

As we have elected some new elders and are preparing to ordain and induct them, I have received various questions about the governing structure of our congregation and the Presbyterian church as a whole. Let me offer some basics for review.

1) Every Presbyterian church congregation is governed by a group (or session) of elders chosen by the congregation. This group is called a “Kirk” (a Scottish word for church) session. Ministers are also chosen by the congregation, and they are elders too. Ministers are “teaching elders” and non-ministers are “ruling elders.” Every elder has one vote and ministers have no power to make any decisions on their own without the approval of the group of elders as a whole. While any decision requires a majority in favour to approve it, as elders we seek to find a consensus whenever possible so that we are most energized and enthused about our decisions.

2) Beyond the congregation there are three levels of government, all defined by geographic region. There is the Presbytery (AHPC is part of the Presbytery of East Toronto), there is Synod (AHPC is part of the Synod of Central, Northeastern Ontario & Bermuda), and there is the General Assembly which is Canada-wide. While Presbytery meets monthly, Synod and General Assembly meet once a year (although committees within each of these levels of government meet throughout the year to do the church’s business).

3) Every level of government in the church has representation from every congregation, and for every minister (teaching elder) there is the appointment of a representative ruling elder so that every vote is balanced between ministers and non-ministers. Throughout all levels of decision-making the church aims to be democratic, and a church of the people rather than one dominated by the clergy.

While churches like the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox are clergy dominated and hierarchical, and churches like the Baptist, Pentecostal and Evangelical are loosely affiliated individually governing congregations, the Presbyterian Church (Like the United Church) are national churches bound together, yet democratic in terms of decision-making power by every member and elder of every congregation. More voices and votes mean more discussion and debate on direction and decisions, but we believe the Spirit of Jesus works most effectively as a body diffused through every person across the church rather than through a hierarchy or individuals alone.

What do you think? Questions welcome.