

Every clerk of a court of the church, on assuming office, must make a declaration with the words “I do solemnly affirm and declare that I will faithfully discharge the duties now entrusted to me”.

The declaration is an early reminder to a new session clerk that the clerkship is not merely an honour or a reward for years of faithful service. More correctly, that elder's ability and dedication has been recognised, and with that recognition there is the acknowledgement of a willingness to assume a key role of leadership among the elders of the church.

Leadership extends beyond the performance of the duties that go with the job. It is many things. It is an ability to make things happen. It is an ability to ensure that the group's aims and objectives are always obvious. It is an ability to clarify goals. It is an ability to unite others behind a common purpose. It is an ability to intervene at the right time with sound advice and informed opinion.

Christian leadership must go even further. It must be motivated by love and a desire to serve. It must be uncorrupted by a desire for power. In practical terms, it must be guided by a high sense of ethics and honour.

The Session Clerk must be a person of considerable spiritual maturity, with a well-tested faith and a strong prayer life, although these are qualities that are expected of all elders.

### Appointment

Although a Session Clerk may be appointed for a limited period of time, incumbents usually hold office at the pleasure of the court, a fact that should be recorded in the Session minutes.

They are appointed by the Session, not the minister, and only the Session may remove them from office

*The final test of a leader is that he leaves behind him in other men the conviction and the will to carry on ... The genius of a good leader is to leave behind him a situation which common sense, without the grace of genius, can deal with successfully.*

*Walter Lippman 1889-1974*

### Duties

The Session Clerk has a number of formal duties. The Session is a court of the church, making decisions that affect its mission and the welfare of its people. It is essential that they are carried out “decently and in order”, a term frequently used in Presbyterian circles.

- ♦ Minutes of meetings must be faithfully recorded.
- ♦ All church records must be maintained and kept in safe custody
- ♦ Correspondence must be written and received
- ♦ Extract minutes must be supplied when requested.
- ♦ Meeting agendas must be drawn up.

### Minutes (II Code 3.05-3.16)

Minutes are the record of the proceedings of a meeting. Session minutes are confidential and access to them is permitted only to members of the court and a higher court.

A basic convention in minuting is that they record the decisions that are made, not the debates that take place. It is not necessary to summarise verbal reports. However the minutes must be complete and they should be concise.

An effective decision of a meeting of any organisation of the church should contain the following information:

- ♦ What is to be done?
- ♦ Who is to do it?
- ♦ Within what time frame?
- ♦ What conditions apply?
- ♦ When progress reports are required?

The Session Clerk should be prepared to prompt

the meeting for this kind of information.

Once recorded in the minutes it becomes a simple matter to keep track of progress on the matter through the “Business Arising” part of the meeting agenda. However it is vital that the Clerk record some information in the minutes (e.g *Fred Bloggs reported that he had approached....*) each time the matter is reviewed. This will enable the subject to be raised during “Business Arising” at the next meeting.

The wording of minutes can be very important, especially if the business is controversial, sensitive or relates to the business of a higher court. In the informal situation that a Session meeting usually is, where business is often agreed to by consensus, the Clerk would be wise to read the final resolution to the meeting to ensure that it is acceptable to all.

Section 4 of the Code on the subject of the Session is important and the Clerk should be familiar with its contents.

Some business conducted by a Session is very sensitive. This relates to the good name of members of the congregation. Session business is normally conducted in closed court and matters considered in closed court are strictly confined to members of that court. However the Session has the right to maintain a record of proceedings considered extremely sensitive separate from the normal records of the Session. It is the duty of the Session Clerk to seal them and to keep these in a safe place until they are to be destroyed (II Code 3.14).

### Agenda

Drawing up the agenda should be the joint responsibility of the Moderator and the Clerk. However the fact that the minutes are in the Clerk's possession places the latter in a position to exercise initiative. The Clerk knows the on-going matters that will be coming up. Consultation with the minister is important.

It will be necessary for reminders to be given to elders, not only about the timing of the meeting itself, but for a range of other reasons.

- ♦ They may have something to report to the meeting.
- ♦ They may wish to place a matter on the agenda.
- ♦ They may have strong feelings about an issue and would like to prepare their arguments for the debate.

The conduct of the meeting is the responsibility of the moderator, but an alert clerk should be prepared to bring any oversight or irregularity to the notice of the Moderator if it is regarded as important.

Sessions usually follow the standing orders in the Code Part 1 but are not bound to them unless specifically stated.

### **Relationships with Others**

The Session Clerk occupies a key position in the affairs of the congregation, formally linking the Minister with the Session and the congregation with the Session.

He or she is frequently the Minister's confidante and chief advisor in the affairs of the parish. They should expect support and encouragement from each other. Loyalty and discretion is important. Private discussions must remain strictly that.

However the Clerk owes a duty of loyalty and service to the congregation and as a result should be a channel by which matters of concern are brought discreetly before the Minister or the Session. The Clerk should be the first to give constructive criticism if such becomes necessary.

Impartiality is vital. A congregation is a group of diverse people who have one thing in common - they seek to know God and honour Him. They will have different interests and tastes They will

represent a variety of opinions. They will be at different stages of spiritual development. The Session Clerk must be prepared to give impartial advice on any matter brought to his or her attention, including directing people to other sources of information and assistance.

In conclusion, the Session Clerk is neither an authority figure nor merely the secretary of the elder's meeting. That person should be seen as a link between the church's leadership and its people and organisations. He or she must be respected by all parties as a person of initiative, high integrity, sound judgement and spiritual maturity.

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# **The Session Clerk**

*"... And whatever you do, whether in word  
or deed, do all in the name of the Lord  
Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the  
Father through him."*

*Colossians 3.17*

