

Elders' Toolbox

What is a ruling elder?

- As part of the Reformed tradition, The Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC) ordains both teaching elders (known as clergy and ministers) and ruling elders (leaders elected by the congregation).
- The congregation recognizes God's gifts for ministry among its members. These gifts, including pastoral care, hospitality and leadership are accompanied by a call to serve the church. The calling and gifts of these men and women are affirmed by the congregation who elects them as ruling elders. They take vows and are ordained in a public worship service. Ruling elders are not "lay" leaders.
- Ruling elders are responsible for the leadership, pastoral care and oversight of the congregation. Specific duties and responsibilities are laid out in *The Book of Forms*, the guide to decision making in our denomination.
- We are called Presbyterian because we are ruled by Presbyters. The Greek word in the New Testament, *presbuteros* means elder. Ruling elders are the primary decision makers and sit on the session, the governing body of the congregation, which generally meets monthly. They serve a spiritual function in the church and participate in ministry with the minister.
- In the PCC, ruling elders may serve for life or may serve in terms as decided by each congregation and approved by presbytery.
- While clergy receive many years of training, ruling elders often receive little or no preparation to fulfil their calling as church leaders. The mission of the Elders' Institute is to offer continuing education through [online courses](#), [workshops](#) and resources ([e-sources](#), [print publications](#)) that equip ruling elders and lay leaders to lead the church into faithful, effective and wise ministries and mission work.

Why do we have ruling elder?

- The Protestant church began with the Reformation during the 16th century. While the goal of the movement was to reform the Catholic Church, the result was the birth of Protestantism. Presbyterian polity (church governance) and doctrine (statements of belief) is primarily inspired by the Reformers John Calvin and John Knox. Hallmarks of the Reformation include recognition that we can experience God in our everyday lives, greater authority and leadership of the session and presbytery (no bishops), and participation of all God's people in the ministry of the church. "Reformed and reforming" is a principle of Reformed churches.
- To ensure active participation of ruling elders in decision making, the PCC is made according to a system of courts. Each congregation has a **session** comprised of ruling elders with the minister serving as moderator. (The moderator does not have a vote except to break a tie.) **Presbytery**, which meets several times a year, is comprised of an equal number of elders and ministers. **Synod**, an annual court of the church, is also comprised of an equal number of ruling elders and ministers. **General Assembly**, the highest court of the church, meets once a year and is comprised of one-sixth of the ministers in the church and an equal number of ruling elders.

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