

THE OFFICE OF SESSION CLERK

Among office bearers in the Presbyterian Church, the session clerk has long been seen to occupy a position of special significance. To the minister the session clerk is his "right hand person". To the congregation the session clerk is the person who, more than any other embodies the congregation and is the link between it and the minister.

People may have some kind of intuitive sense of what is involved in being a session clerk, but for anyone who is invited to accept this appointment it is difficult to know exactly what is involved. While recognising there is much more to being a session clerk than simply carrying out the prescribed duties of the office, it is nonetheless important to know what these are and what is generally expected of a session clerk

APPOINTMENT

Every court of the church must have a clerk (The Code 3.01) who is appointed for a specified time or during the pleasure of the court (The Code 3.02). Particularly in a large session a case can be made out for making the appointment only for a specified number of years, but it should be recognised that even a smaller session may be depriving itself of valuable talent by leaving it to one person to hold this office for potentially a very long time. There are also those who, because of other commitments, might be more willing to act as clerk if the appointment were to be for a definite, rather than an indefinite, number of years.

The person chosen as clerk does not have to be an elder (The Code 3.01). Historically the clerk was just that, no more than what nowadays might be called a minute secretary. Now all or nearly all session clerks are elders.

On appointment the clerk takes the oath to faithfully discharge the duties of his or her office (The Code 3.03). It would be in order for a session clerk to have the assistance of a secretary or typist in taking the minutes and attending to correspondence. It would be in order for such a person to attend session meetings for this purpose. If the clerk is absent from any meeting of the session, a clerk pro tempore is appointed (The Code 3.04) and the declaration has to be administered.

MAIN DUTIES

The main duties of a session clerk are:

- (a) with the moderator or interim moderator to call and prepare for meetings of the session;
- (b) to keep minutes of session meetings;
- (c) to attend to correspondence, including the issuing of extract minutes;
- (d) to be responsible for all records of the congregation such as congregational meetings, rolls of communicants and adherents, appointment of presbytery and assembly elder, etc. – baptismal, marriage and funeral registers are normally kept by the minister;
- (e) to submit the records of the session and congregation to the presbytery for attestation when required;
- (f) generally to see to the functioning of the session, to be concerned for the welfare of the congregation, and to have a working knowledge of the church's practice and procedure.

PREPARING FOR MEETINGS

Meetings of the session are called by resolution of the session or by the moderator (The Code 4.11). The session clerk would normally see that the minutes of the previous meeting and an agenda for the meeting thus called are circulated to elders.

CHAIRING OF MEETINGS

Session meetings are normally chaired by the minister of the congregation designated as the

'Moderator' of the Session. With the prior approval of the minister it is possible for a minister or a member of the session to be deputed by the moderator to chair the meeting (The Code 4.13). In a particular instance the presbytery or assembly may appoint someone to take the place of the moderator.

The quorum for a session meeting is three – the moderator or the deputy moderator and two elders are necessary to form a quorum of session (The Code 4.15).

CONDUCT OF A MEETING

In general, proceedings in the lower courts of the church should be modelled on those that are employed in the General Assembly although the standing orders used for committees of the church may also be employed in the session (The Code-Standing Order 87). In practice, because most sessions are relatively small in comparison, their proceedings tend to be carried out much less formally. However, some procedural points should be noted as a means of securing good order and possibly also of saving time.

There should be an agenda. This should be drawn up by the clerk in consultation with the moderator. If papers are issued in advance, the agenda should be included among them. This too is the responsibility of the clerk. If advance notice of the agenda has not been given, it is helpful if, at the outset, either the moderator or the clerk indicates what the known business is.

The conduct of a session meeting is the responsibility of the moderator, but there may be times when the clerk can supply useful information or give guidance on matters of procedure.

Meetings are first constituted with prayer. The attendance is then recorded and apologies received. The minutes of the previous meeting and any meetings held in between are presented by the clerk for confirmation. Minutes are either read or taken as read if circulated beforehand. When minutes are submitted for confirmation the only point at issue is whether the minute accurately records what happened. The minutes cannot be altered, either because of wiser judgement on reflection, or even because of some fault in arriving at a decision. Typographical and clerical errors may be corrected in the text. Any alterations should be initialled by the Moderator and Clerk. Where more substantial corrections have to be made, these should be fully detailed in the minute of the meeting that is taking place, as well as being made in the original minute. With the minutes of the previous meeting/s confirmed the Session turns to consider the business of the current meeting.

When the agenda is submitted for approval, it is then that members should indicate any other matters they would like to have considered, and it should there and then be agreed whether or not to consider them and, if so, when. The value in proceeding in this way is to guard against the possibility of someone who has had to leave before a meeting has ended discovering at a later date that some topic has been discussed or some decision taken of which they had no forewarning. The only justification for having general business as an item on the agenda at the end of a meeting is to permit consideration of some matter which may genuinely emerge in the course of a meeting and which could not possibly have been anticipated when the order of business was agreed.

The business then proceeds through its various items. When the moderator considers that an item has been adequately considered, he will seek to bring the session to a decision. This may be reached either with obvious unanimity or by a process of consensus. Some matters, however, may give rise to varying or opposing points of view. In these circumstances it is well to follow standard procedures in regarding to formulating motions and voting.

Every proposed course of action needs to be not only moved but also seconded. If a proposal is not seconded, it falls and is not to be recorded. The proposal as originally put is called the motion. Once seconded, it is then subject to alteration by means of amendment or counter motion. An amendment slightly alters a motion, but does not run counter to its main thrust. The purpose of a counter motion seeks to radically go against the aim of a motion. Counter motions can be motions contradictory or negative of the original motion, or of a substantial part of the original motion (Standing Order 25).

An amendment should be disposed of as soon as possible after being moved and seconded. The vote is taken FOR the amendment and then AGAINST it. An amendment to a counter motion is treated in the same way. Any further amendment if seconded should be voted on before the original amendment is considered. An earlier part of a motion cannot be amended if a later part of the same motion has already been amended. If an amendment is successful, for further debate the motion or counter motion becomes the motion as amended or the counter motion as amended. Eventually what will be before the session will be the motion, possibly amended, and perhaps also a counter motion or counter motions, also possibly amended. Voting is then FOR the motion (as possibly amended) and then FOR any counter motion (as possibly amended). If the vote is between the motion and several counter motions, whichever receives the fewest votes falls, and another vote is taken. This process is repeated until there is a majority for one over all the others. That one must then be put again to the vote FOR or AGAINST to establish finally the mind of the session, as it is still possible that the session may want to reject the whole issue outright in any shape or form. The moderator has a casting vote, only if this is needed. In this way the business moves on in a reasonably orderly fashion.

Decisions (unless appealed against) take immediate effect; they do not have to wait until the minute of the meeting at which they were taken is approved. Decisions remain in force until countermanded.

When all the business has been completed the moderator will close the meeting with prayer and/or by pronouncing the benediction.

Meetings of the session are normally held in private. The session may resolve to invite people to attend a meeting for a specific purpose.

MINUTING A MEETING

This too is a major responsibility of the session Clerk. Minutes of session meetings were, and still are in some cases, recorded by the session clerk in long hand and in a bound volume. Increasingly minutes are now recorded in loose leaf form which allows the minutes to be processed on a computer, duplicated and/or emailed to elders prior to a meeting. In the meeting the minutes can be taken as read to save time. The Code Committee has advised that provided the session minutes are only sent to members of the Session there is no reason why they should not be forwarded by electronic means.

When keeping minutes in loose-leaf form certain precautions should be taken. One copy should be printed on heavier paper for eventual binding. Each page should be numbered consecutively. Each page should begin with the last word of the preceding page. When the minutes are confirmed each page should be initialled by the moderator and the minutes of that particular meeting should be signed by both the moderator and the clerk. From time to time, perhaps every five (5) years or so, the signed papers are to be bound together into a conveniently sized volume.

As for the format in which minutes should be kept, while none is prescribed, a standard pattern has come to be accepted and sample minutes are available from the Clerk of Assembly. The minute should begin by stating the place and date of the meeting and that it has been constituted with prayer. Next the attendance is listed and apologies recorded. The names may be entered in a separate attendance book but, if so, it should be borne in mind that sufficient detail must be given in the minute to show that a quorum was present. If a separate attendance book is kept, it as well as the minute book must be submitted to the presbytery at the time the records are attested, generally at an ordinary presbytery visitation.

Next the fact that the minutes of the previous meeting were submitted by the clerk for confirmation is minuted and any necessary corrections noted. After that minute has been approved and the session has then agreed the agenda for the meeting that is taking place, the business will proceed item by item, and the clerk will take adequate notes with a view to the eventual preparation of the minutes. If an item has been especially complex or contentious, or if a decision reached by the session is

likely to be the subject of an extract minute, as, for example, where a decision has been challenged by the taking of an appeal, the minutes of that particular item should be approved before proceeding to the next item of business.

Every set of minutes should end by showing that the meeting was closed with prayer.

As for the style in which minutes should be kept, all that needs to be recorded are the actual proposals made and the decisions taken. No details need be given of how a particular debate went or of who spoke in the course of it. The less elaboration in the minutes the better. Clerks should aim to be as succinct as possible in their minuting.

Some other points should be noted in regard to the keeping of minutes.

1. It is useful to have headings for the different items. The heading may be placed either in the margin or at the beginning of the paragraph to which it refers, but either way the text should be complete in itself, and should not need the heading to be added to give it sense.
2. There should be no substantial blank spaces but, if there are any, they should be ruled through.
3. No papers should be pasted or clipped into the minutes.
4. When in doubt about the format of minutes follow the format of the Assembly minutes.

CORRESPONDENCE AND EXTRACTS

It is the session clerk, not the minister, who should attend to correspondence relating to session business. It is the secretary of the committee of management or deacon's court (where applicable) who should deal with all correspondence relating to the temporal affairs of the congregation, including property and finance.

The clerk may have to issue an extract minute in connection with some particular item of business from a session meeting or from a meeting of the congregation called by the session or by a higher court of the church. An extract minute is normally in the following form:

At and within the Presbyterian Church on the day of, 20...., the session of the congregation at (or the congregation at) met and was constituted with prayer.

Among other things:

The meeting was closed with prayer.

Extracted from the records of the Session (Congregation) at this day of 20.... by me.

(Sgd.) Session Clerk

If the document runs to more than a single page, each page should be initialled by the clerk. Extracts can be issued only by the clerk and a clerk should be very cautious in giving extracts without the authority of the court.

CUSTODIAN OF RECORDS

The session clerk is the custodian of the session records. These include the minute book, the communion roll and supplementary roll, and the adherent's roll.

Each year the minutes of the session should include a reference to the fact that the annual attestation of the communion roll by the session has taken place. The number of communicant members after revision of the roll should be stated, as the names of those who have been removed from the roll after due notice.

When a new clerk is appointed, an inventory of the books and papers of the session that are being handed on ought to be recorded in the minute book.

OTHER ASPECTS OF THE OFFICE

It is also part of the session clerk's responsibilities to help the session to function smoothly in its oversight of the congregation. This will include:

1. allocating, or delegating the allocation of, elder's districts;
2. making, or delegating the making of, all the necessary preparations for communion services, including assigning elders their duties, seeing to the ordering and preparing of the bread and wine, seeing to the communion linen, and making arrangements for the disposal of the elements and the washing of the cups, plates and linen;
3. assisting the minister in the arrangements to secure new elders;
4. giving a lead to the session when it meets with prospective first communicants;
5. encouraging the session to give thought not just to routine matters of business;
6. keeping one's ears and eyes open to what is going on in the congregation, and bringing to the attention of the minister matters that the congregation are happy with or are expressing concern over;
7. liaising with the conveners of sub-committees where these are used to spread a session's work-load;
8. making sure that proper intimation is given to the congregation of meetings called by the session;
9. giving all possible assistance to an interim moderator appointed by the presbytery;
10. making oneself familiar with the practice and procedure of the Presbyterian Church through *The Code* of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in NSW, and *Constitution, Procedure and Practice* of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia.

(Adapted from A. Gordon McGillivray *The Office of Session Clerk* revised October 2008 from the Church of Scotland and adapted to N.S.W.).