tangible ways, the fact that we are responsible for one another can serve to keep us connected to one another.

Finally, relationships of responsibility and accountability mean that we are not alone when we face challenges. Within a presbytery, for instance, a congregation may be able to draw on the resources of others. The sharing of our human, material and monetary resources provides the context for genuine community to develop, even as it allows us to accomplish more than we could on our own.

Strengthening Congregation-Presbytery Relationships

How are we to live faithfully in these covenantal relationships? What attitudes and actions will strengthen our ability to do so? What do we need to do to bring our life together more fully in line with the beliefs we profess?

Accepting the Counter-Cultural Nature of the Gospel

Faithful living in covenantal relationships requires holding those covenants in high esteem. However, there is much in our culture that argues against covenants.²³ If we are to

From the gospel perspective, the basic framework for all our interactions is not contract, but covenant

Our Christian faith teaches us the reality that we depend on one another

come to value more highly our covenantal relationships within The Presbyterian Church in Canada, we will need to accept the counter-cultural nature of our calling as Christians.

Just how greatly the gospel contradicts the norms of our world can be seen in a brief overview. Modern Western society awards the highest priority to the individual. Persons are encouraged to hold “what is true for me” as the ultimate value. As a result, individualistic perspectives outweigh other values that are based on commitment to the whole.

The influence of this value system can be seen in Canada in the repatriation of the constitution and the proclamation of a Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982). The charter gives priority to the rights and freedoms of individuals, but does not balance this priority with a ‘charter of responsibilities’: the responsibilities of the individual to society as a whole. This omission has yielded a culture that is increasingly individualistic and quick to initiate law suits.

Modern economics reflects these same values. The basic interaction is one of exchange, in which producer and consumer decide what is bought and sold at what price. Contracts spell out limits and clearly define who will be served and at what price. From a consumerist perspective, the highest declared value is pleasing the consumer.

The contrast to the worldview to which we are called as Christians could not be more striking. Here God is honoured as the highest value. We are understood not as self-contained individuals in charge of our own destiny. Instead, our faith teaches us that we are dependent persons who find completeness in Christ and in relation to the community of those who share faith in Christ. Human dignity and worth are sacred because they are derived from God loving us, not from our personal achievements or social roles.

From the gospel perspective, the basic framework for all our interactions is not contract, but covenant. Covenant starts with God who is different and unequal in the relationship and whose covenant qualities are steadfast love and faithfulness. Covenant is shaped by God’s grace. Biblical ‘economics’ are centred, not on exchange, but on donation. What is valued is self-giving for the sake of others, patterned after the way the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit relate to one another in the Trinity.

Flying in the face of our society’s individualism, our Christian faith teaches us the reality that we depend on one another. Yet if we do not acknowledge the counter-cultural nature of the gospel, we will not recognize our need for one another. In congregations and presbyteries, we share much more than a common structure. We share the experience of the living God at work in our lives. As we face the challenge of discerning God’s grace and maintaining a perspective of faith in a culture of unfaith, we need one another. Covenantal relationships permit us to support one another in holding fast to what we believe.

Our shared life within the body of Christ means also that we are accountable to God and to one another. All authority in the church is rooted in this accountability. We need to understand and accept Christ’s requirement that we submit to one another. We are called to give and receive trust that allows others, in the name of Christ, to have power over us. If we do not accept our interdependence, if we deny the reality that we have been placed in relationships of responsibility and accountability, our covenant language will make no sense. Whenever a congregation feels that it should handle its life without any reference to the presbytery, whenever a minister shuns the presbytery, whenever a presbytery has no commitment to guiding and caring for its congregations or its ministers, the covenant relationship between them is weakened.

Faithful living in covenantal relationships requires the transforming of our minds and hearts. The capacity to value covenant is a fruit of maturing discipleship that enables us to recognize and embrace God’s ways.

Reconvening

Faithful living in covenantal relationships requires the recognition that at times we have failed. Even as the church celebrates its redemption in Christ, it remains a community of sinners. This means that we act in ways that separate us from God and from one another. Yet keeping the faith means keeping in covenantal relationships. Consequently we stand in continual need of confession, repentance, restoration and the renewal of those covenants. We must provide opportunities for reconvening at appropriate times and contexts as we seek to strengthen congregation-presbytery relationships.

Building Relationships of Trust

The quality of relationships and of the care we provide one another will have a tremendous impact on the healthiness of the covenants between us. Responding faithfully to being called to covenant means developing relationships characterized by respect and Christian love. It means taking the time to know one another. It means acting out of pastoral concern and seeking to help the church fulfill its mission by encouraging people to offer their gifts in Christ's ministry. The importance of nurturing trust within the relationships shared by congregations, ministers and presbyteries cannot be emphasized too strongly.

The Way Ahead

The Called to Covenant project is focussed on three areas where congregations and presbyteries are most intimately involved: regular pastoral oversight of congregations and ministers by presbyteries, planning of congregational ministries and crisis intervention by presbyteries. The three focal areas are interconnected. Each complements the other, and the fruitfulness of the church's efforts in one area may affect how well it does in another.

The interconnectedness between regular pastoral oversight, congregational planning and crisis intervention can be seen in the following disturbing scenario. Unfortunately, this scenario would be familiar in many of our presbyteries. The presbytery has not visited the congregation for five years at the point when a request for help from the session brings a troubled situation to its attention. The session 'S-O-S' comes in the form of a petition, forwarded by the session, from some individuals in the congregation who are asking for action against the minister or congregational leaders.²⁴

The presbytery sends in a visitation team. It finds individuals and groups engaging in hurtful behaviour that is eroding the relationships between them. There are several other indications that the conflict has reached a high level.

Further knowledge of the congregation reveals that both the people and the minister have become frustrated because the congregation's ministry is not what they think it should be (and perhaps not what it once was). This frustration has led to destructive cycles of blame. The people are critical of the minister and perhaps other congregational leaders (blaming the pilot), while at the same time feeling powerless: since the session cannot deal with a complaint against its moderator (i.e. the minister), they ask, who ever evaluates the minister's competence? The minister is critical of the people and perhaps other congregational leaders (blaming the crew), and also feels powerless: since church is perceived by some as a 'volunteer' organization, who can insist that the people honour their pledge "to be co-servants with their minister under Christ"?

Yet, sadly, minister and congregation have not worked to discern who God is calling them to be together. Nor have they tried to understand the world in which they are to bear witness to the love of God. How can ministry be reviewed and guided, with wisdom and grace, when

If we do not accept our interdependence, our covenant language will make no sense

Strengthening the covenantal relationships between congregations and presbyteries will require changes of mind, heart and will as well as improvements in skills and abilities

the minister and people have not struggled to understand God's call to them in that particular time and place?

Lacking such prayerful reflection, they easily lose sight of the spiritual dimensions of the church's mission and fall prey to survival mentality and nostalgia. They ask: How can we get the people we need to keep going? How can we 'do church' so that it will look the way it used to look? They also fail to understand that, in some measure, life in the church cannot be the way it was because the world has changed. Societal attitudes and trends have changed the place the Christian church has in society and are placing tremendous stresses on it. Some examples are the increase of belief that life can be lived without God (secularism), the deterioration of consensus that absolute truths exist (relativism), the decrease of inclination among Christians to seek involvement in a congregation (non-institutional Christian faith) and the depopulation of some parts of the country.

Fortunately, another scenario is also familiar in many presbyteries. In this case, the congregation has planned and reviewed its ministries. The session has arranged times of prayer, bible study and discussion when people have sought God's direction for their congregation. They have asked: Who is God calling us to be among the people who live in this community? What is God calling us to do? How will we share the work? What roles will each of us take, whether minister, elder, congregational leader or member? What concretely are we planning to do, and what are the next steps on that journey? How fruitful do our efforts so far appear to have been, and what shape should this work take in future: the same or different? What support or resources do we need?

In the context of prayerful working together to learn and carry out God's will for the congregation, it experiences a unifying sense of purpose. People feel free to offer their opinions. In discussions about the direction the congregation should take, there are many voices expressing a variety of views, often passionately. People seem to expect such diversity: after all, hasn't our creative God made us all wonderfully? The result is an environment where people and viewpoints are respected and energy is released for mission. It is not uncommon for two individuals to disagree about the importance of one part of the congregation's ministry while working together side by side in another area. When this dynamic is repeated many times across the congregation, the people are effectively bound together by their very diversity. The shared commitment to witness to the love of God in particular ways helps the people and the minister to work together even in the face of demanding challenges. They are strengthened for their witness and for avoiding destructive conflict.

The presbytery sends a visitation team at regular intervals. It uses the congregation's plan for ministry as the framework for the encouragement and guidance it offers the congregation and the minister.

These two scenarios illustrate how faithfulness of congregations in planning and reviewing their ministries and faithfulness of presbyteries in caring for their congregations and their ministers through regular oversight reduce greatly the development of crises that require presbyteries to intervene. At the same time, as congregation and presbytery engage in these activities, relationships that develop assist presbyteries to intervene wisely on those occasions when problems do develop and the congregation needs the presbytery to serve as an outside resource.

Both scenarios — and a wide range of possibilities in between — are part of the current reality of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. The goal of efforts initiated by the Called to Covenant project is to strengthen the covenantal relationships between congregations and presbyteries through attention to the key ministries of regular pastoral oversight, congregational planning and crisis intervention. Strengthening the ability of

congregations and presbyteries to engage in all these kinds of interactions will certainly build trust. At the same time, these interactions can be expected to be most fruitful when relationships of trust have been built.

Strengthening the covenantal relationships between congregations and presbyteries will require changes of mind, heart and will as well as improvements in skills and abilities. Certainly the energy and commitment such transformation demands can appear daunting. Nevertheless our efforts will help The Presbyterian Church in Canada to be more truly who God is calling us to be: communities that build up the body of Christ, bringing its covenant members to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity in Christ.²⁵

CALLED *to* CARE 1

The Ministry of Regular Pastoral Oversight by Presbyteries

Congregations and presbyteries are called to be in covenantal relationship with God and each other. (For fuller discussion, see chapter 1) The congregation, established by and accountable to the presbytery, is called to carry out Christ's ministry. The presbytery is responsible for the care and oversight of the congregations within its bounds. Presbytery pastoral oversight includes encouraging an atmosphere where each congregation experiences the grace of God, and stimulating and helping congregations to fulfil their mission as best they can. Presbyteries are to support and encourage congregations in all the various seasons of their lives, providing information and offering perspective by observing situations from outside the context of the congregation, seeing the bigger picture.

The covenant between a congregation and a presbytery becomes a three-way covenant whenever a minister is called by the congregation, with presbytery approval, or appointed to the congregation by the presbytery. Presbytery oversight of ministers, who become members of presbytery, includes offering them support, encouragement and a broader perspective on matters relating to their ministry.

These relationships of responsibility and accountability flow out of the covenant into which Christ has drawn us, and must be understood and accepted as such. In its most faithful expressions, pastoral oversight by presbyteries is intentional, proactive, explicit and carried out in an atmosphere of mutual trust and shared respect where faith and will work together. Where pastoral oversight is achieved in its fullness, there will be openness, mutual concern, inclusivity, celebration, transparency and strong relationships.

Points of Contact

The significant contexts where the paths of presbyteries and congregation may cross are:

- presbytery meetings
- congregational visitations
- pulpit vacancies
- presbytery educational events
- session meetings and congregational events.

Each of these interactions provides an opportunity to strengthen the relationships that form the basis for the covenants between congregations, ministers and presbyteries. To improve the giving and receiving of pastoral oversight by presbyteries, a number of strategies

have been identified. They are listed below, not in any order of importance since different approaches may need to be emphasized at different times in any particular relationship.

These basic strategies include finding ways:

- to improve communication
- to help people to get to know each other
- to worship God together
- to focus attention on our primary purpose — the worship, love and service of God — and allow this reality to shape what we do together
- to share celebrations and concerns
- to pray for one another
- to strengthen Christian faith and discipleship
- to teach: increase knowledge and skills needed for roles and tasks
- to provide information and support
- to take some specific actions to fulfill your responsibilities and to encourage others to do the same.

In the sections that follow, these basic approaches have been applied to the significant points of contact between congregations and presbyteries. The list of ideas is comprehensive and includes things being done routinely by some presbyteries. Presbyteries are encouraged to pick and choose, experimenting to discover which approaches are most helpful in their context.

A. PRESBYTERY MEETINGS

The suggestions are described in terms of the component parts of a presbytery meeting: welcoming, location/time, worship, fellowship, challenges and celebrations, business, commissioning and blessing.

Welcoming

Invitation

- Extend the invitation to all within the bounds of presbytery.
- Invite a different elder each month to go with the representative elder to the meeting.
- Announce meetings in congregational bulletins, newsletters, by email, on website.
- Ensure that it is clear how to find and gain access to the meeting location, e.g. map/signs, church and room name.
- Provide parking information.

Greeting

- Have a greeter to welcome presbyters and guests.
- Use name tags.
- Introduce and welcome visitors in the meeting.

Initiation

- Familiarize those present with how the meeting will unfold (who/how/when to speak). For guests/visitors, a brief handout could be provided or the moderator could give a brief summary.
- Introduce new members to the court through a training session, providing a job description and/or holding a covenanting service at the time of establishing the new roll of the presbytery at the fall meeting.

Where pastoral oversight is achieved in its fullness, there will be openness, mutual concern, inclusivity, celebration, transparency and strong relationships

Location/Time

- Rotate the location of each meeting (if possible) among congregations to increase the awareness of its constituent congregations and to provide congregational members with greater opportunity to attend.
- Consider the ambiance and seating of the meeting (visibility, hearing, comfort) to enhance the meeting dynamics.
- Consider a time that includes people who work outside the church.

Worship

While every court of the church is opened and closed with prayer, it is generally recognized that time should be set apart for worship as time and circumstances permit. Some courts integrate the worship and meeting time. When the presbytery meeting takes place within the context of worship, it reminds those present of the ways they are connected through covenant. Some presbyteries hold a service of worship immediately before the prayer of constitution which opens the presbytery meeting. Others carry out the entire presbytery meeting as a service of worship, an approach that puts into practice a concept called ‘worshipful work.’²⁶ (See “Worshipful Work”, in the Resource Book.)

Fellowship

Being together ‘at table’ is regarded as a crucial part of building relationships. For example one presbytery that was experiencing conflict agreed to gather together for a meal before the presbytery meeting. No presbytery business could be discussed during the meal time. Eating together became important in healing the present conflict and in reducing future conflicts. If a meal is not possible at each meeting, some presbyteries have dinner at specific meetings throughout the year.

Always plan a social break at meetings for a scheduled length of time and at a scheduled time.

Some presbyteries have used retreats as an important vehicle for building trust, community and collegiality among presbyters (members of presbytery).

Challenges and Celebrations

- Share good news stories.
- Have time for the prayer concerns and celebrations of congregations, individuals and committees of presbytery.
- Share challenges.
- Research and collect data from congregations to identify issues that clusters of congregations within the presbytery may be experiencing.
- Act upon the shared concerns of congregations by providing leadership in seeking possible solutions for these issues.
- Facilitate meetings for sessions within presbytery to discuss common issues and seek new directions.
- Have a pastoral care team of presbytery for the support of ministers and/or congregations.
- If the presbytery rotates locations for its meeting, encourage the host congregation to share what is happening in that congregation.
- If the presbytery meeting location doesn’t rotate among all congregations, provide opportunity, on a rotating basis, for congregations to share what is happening.

Business

- Seek to speak and listen to the truth in love; be respectful, recognizing that people may share different understandings of the truth. At the beginning of each year, agree upon how presbyters will interact with each other and covenant to carry this out.
- Provide training in running meetings and in conflict resolution.
- Seek collaboration, not competition. Meeting formats that place the business of the court within an atmosphere of worship enhance collegiality.
- Determine what issues are to be dealt with as a full court and what issues will be referred to a committee.
- When assigning jobs or tasks, consider the skills and giftedness of people, offer training to enhance skill sets, and set a term for the appointment.
- Appoint lay people to presbytery committees (not just presbyters) to share the workload and provide different perspectives and skills.
- Set up a mentorship program for new presbyters whether they may have been a presbyter in another presbytery or not.
- Prepare and distribute to all new members a clear and concise outline of the “Standing Orders” of the court. This helps people understand how the court orders its work.

Commissioning and Blessing

- Summarize the corporate decisions made and actions taken, and offer them to God in prayer.
- Offer time at the end of the meeting for comment on the process.
- End the meeting with worship, commissioning, and benediction.
- Communicate the work of presbytery back to the session and congregation for information, input and prayer.
- Seek fellowship and conversation with colleagues after and between meetings.

B. PRESBYTERY VISITATION TO CONGREGATIONS

The visitation to congregations by the presbytery is a cornerstone in the covenant relationship between congregation and presbyteries. When this is weak the whole structure is affected. Throughout the church there is a wide variety of practice in carrying out this important role. Some presbyteries no longer have visits; others make token visits but most try to fulfill this significant role. Where visitations are working well, there is significant attention paid to the following steps:

- pre-visitation preparation
- questions
- visitation
- covenanting and moving forward
- evaluation.

Pre-Visitation Preparation

- The purpose and terms of the visitation should be explored and agreed upon by all parties involved.
- In cases when the congregation has worked already to discern the particular ministries to which God is calling it, the presbytery visitation team will wish to receive ahead of time any materials describing the congregation’s planning.
- In all cases, the presbytery visitation team should preview congregational statistical

reports, annual reports and newsletters. As well, presbytery visitors should be knowledgeable about the presbytery's mission, vision and plans, since this information might be pertinent to the congregation as it further develops its plans.

- A timeline for the process should be agreed upon.

Questions

- If there is consensus in any one thing it is that the questions dealing with presbytery visitation of congregations found in the *Book of Forms* are in significant need of revision: the wording is outdated and many questions are designed in yes/no format rather than to foster dialogue.²⁷ Most presbyteries have adopted their own questions.
- Adequate time should be given to the dissemination and answering of any questionnaire used prior to the visitation to poll broadly for topics that should be addressed. There should be accountability for input given by individuals in these questionnaires.
- The visitation team should evaluate the responses to questionnaires before the actual visitation.
- Specific questions for the visitation to facilitate the dialogue should be prepared. These should be supplemented by the analysis of the pre-visitiation questionnaire.

Visitation

- A specific date should be set for the visitation.
- The presbytery visitors should seek to learn the congregation's understanding of the ministry to which God has called it. Talk with the minister, the session, the elders, the board of managers, representatives from all church groups (e.g. women's groups, bible study groups, Sunday school, youth group), and with congregational members-at-large. What roles and responsibilities does each have in helping the congregation to fulfil its mission?
- The visitors should be alert to information that reveals the congregation's level of health. Such information can be quantitative (statistical reports) or qualitative (sense of purpose and motivation).

Signs of congregational good health include:

- leadership that is trusted by the people and sufficient to meet the need
- liturgy that helps the people worship God and grow as Christian disciples
- education in the faith
- active involvement in the community around it
- motivation for all its activities that is directed toward Christ's mission in the world, rather than a survival mentality or nostalgia.

Signs of poor health include:

- being focussed entirely on keeping the church building going
- struggling to keep programs going
- being spread too thin/worn out
- losing any sense they can make a difference
- clinging to hope that is almost apocalyptic
- motivation for involvement in the community or for reaching out to others with the gospel that is directed primarily to staying alive as a congregation.

While assessing the health of the congregation, the presbytery visitors should be looking for signs that it has sufficient vitality to continue. (See "Tools for Presbyteries and

Congregations in Discerning Health” and “Measuring Tool for Ministries”, in the Resource Book.) (See also “Church Health” in Congregational Awareness Studies available from the Bookroom or on the website at www.presbyterian.ca/evangelism. Click on resources and reports.)

When there are signs that the congregation must structure its ministry in a much different form (such as amalgamation or closure), the presbytery will need to follow up this visit with further intervention. (See “A Process for Congregational Turning Points”, in chapter 4.)

- The presbytery visitors must enquire whether the congregation is conducting its life in ways that ensure it offers a safe place to all participants. Does the congregation consistently follow suitable practices for serving food, maintaining building structures, handling money and interacting with vulnerable people? Does it offer adequate training to those in leadership positions? Is adequate insurance coverage in place?
- Identify the presbytery’s roles and responsibilities for supporting the congregation to live out its mission, including naming the various people and committees.
- There needs to be openness about and accountability for input given by individuals. For example, the visitation team will likely meet separately with different groups of people. If it hears comments that should be passed along to the minister and session for follow-up, it must be free to mention the names of those expressing the concerns. This in turn provides the individuals who are directly involved with the possibility of talking and working things out, perhaps coming to a better understanding. Anonymous feedback leaves people feeling powerless and erodes relationships. The opposite of “telling the truth in love”, anonymous feedback is behaviour that denies covenant, and therefore must be avoided.

Covenanting and Moving Forward

- The congregation and presbytery should take time to celebrate and affirm in worship what God is accomplishing in and through the congregation. At the same time, they should recovenant regarding the congregation’s mission, and the roles and responsibilities of the congregation and of the presbytery to accomplish it.
- Time should be given for the new mission to be enacted.

Evaluation

- The presbytery should follow up the visitation, sending the same presbytery representatives as were involved in the visitation if possible. Presbytery seeks to work with the congregation to celebrate, to evaluate progress, to help refocus direction(s) and/or to support new initiatives.

(See “Guidelines for Presbytery Visitations” and “Presbytery Visitations to Congregations” in the Resource Book.)

C. PULPIT VACANCIES

The Life and Mission Agency has published (1999) an excellent document that covers all details with regards to calling a minister, entitled *Calling a Minister: Guidelines for Presbyteries, Interim Moderators and Search Committees*. This resource is recommended for use by interim moderators and search committees. It is available from the Bookroom and on the website at www.presbyterian.ca/mcv. Click on resources and “Calling a Minister”.

D. PRESBYTERY EVENTS

- Poll congregations to find out what they are interested in learning to support their ministries and host educational events inviting all the Presbyterian churches in the area.

Have workshops/training for:

- Sunday school teachers
- elders
- presbytery members — to enhance skills required for effective pastoral oversight, planning, and crisis intervention

Have youth events for the whole presbytery:

- try sharing youth leadership between some congregations
- rotate location of events
- host presbytery-sponsored monthly contemporary worship

Be a resource:

- Give support and information to congregations through speakers, educators, and articles.
- Provide information about learning centres and training events such as the Elders' Institute (St. Andrew's Hall, Vancouver School of Theology), the Centre for Asian and Canadian Theology and Ministry (Knox College), the Ewart Centre for Lay Education (Knox College), and Teacher/Leader Course (TLC) (a program of the Life and Mission Agency of The Presbyterian Church in Canada) and other events sponsored by various groups within the church.
- Help congregations get to know each other's strengths and weaknesses so that they can help each other.

Use the expertise of the regional staff.

E. SESSION AND CONGREGATIONAL EVENTS

Sessions and congregations need regular education regarding the role of presbytery.

Topics include:

- what is currently happening within the bounds of the presbytery
- job description of presbytery
- when does a congregation call for help from presbytery
- how to seek assistance when friction is present within a congregation or between a congregation and its minister
- what does presbytery do with its money
- information about the authority of presbytery when selling a church building or manse, calling a minister, and providing pulpit supply
- the importance of the pastoral care team of presbytery, and how it supports ministers.

Education can be provided through:

- workshops to educate congregations about presbytery
- an information brochure/booklet or series of bulletin inserts outlining the function, duties and responsibilities of presbytery
- classes for communicants and new members
- the representative elder from the congregation or a guest representative elder from another congregation
- pulpit exchanges between ministers and congregations within the presbytery.

F. COMMUNICATION

General Communication

Better communication is needed about the activities of presbytery:

- Have a presbytery newsletter.
- Make use of PCConnect (an email newsletter produced monthly by the Life and Mission Agency), web pages and email.
- Highlight presbytery events in weekly bulletin or newsletter.
- Reports by the minister or representative elder to session are very important.
- Choose an articulate representative elder who has had training about that role.
- Have a different elder go to the presbytery meeting with the representative elder each month.

Session is usually better educated about presbytery than the congregation. It is important to have the report of the representative elder shared with the rest of the congregation.

Official Communication

The *Book of Forms* is an important resource:

- Improve its index system — make it more user-friendly.
- Use clear up-to-date language.
- Name appropriate responsibilities for the General Assembly, synods, and presbyteries.
- A new manual for ruling elders is needed.
- Any forms, information and procedures from Church Offices are welcome.



CALLED *to* BE *and to* DO

The Ministry of Congregational Planning

Some people plan for fear of the consequences if they don't. Others view planning as a sign of structural vitality. Big business offers its quarterly forecast as evidence of corporate efficiency. In the church, we give ourselves to planning not because it is an organizational necessity but because it is an expression of Christian stewardship. Together we ask God: How can we use the gifts you have given us to share your ministry of reconciliation here, in this place and among this people? Who are you calling us to be and what are you calling us to do?

For us, planning is not so much a process as it is a *ministry*, a ministry exercised in concert with partners in covenant. In the midst of this ministry we find ourselves responding to and with each other — seeking the Spirit's direction, hearing opinions, expressing ideas, sharing interests, reviewing options, asking questions, considering innovations, all of which has us paying attention to each other and behaving as we have been called to behave, as the body of Christ.

In these times of listening and sharing — hours steeped as much in prayer as conversation — a sense of mission can begin to take shape. As challenges are named and measured, priorities for ministry can emerge. As the way forward becomes increasingly clear, a vision can come into focus. Forged within a context where covenant is honoured, this vision will claim broad ownership, never becoming the property of one individual or one group. It will bind, not divide.

Planning is Not Easy

Little about this planning ministry is simple or straightforward. It invites us to be sensitive and discerning in ways that do not come easily. Giving ourselves to these ways with energy and enthusiasm is challenging. But these are challenges we need to embrace because in the midst of them, as congregations and presbyteries, we will find ourselves living in obedience to an essential biblical reality, that “we are members one of another”.

The New Testament does not overflow with planning models. There may be reasons for this. Convinced that the Lord's return was imminent, the first believers gave themselves to a simple agenda, that of staying faithful amid stormy surroundings. A second reason may have been present. A church familiar with the Spirit's active involvement in its life found it both easy and natural to expect the Spirit to intervene directly, either affirming or adjusting the mission as each day required.

We confess the Holy Spirit as our comforter and help, believing that the Spirit forms and equips the church, “sometimes gently, sometimes powerfully”. We also believe that the Lord of the church honours our willingness to wrestle prayerfully and deliberately with the issues we face. It is entirely consistent with the tenor of congregational life, as the New Testament portrays it, that we “stand firm in one spirit”, giving ourselves as one body to “striving side by side for the faith of the gospel”.²⁸ Such ‘standing’ and ‘striving’ invite us to embrace our calling and identity as a covenant people, chosen and treasured.

An Environment Shaped by Values

God’s call to live in covenant summons us to live within an environment shaped by specific core values. These values include a willingness to trust, a disposition to yield, a determination to encourage and a readiness to risk.

A willingness to trust equips us to establish a comfort zone in which differing points of view can be exchanged confidently and freely. It has us turning easily to consider new directions, pausing to question a standard assumption, perhaps even reversing our direction to recover an idea rejected during earlier conversation.

A disposition to yield prepares us to consider opinions contrary to our own. It equips us to let another have the last word, to understand when the conversation circles back to a point raised earlier, to see the wisdom in a proposal previously overlooked.

A determination to encourage enables us to support an objective we once thought marginal. It prompts us to take ownership in the emerging plan, promising to pray, offering to help, suggesting ways to sustain the momentum.

A readiness to risk positions us to think expansively, to cast our gaze beyond the standard patterns belonging to last month or last year. It allows us to forecast designs belonging to a fresh set of possibilities, stirring us to venture into territory we once thought little more than a pipe dream.

More on Trust

While trust may be many things, layered and complex, at the very least it is a sign of health. Within the church community, trust — God’s amazing gift — flows out of our rootedness in Christ. The testimony of those who have experienced trust within the courts of the church reveals that levels of trust can be generated as people pray for each other and their respective congregations, and as they work at creating a climate of graceful listening. Whether in session or presbytery, trust will flow as we commit ourselves to being vulnerable, honest, transparent, and genuine. It can be enhanced as we give ourselves to activities such as sharing meals and setting aside time to enjoy each other’s company. Again, the testimony of those who have experienced trust within the courts of the church is that trust can develop when all the hidden agendas have been relinquished and yesterday’s tired grievances forgiven.

Getting on With It

Getting from here to there, from where we are to where we want to be, can be challenging, especially when the terrain is uneven and the surroundings unfamiliar. Maps can prove helpful. This planning ministry is essentially a mapmaking ministry, a venture in trust and obedience which will have the body of Christ equipped to step forward in faith. Those experienced in this ministry speak of three stages — drawing the map, moving forward, and reviewing the journey. All stages require continual prayerfulness to discern where God’s Holy Spirit is leading.

(See “Planning Your Congregation’s Future”, in the Resource Book.)

Together we ask
God: How can
we use the gifts
you have given us
to share your
ministry of
reconciliation
here, in this place
and among
this people?

Within the church community, trust — God’s amazing gift — flows out of our rootedness in Christ

Drawing the Map

The vocabulary of “getting on” implies making a start, which will mean asking the questions that can help us get our bearings. The time-honoured questions involving strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats [SWOT] have proved helpful for many. Our bearings will come into focus as we determine not only the things we do well, but also the areas in which we need improvement. In the course of naming our opportunities and understanding what threatens us, we will discover more of who and what we are. We will begin to get a feel for the landscape we occupy.

The next steps require choosing a destination and charting a course to it, always in the spirit of prayerfulness that seeks God’s will for the congregation. What concretely do we understand God is calling us to be and to do? What small steps will we take along the way? To make the journey more possible, we will choose goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-specific [the SMART formula].

A word of encouragement may be in order here. Analysing and making plans, while valuable, can evolve into a trap when they drag on and on. At some point, it will be time to move beyond analysis into action. Defining our objectives and building consensus will be important. But having drawn our map and settled on our destination, at some point it will be time to get moving.

Moving Forward

Reaching destinations on a map can be easy. Prayerfully following the map of the congregation’s plan for ministry will prove more difficult.

As the congregation steps forward on the journey, it will discover that making changes requires work: letting go of the familiar and grieving it, accepting the uncertainty of the as-yet untravelled paths, and embracing the new situation.²⁹ The costs of the transition may be emotional, spiritual, physical, and financial. These costs must be borne for the congregation to make the transition it has chosen. Throughout the journey the session must be attentive to the needs of the people for nurture, support and challenge. Congregations with a plan can move forward with a passion for ministry and mission beyond themselves.

Reviewing the Journey

Choosing a destination carries with it a determination to test ourselves later on, to ask some important questions at regular intervals. A year and two years into the journey, it will be important to review the journey, prayerfully opening ourselves to God’s guidance. How are we doing? Are we getting there, nearing our destination? What are the signs of grace, the occasions and interactions and happenings that reveal that the Spirit of God has been moving among and through us? Let us celebrate them. In what ways have we quenched the Holy Spirit, choosing anxiety and familiarity instead of stepping out in faith? Let us ask forgiveness from God and one another, and recommit ourselves to the journey. We will ask these questions recognizing that our plans are not engraved on tablets of stone. What sense do we have that God is calling us into a different direction? Let us redraw the map and move forward.

Planning is Essential

The congregation’s map-making ministry of planning is an essential expression of its stewardship of God’s gifts. When congregations engage in this ministry, they are strengthened for their witness. As well, the prayerful listening to God and to one another that faithful planning requires helps to create a context where people and differences are respected and destructive conflict can be prevented.

In Presbyterian congregations, the elders share with the minister responsibility for leadership, pastoral care and oversight of the congregation. All the activities of its life are under the direction of the session. Accordingly, the session is expected to give leadership to the congregation in mapping out its work and witness.

The Role of the Presbytery

What is the role of the presbytery in this planning ministry? Presbyteries can begin by planning their own ministries, thereby serving as good role models. For presbytery's plan for presbytery, see Appendix C in "Planning Your Congregation's Future" in the Resource Book. Presbyteries may choose to adapt the tools in "Planning Your Congregation's Future" that have been developed for congregational use.

Presbyteries are to support and encourage their congregations, and to serve as a resource and source of assistance when needed. Presbyteries provide accountability to sessions, ensuring that the steps of mapmaking, journeying and reviewing are being carried out in congregations. Presbyteries also provide support, encouragement and a means of accountability to ministers.

Experience within this church demonstrates the importance of presbyteries, through the exercise of their regular pastoral oversight, helping the leadership of congregations to plan and review their ministries. At the same time, the presbytery uses the congregation's plan for ministry as the framework for the guidance that the presbytery provides its congregations and ministers. In these ways, presbyteries can contribute to their congregations fulfilling what Christ is calling them to be and to do.

CALLED *to* CARE 2

The Ministry of Crisis Intervention by Presbyteries

In The Presbyterian Church in Canada, the care of congregations and ministers belongs to the presbytery. (For fuller discussion, see chapter 1.) This role gives the presbytery the duty and authority to intervene to assist congregations that are experiencing barriers to the way ahead. Such barriers take a variety of forms ranging from crisis, mistrust, troubled relationships between people or between people and minister, the need for expertise in specialized programming or for assistance with sound financial management. Presbytery intervention requires a recognition that the issues are beyond the current capacity of the congregation. Broader perspectives and outside resources are needed. Requests for assistance from presbytery come in many forms, formal and informal. Letters from session asking for help, petitions, telephone calls and office visits are all examples of the ways requests may come to presbytery.

Effective intervention by presbytery depends on well developed, trusting relationships between congregation and presbytery. (How to nurture such relationships is the subject of chapter 2.) Trusting relationships provide the opportunity for the presbytery to know the congregation, its people, history and culture. This increases the ability of the presbytery to offer wise and sensitive guidance when required.

The interactions between presbyteries and congregations that are facing special challenges will be limited severely whenever trust does not exist between them. Unfortunately, congregations often come into contact with presbytery only when they are searching for a new minister or are in a time of crisis. When members of presbytery visit in the context of a crisis and without having built a trusting relationship, presbytery may be perceived as an enemy rather than a fellow servant of Christ. After all, presbytery holds a fair amount of power. The importance of nurturing trusting relationships, for day-to-day matters and for times of special challenge, cannot be overstated.

Human resources are key to presbyteries assisting congregations well. When congregations (and sometimes presbyteries) are feeling overwhelmed, the question arises immediately: Who will help? Who will show us the way ahead? This chapter will focus on the development of human resources to serve on behalf of the presbytery at times when congregations are facing significant barriers in their ministries. How can we identify and

develop people who are equipped — spiritually, mentally and emotionally — to give the necessary skilled leadership? Developing people with the necessary leadership skills will take time. This is a long-term process, not a quick fix.

As presbyteries seek to equip themselves to intervene well, they will need to carry out the following steps:

- identify human resources: who will go for us?
- develop human resources: what do they need to learn?
- keep the intervention process open and informative
- carry out an intervention.

At the same time, The Presbyterian Church in Canada will need to implement church-wide strategies to assist and equip presbyteries and congregations for their tasks. The current reality in many congregations and presbyteries is that the church is under stress. There are pressures on time and money, people are tired, and the leadership describes itself as feeling ragged from constantly having ‘to put out fires.’ In addition, some presbyteries have too few ministers for the number of pastoral charges, resulting in the ministers having to fulfill extra duties as interim moderator. In the longer term, the possibility exists that, if we can break the cycle of investing much of our energy in dealing with problems and damage control, resources will be freed up for more creative, relationship-building efforts. In the meantime, some presbyteries may need help from synod or General Assembly levels to be able to attempt the suggestions being made in this chapter.

The congregations have a central role in helping the interventions of the presbyteries to bear good fruit. Their most important work is to deepen their openness to the Spirit of God moving among them. They will need to acquire the will and the capacity to repent, to be transformed, and to recovenant. Without this, no reconciliation or overcoming of obstacles can take place. Further, without reconciliation the planning of the congregation’s future ministry (as outlined in chapter 3) will be compromised severely. All interventions need to give adequate attention to the spiritual dimensions of the barriers that the congregation is experiencing. As much potential as developing skilled interveners has for this church, in itself it is no guarantee that barriers will be surpassed and health restored.

Identifying Human Resources

As presbyteries seek to discern appropriate individuals to serve as interveners, they will face a number of questions. What personal qualities and skills do interveners need? Where and how do we find these individuals?

Interveners need personal qualities and skills that are similar to those required for interim ministry, including:

- ability to present a non-anxious presence in the midst of transition, grief and conflict
- excellent communication skills (including listening skills)
- ability to diagnose a situation accurately and develop action plans quickly
- ability to provide honest and accurate feedback
- ability to honour the work of others, past and present
- awareness of being a significant but limited part of the congregation’s history
- credibility within presbytery
- a respect for the presbytery and a respected reputation within the presbytery
- ability to work in a team.

Interveners may be found through one or more of the following:

- establishing a special group within the membership of the presbytery
- making use of the skills of our own lay people

The importance of nurturing trusting relationships, for day-to-day matters and for times of special challenge, cannot be overstated

- collaborating with a neighbouring presbytery
- working with the synod
- tapping community resources and other denominations.

How could presbyteries find the appropriate people?

- The presbytery would first want to ascertain how much of what it needs is available within the membership of the presbytery.
- The presbytery could follow this up by writing to the sessions within its bounds. Many lay people within our congregations have developed skills in their secular workplace that would equip them well to serve as interveners within our church.
- When more is required, even after pursuing the above two approaches, presbyteries may want to contact their neighbouring presbyteries and synod.
- Presbyteries could take steps to learn what resources exist in the other churches and wider community, perhaps through enquiries to the district ministerial. (See “Consultants and Resource and Training Centres for Conflict Resolution”, in the Resource Book.)

Developing Human Resources

As the presbytery seeks to ensure that the intervention team acquires the necessary competence, it should first gather its interveners together to learn what skills and knowledge they have already. What gifts and skills do they bring to this ministry, and what do they need to learn? The presbytery could arrange for training of its intervention team. Such training (and the costs) could be shared with neighbouring presbyteries, the synod or locally with ecumenical partners. The presbytery could also maintain a library of books on these subjects. (See “Consultants and Resource and Training Centres for Conflict Resolution”, “Framework for Understanding Conflict”, and “Levels of Conflict”, in the Resource Book.)

The presbytery’s care and support for its intervention teams does not end with the provision of adequate training. Many individuals who have served on presbytery intervention teams have described the significant spiritual, emotional and energy cost of that involvement. Presbyteries must ensure that their interveners are receiving adequate pastoral care.

Ensuring an Open and Informative Process

As presbyteries seek to keep the intervention process open and informative, they may use such means as³⁰:

- clarifying for the congregation that they can attend presbytery when matters related to their congregation are being discussed. The congregation has a voice through their representative or assessor elder. The presbytery will ensure there is someone at the presbytery meeting to assist them and clarify matters that they don’t understand.
- ensuring they receive as much information as possible before any meetings or visits requiring major decisions.
- preparing documents in a large type for easy readability.
- providing a list of names of members of presbytery (with telephone numbers and email) whom people can contact with their questions.

Carrying Out an Intervention

With trained people in place and open lines of communication, the presbytery now faces the question of what form its intervention will take. There are a number of different strategies that can be used depending on the circumstances. These strategies can be applied in a broad range of situations. Some examples appear below.

When congregations (and sometimes presbyteries) are feeling overwhelmed, the question arises immediately: Who will help? Who will show us the way ahead?

A. BRIDGEBUILDER™

“Bridgebuilder™” is a structured process for helping congregations in times of transition and tension.³¹

What it is:

- a process of getting ‘unstuck’
- a process of empowering people to create a new future

What it is not:

- an attempt to fix by reason or recommendation
- an attempt to mediate a compromise between forces in opposition
- an attempt to be an expert telling weakened forces what to do

Role of the intervention team:

- to move the congregation from a focus on weakness to a focus on strength
- to move the congregation from a focus on symptoms to changes in their patterns of behaviour
- to move the congregation from anxiety to clarity
- to move the congregation from ‘stuckness’ to new adaptations

The process involves the intervention team entering the church community, providing education, gathering feedback from participants in small groups and personal interviews (10 leaders, 10 members, staff) and presenting a feedback report that outlines some possible scenarios, health promotion, and aftercare.

B. MEDIATION

Mediation is the process of facilitating dialogue between disputants who are participating voluntarily in a process of solving a problem.³²

Goals of mediation:

- to facilitate dialogue between disputants
- to help parties move from personal antagonism to focus on issues
- to help parties solve their own problems and reach a mutually satisfactory agreement

The role of the mediator:

- to set a positive tone
- to encourage productive communication
- to surface assumptions, feelings
- to define issues
- to point to guiding principles (e.g. interest-based rather than position-based bargaining; direct dialogue)
- to teach/coach effective communication
- to help parties to define and assert interests
- to assist in defining and evaluating options
- in some cases, to provide technical expertise
- to assist parties to build a final agreement

The congregations have a central role to deepen their openness to the Spirit of God moving among them

The process of mediation involves:

- introduction (explain process, role of mediator, ground rules)
- story-telling (the disputants have the opportunity to describe the situation from their perspectives)
- problem-solving
- note areas of agreement or common concern
- list issues for discussion
- generate and examine options for resolution
- throughout the problem-solving phase, the mediator may need to shift focus back and forth between issues (i.e. the problems to be solved) and healing strategies and spiritual ministry.
- agreement

(See “Mediation”, in the Resource Book.)

C. A PROCESS FOR CONGREGATIONAL TURNING POINTS

As discussed more fully in chapter 2 on the ministry of regular pastoral oversight by presbyteries, presbytery and session should regularly be examining together some of the “snapshots” of the current congregation’s life and ministry. This involves reviewing printed information such as statistical, financial and annual reports as well as newsletters. It also involves listening to the people as they describe what is happening, the challenges they are facing and the decisions they have been making.

At times when congregational vitality is seriously under review, presbytery must provide appropriate pastoral care and support. In cases where congregational leadership is weak due to age, lack of time, numbers or the limited availability of the interim moderator, the presbytery may appoint assessor elders. Another possibility is the appointment of a project team, comprised of people who possess the necessary gifts for a particular situation.

Decision to close a congregation or amalgamate with another congregation is not made easily or lightly. Some steps that can assist a congregation in this discerning process include:

- Remembering or telling the congregation’s story: What difference has the congregation made in the life of our community? What have been the congregation’s particular gifts and strengths?
- Where are we now? A look at the different facets of the church’s life: spiritual, outreach, and events that build community.
- What are the options? Brainstorm as if anything is possible.
- What things no longer need to be carried out?
- How do we imagine the congregation’s future?

(See chapter 3 for a full treatment of the planning and review of congregational ministries.)

One example of a presbytery proposing a creative way to provide support for a congregation wishing to restructure its ministry is found in the Presbytery of Montreal. The presbytery has agreed that if a congregation decides to sell its building but remain an active congregation, then the congregation is given stewardship of the money received from the sale of the building. The congregation is able to spend any money earned by the principal, but is unable to spend the principal itself without permission of the presbytery. The principal is not to be spent on operating costs, but on achieving a new undertaking, such as an outreach project or some other endeavour that would enable the congregation to move in a new direction. To date, no congregation that has sold its building has asked to spend its principal.

If the discussion leads to a decision to close or amalgamate, the permission of the presbytery must be sought. See 200.8 and 200.11 in the *Book of Forms*.

When the decision has been made to close or amalgamate the congregation, presbyteries must be aware of the following tasks³³:

- ensuring session and board minutes are up-to-date
- ensuring congregational roll and pastoral care lists are accurate
- ensuring valuables and documents are listed and whereabouts known
- assisting the congregation in the sale of church property, under the direction of the denominational Trustee Board
- working with individual members to help them through the difficult time of changing membership
- providing assistance to the session, including arrangements for the offering of ongoing pastoral care to members who are shut-in.

Implementing Church-Wide Strategies

As the denomination seeks to assist and equip presbyteries and congregations in these tasks, church-wide effort will be essential. This effort could take the following forms:

- providing national teams to come to the synods to offer training for appropriate presbytery representatives.
- coaching to provide advice to intervention teams who need support while they are in the midst of a presbytery intervention. The intervention team needs to feel supported and equipped for its task.
- developing and maintaining a database of trained individuals both inside and outside The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

The church needs to consider the question of whether its presbyteries can carry out their necessary ministries of intervention with only “volunteers” from congregations and presbytery (both lay and clergy). Some synods have chosen to structure a synod staff position to assist presbyteries with interventions.

Some of the ways that other denominations have responded to this challenge should be noted. The Presbyterian Church (USA) employs people in paid presbytery positions called ‘executive presbyter’. The United Church of Canada assists its presbyteries in ministries of intervention through ‘conference ministers’ (a ‘conference’ is analogous to our synod). In the Reformed Church of America, in one synod comprised of five ‘classes’ (‘classes’ are analogous to our presbyteries), the five classes pooled their funds to appoint one synod staff person. Each classis also contributed a couple of people (volunteers, clergy or lay) to serve on a combined synod team of intervenors. The synod staff person taught and coached the team, which served wherever it was needed within the synod.

Some presbyteries may find that a large percentage of their ministers are serving as interim moderators. When congregations are not able to call a minister and need to spend time reimagining their future, this places additional demands on the interim moderator. In such cases, a presbytery may choose to appoint an additional minister, perhaps a retired minister on the appendix to the roll of that presbytery, to serve as interim moderator to several congregations. The presbytery may also wish to appoint a minister to work as interim moderator within the bounds of the presbytery for a designated amount of time within individual congregations. The cost could be shared by the congregations and the presbytery. Presbyteries should feel free to find creative solutions to augment their human resources for ministries of intervention.

Conclusion

To care faithfully for their congregations, presbyteries must prepare themselves to serve as an outside resource when a congregation faces challenges beyond its current capacity. Such preparation requires identifying and developing people who can offer appropriate skilled leadership. It also requires congregations and presbyteries to deepen their openness to the reconciling Spirit of God. Although this work takes time, commitment and creativity, it nevertheless allows presbyteries, serving under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to fulfill the purpose for which they exist: the equipping of their congregations for their ministries.

CALLED *to* COVENANT

Strengthening Congregation-Presbytery Relationships

In love, the Triune God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — has called us into relationship. God has reconciled us through Christ and united us with him through our baptism. With abundant grace, God has given us gifts enabling our response: the gift of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit to teach us and remind us of Christ and to intercede for us, and the spiritual gifts to share Christ's ministry.

Our calling into covenant relationship with God places us in covenant relationship with others in the church, the community of 'those who have been called out'. We affirm and reaffirm who and whose we are each time we worship God together.

The church's witness to the gracious love of God is shaped by the quality of its covenantal relationships. In The Presbyterian Church in Canada, this means that the relationships between congregations and presbyteries matter. They can build up the body of Christ, releasing creative energy for mission and ministry. Equally, they can harm the church, directing its attention inward to its hurts and grievances, troubled relationships, and anxieties about survival. Without doubt, congregation-presbytery relationships affect how we are perceived by the world and how we influence the world in the name of Christ.

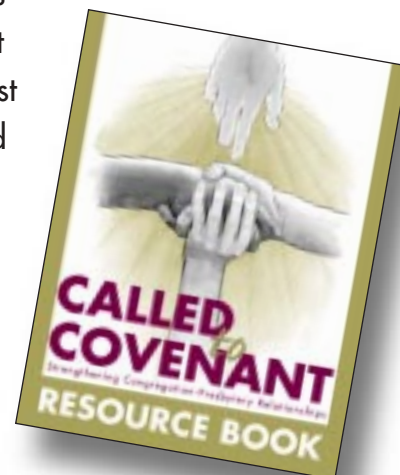
As described in the previous chapters, the work of strengthening congregation-presbytery relationships must take a number of forms. We must learn to acknowledge our need for one another, resisting voices to the contrary, so that we can value the covenants that form the reality of our existence. We must develop trust, by intentionally growing to know and care for one another. We must plan and review our ministries. We must develop the human resources to carry out necessary ministries of intervention.

Strengthening congregation-presbytery relationships will require spiritual work, allowing the Holy Spirit to effect changes of heart, mind and will. It will also require new ways of interacting together, new tools and the development of skills. We can anticipate that at some moments the church will be involved in reviewing and changing its ways. At other moments, it will be sharing what it has learned, affirming what is good, inviting the weaker member to be mentored by the stronger. Through these efforts, seeking and receiving the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit, The Presbyterian Church in Canada will become more truly who God is calling us to be: communities whose lives enact the good news of the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Endnotes

1. The 141 requests may be categorized as follows: 52 dealt with issues of pastoral oversight, 42 with accountability, 24 with conflict and 23 with planning. Not included in the list of 141 requests were the many overtures and additional motions dealing with stipends, pensions, the medical dental plan, the Han-Ca presbyteries, the new Book of Praise or the Policy on Sexual Abuse and Harassment. Nevertheless, these topics too have an effect on congregation-presbytery relationships, reflecting concerns regarding pastoral care, planning, oversight and accountability.
2. Jer 31:31, 33
3. Mt 26:28
4. Eph 4:4-6
5. Rom 12:5
6. 1 Pet 4:10
7. This important statement answers question 1 in both *The Larger Catechism* and *The Shorter Catechism*.
8. *Living Faith*, 7.6 and John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeil ed., Ford Lewis Battles tr., Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960, 4.15.6. All citations from *Institutes* are from this edition.
9. Eph 2:8-10, Eph 3:17, Jn 14:26, Rom 8:26-27, Rom 12:6-8, Eph 4:11-13, 1 Cor 12:1-11.
10. Gal 3:26-27 and Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.15.1, 4.15.6.
11. The Greek word for 'church', *ecclesia*, means those who have been "called out".
12. Eph 1:22-23 and 4:15-16; 1 Cor 12:12-27; Rom 12:3-8; Phil 2:1-5.
13. *Living Faith*, 7.1.1, 7.2.1, 7.6.1, 7.3.
14. *A Proposal for Considering the Theology and Practice of Ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, 1992, p. 51.
15. *Living Faith*, 7.1.6.
16. *The Book of Common Worship*, p. 135ff, 347ff, 390ff.
17. Other denominations use other structures to live out their belief that they have been called by God into covenant relationship with God and with each other. Readers interested in a discussion of the biblical and theological basis for our presbyterian system may wish to refer to the document entitled *The Theology and Practice of Ministry in The Presbyterian Church in Canada*, in the A&P 2003, p. 372-412.
18. Adherents are individuals who attend worship and participate in the life of a congregation, but have not taken the step of membership (by profession of faith or by transfer of membership) within the congregation.
19. *Book of Forms*, 4.
20. Whenever the minister belongs to a presbytery other than the calling presbytery, there is an additional step: the minister's presbytery must approve the call and 'place it in the minister's hands', before the minister is able to accept or decline it.
21. *Book of Forms*, 111.
22. Further discussion of the corporate nature of ministry within The Presbyterian Church in Canada is found in the report of the Committee on Articles of Faith, A&P 1965, p. 327f.
23. The ideas in this section are drawn from material presented by the Rev. Dr. Art Van Seters at the first Called to Covenant consultation event in Guelph, Ontario in September, 2001.
24. The session S-O-S may come also in other forms, such as a letter from the session to the presbytery, asking for its help, or an informal conversation between the minister or an elder and the clerk of presbytery.
25. Eph 4: 12-13.
26. The concept of worshipful work is described in the book by Charles Olson entitled "Transforming Church Boards". Alban Institute, 1995.
27. *Book of Forms*, A-52.
28. Phil 4:1, 3.
29. For an excellent, readable resource on change and transition, Bridges, William, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*. New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1991.
30. Moira Barclay Fernie, former Clerk of the Presbytery of Montreal, written after she worked closely with a number of congregations as they moved towards closure or amalgamation.
31. Bridgebuilder Ministry is the name of a training program for working with churches in conflict developed by Peter Steinke (www.healthycongregations.org).
32. Richard Blackburn, *Mediation Skills Training Institute*, Lombard, IL: Lombard Mennonite Peace Center, 1993.
33. Moira Barclay Fernie, former Clerk of the Presbytery of Montreal, written after she worked closely with a number of congregations as they moved towards closure or amalgamation.

Called to Covenant is the result of church-wide consultation into strengthening the relationships between congregations and presbyteries. It examines the covenants that form our identity: the covenant that God has initiated with us in Christ and that places us in covenant relationships with one another. On this foundation, it explores three areas where congregations and presbyteries are most intimately involved: regular pastoral oversight of congregations and ministers by presbyteries, planning of congregational ministries, and crisis intervention by presbyteries. The separate resource book provides practical tools for congregations and presbyteries to use and adapt, as they seek to broaden their understanding and strengthen their support of one another's ministries.



In an increasingly secular and conflicted world, how will the church journey? For more than a decade congregations and presbyteries have raised questions, leading to a national search for a way to be the church in faithfulness to the gospel of Christ. This multi-year process has resulted in the present proposal, *Called to Covenant*. What distinguishes it is its theological orientation around the concept of covenant. The fundamental issue for the church is how we understand and evidence that we belong to a God who has covenanted with us in Jesus Christ, and how we draw implications from this for our individual and collective relationships. Guided by this covenant principle, this resource outlines practical ways congregations, sessions and presbyteries can find disciplined and creative approaches to journeying together as the body of Christ. I believe that it can inspire fresh vision and hope that can make a difference for our denomination.

Arthur Van Seters, former Principal of Knox College

The effectiveness of the church's witness depends, in part, on the quality of its inner life. The relationship between congregations and presbyteries especially affects how we are perceived as a denomination, and how we influence the world in the name of Christ. The Life and Mission Agency, presbyteries, congregations, and sessions have been consulting on the quality of our life together for several years. *Called to Covenant* is the fruit of that process. It calls us to a profound respect for the call of God in each of our lives, expressed in a covenantal reality, which impacts both our governance and our personal relationships.

I commend this document to the church as a compendium of ideas and possibilities of how we can live together effectively bearing witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. From this rich smorgasbord, congregations, sessions and presbyteries are invited to engage creatively in dialogue with each other to enhance our life in Christ. I am convinced that we are called to deepen our covenantal relationship with God and with each other. May the Spirit refresh and expand our vision in faith, hope and love.

Thomas Gemmell, former Principal Clerk