

Presbytery of Ottawa

Guide for those speaking at presbytery meetings

Who makes up the Presbytery?

The presbytery is a court of the church, and is the regional governing body for the presbyterian churches in the area. It is comprised of the teaching elders (ministers or pastors) of each of the congregations, together with an equal number of ruling elders representing each of the congregations. There are approximately forty members of the Presbytery of Ottawa, and we reflect the broad diversity that is The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Retired pastors or ministers without an active pastoral charge are also invited to attend meetings of the presbytery, and are afforded an opportunity to speak, but do not have a vote. In recent years, there have been approximately twenty such ministers within the local presbytery, but generally no more than about five have been in attendance at any given meeting.

The role of the presbytery is to facilitate shared leadership and mutual support and accountability, which are at the heart of the model of presbyterial church government. All ministers and elders share equally the responsibility for overseeing Christ's church. We are accountable to God and to each other in caring for the church — the body of Christ — and in advancing Christ's mission to reconcile all to God and to one another.

What happens when a congregation is “cited” to appear before the presbytery?

At regular meetings of the presbytery, the representative elder together with the minister of the particular congregation speak on its behalf. When a congregation has specific business to bring to the presbytery, or when the presbytery has decisions to make which affect the life of a congregation, it is usual that the congregation is “cited” to appear before the presbytery. When a congregation is cited to appear, especially when it is a matter affecting the relationship between the minister and the congregation, it is customary for the session and/or the congregation to appoint one or more representatives, known as commissioners, to represent the interests of the congregation. The presbytery through the moderator will then normally recognize such commissioners and give them an opportunity to speak to the presbytery.

What to expect in the presbytery meeting

Speakers in a meeting of the presbytery, when recognized by the moderator, are expected to address any remarks to the moderator who presides, and only through the moderator to anyone else present. This practice is designed to keep good order: ensuring that only one person speaks at once, and honouring the biblical principle that Christians are called both (a) to seek to be under the direction and enabling of the Holy Spirit in the words we use and the spirit in which we speak them, and (b) to listen to each other, seeking to hear the voice of that same Holy Spirit. We are called to both speak and to listen to one another with respect, seeking to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit and the mind of Christ, as we seek to know and to do the will of God, to the glory and honour of God alone.

Typically, commissioners from congregations appear before the presbytery in the congregation's interests when calling a minister, or when responding to a call from another congregation addressed to a minister, or when a minister is seeking leave to resign or to retire. In the case of a congregation calling a new minister, representatives of the congregation are invited to offer reasons in support of the call or, rarely, to advance valid reasons why a call might best not proceed. In the case of the request of a minister to resign or retire, representatives might express acquiescence in the expressed wish of the minister, or urge reasons why the request might better not be granted. Representatives from congregations who are invited to address the presbytery are expected to limit their comments to those matters. In any case, however, representatives of the congregation are expected to be cognizant that they are speaking, not merely for self, but as representatives of the congregation, with the health and well-being of both the congregation and the minister in mind, and also aware that the presbytery is also striving to ensure the well-being of the presbytery itself and all the congregations within it.

The moderator may call any speaker “to order”, if either the remarks being made stray from the matter under consideration, or express disrespect or harm to brothers and sisters and siblings in Christ. All

need to be cognizant that the body of Christ reflects a broad diversity of experience, identity and theological perspectives. Beyond the role of the moderator of presbytery, any member of the presbytery taking issue with the language of any speaker as being offensive or censurable may voice an objection, and in such instances have the clerk take note of the specific language used. The discussion then continues with the matter that is before the presbytery. Following the discussion of the matter at hand the presbytery may then return to the specific language used and decide whether it is offensive or censurable. If it is deemed to be so, the presbytery may initiate disciplinary proceedings against the speaker.

Conscious that God both hears our words and knows the intentions of our heart, we are all called to speak to honour the One who gives us breath, to listen to and to recognize the Holy Spirit speaking through others, and to build each other up in love.

January 10, 2025

The Vacancy Visitation Committee of the Presbytery of Ottawa

approved by Presbytery January 21, 2025

to be made available to sessions and congregations when cited to appear before the presbytery