

# Clerk of Session Resource

*This resource provides guidelines and advice for the role of Clerk of Session. It is produced by the Elders' Panel of the Council for Congregational Life and Witness.*



# **1. A summary of the role of the Clerk of Session**

## **A definition of the role**

The dictionary definition of a clerk is someone who takes care of correspondence, records and documents for an organisation. This is also the definition in the Code 143 (1). This formal definition does not do justice to the importance of the role of a Clerk of Session in the congregation. The clerk is a hub for communication – and communication is essential for any organisation, especially the church, to fulfil its purpose. The Bible does not specifically mention the role of a clerk but it is clear that the church is to be led by elders (Titus 1:5), that some are given the gift of administration to serve the church (1 Corinthians 12:28) and that the church is to be led in a well ordered way (1 Corinthians 14:40).

## **Essential requirements of the sort of person who fulfils the role**

The Clerk of Session, therefore, should be someone who is organised, able to communicate clearly and effectively (especially in writing) and, in today's world, have appropriate IT skills. This includes preparing agendas for Kirk Session meetings, taking minutes and other duties which arise from time to time. In all these areas of service, the Clerk of Session should relate well to others, especially to his/her fellow Ruling Elders, other congregational leaders and to the Minister. This is because communication must be both accurate and relational.

## **Being a Clerk of Session and also continuing to exercise leadership as a Ruling Elder**

In exercising congregational leadership, the Clerk of Session has no more and no less a say in Kirk Session than his/her fellow elders. There are ways in which the clerk could exercise more influence but should not. There are also some practical ways in which the Clerk's influence could be inhibited, for example, in taking minutes during a discussion while also desiring to speak at the same time. These are all addressed in this resource.

## **Correcting misperceptions about the role**

Sometimes people in the congregation have a different perception of the role than what is described here. They may look to the Clerk of Session for leadership that the Kirk Session should provide. As a hub for communication, the Clerk will be a vital source of information but may occasionally have to remind people that certain things are the responsibility of the Kirk Session or the Minister and not the Clerk of Session. It is always important for the Clerk to remember that he/she is a humble servant of Christ's church and not a leader elevated above other leaders.

## **The role of a Deputy Clerk of Session**

Some Kirk Sessions appoint a Deputy Clerk of Session. A deputy can be useful to support the Clerk of Session, for example in taking minutes if the Clerk cannot be available. Appointing a deputy can also help in succession planning although being a Deputy Clerk should not be seen as an automatic path to becoming a Clerk without Kirk Session approval. Careful sharing of responsibilities is necessary so that the Deputy Clerk does not feel redundant but operates as a deputy in a support role and not as a Clerk.

## **2. Working relationship with the Minister**

### **Practicalities of the working relationship**

The working relationship of the Clerk of Session with the Minister is paramount. This is not only for the purpose of preparing meeting agendas together or checking minutes are correct. It is also because the Minister may wish to use the Clerk as a 'sounding board' for ideas to be brought to the Kirk Session or for issues to do with the practicalities of running the church. The Minister and Clerk must not make leadership decisions that belong to the Kirk Session but certain issues such as the timing of bringing items onto the Kirk Session agenda, assigning elders to districts or even some sensitive pastoral issues may be important conversations between the Minister and the Clerk. These conversations should not happen before or after a Sunday service but at a more opportune time during the week. The Clerk of Session, like all elders, should be aware of the importance of confidentiality especially in pastorally sensitive matters.

Sometimes, the Clerk of Session is the person members of the congregation choose to complain to about what the Minister or another congregational leader is or is not doing. The Clerk should listening empathetically (but be neutral in saying anything because the full picture cannot be known if only one party is present) and be wise in response. Ideally the person should have brought their complaint directly rather than through the Clerk but nevertheless, the essence of the complaint should be communicated to the relevant person (unless it is a simple matter that can be dealt with there and then by the Clerk).

### **Understanding the Minister's role and leadership style**

The Clerk of Session should fully understand the Minister's role. The Minister is Moderator of Kirk Session and is known as the 'first among equals'. This does not mean that the Minister has more or less say in Kirk Session than other elders. What it means is that proper respect should be shown to the Minister as the person who facilitates and chairs the Kirk Session meeting. It is vital that the Clerk supports the Minister in his/her role as Moderator of Kirk Session. Like the Clerk, the Minister cannot make leadership decisions about the congregation except as part of Kirk Session (this is also true of staff teams in larger congregations but room for delegated minor decision making by staff and other congregational leaders should be allowed to avoid micro managing). A notable exception to this is the Minister's control, as Teaching Elder, over who speaks from the pulpit or over anyone who addresses any group in the church building (Code 37(a) and 81 (4)).

Clerks of Session should make every effort to get to know a new Minister and be aware that all Ministers have their own leadership styles which means they may do things a little differently, for example, the previous Minister may have used a phone call for what the new Minister wishes to have a face to face meeting about or vice versa. Some Ministers will be more formal in their approach to moderating Kirk Session and others less so. A good Clerk will prompt the Minister if, for example, the wording of a decision agreed by the Kirk Session is not clear, if an agenda item has been overlooked or if it is not clear who is to implement a decision that has been made.

### **3. Preparing an agenda**

#### **The process of preparing the agenda**

One of the tasks of a Clerk of Session is to prepare the agenda of the Kirk Session meeting. The purpose of the agenda is to give structure to the meeting and to ensure there is a focus on important matters concerning the congregation. Bear in mind that Code 30 (1) defines the role of the Kirk Session as being for 'the oversight and government of the congregation, for the upbuilding of God's people in spiritual fruitfulness and holy concord, and for the extension of Christ's kingdom among all people'.

Preparing the agenda should be done in consultation with the Minister and is also open to input from other Ruling Elders who may request items to be added to the agenda. It is good practice to avoid a general item of 'Any other business' and instead to ask Ruling Elders to always notify business to the Clerk of Session and Minister in advance unless there are very exceptional important and urgent reasons to raise the issue during the Kirk Session meeting. One way to prepare the agenda is for the Clerk to prepare a draft and send it to the Minister for any additions or amendments before finalising it and sending it to the Kirk Session.

#### **What should be included in the agenda?**

Sample agendas for different sized congregations are found in the resource 'Rethinking the Kirk Session meeting' listed in the further resources on page 11. The agenda should include:

1. Opening devotion and prayer – as required in Code 141 (1). This does not mean prayer and reference to the Bible cannot or should not be included elsewhere in the meeting.
2. Apologies (in larger Kirk Sessions it is good practice to have an attendance register)
3. Any 'matters arising' – these are agenda items that continue from the last meeting
4. New items
5. Items requiring regular reporting such as from a youth work or pastoral care coordinator
6. A report from the congregational committee (or simply noting that the Kirk Session have received the minutes of the meeting of the congregational committee) – Code 16 (3).
7. Reports from Presbytery and the General Assembly (it is best that these reports are brief and relevant to the Kirk Session but they are an important reminder that the congregation is part of a wider church)
8. Setting the date of next meeting (this could be agreed for the whole church year rather than at the end of each meeting)

#### **A vital additional function of the agenda**

The agenda should be sent to the Kirk Session in advance of the meeting. This allows elders to reflect and pray about the agenda items. Therefore sending the agenda out a week before the Kirk Session meeting is best practice. Agenda items should be clear and not cryptic – sometimes adding a sentence describing what the item is about or some questions to consider is helpful, for example, 'Harvest outreach: Please come with your ideas for engaging with the community during Harvest season' rather than just 'Harvest Sunday'. Any reports should also be sent to the Kirk Session in advance, again so that they can be prayerfully considered by all before the meeting.

## 4. Taking minutes

### **The purpose of taking minutes and what must be included**

The purpose of recording minutes is for communication of decisions made by the Kirk Session. It is not necessary to record the entire discussion but it can be worthwhile to record key points so that it can be seen why a decision was made if the decision is re-visited at a later date (this avoids repeating the discussion or missing vital information that would help make a good decision). In recording the key points, it is not necessary to record who said what because decision making by a Kirk Session is teamwork – an exception to this is if someone was invited to address the Kirk Session, for example, a youth worker or an expert from outside the congregation.

Code 252 requires that the minutes include:

1. The date and place of the meeting
2. The fact that it was opened and closed with prayer
3. The attendance of those present (this can be in a separate attendance register kept with the minutes)
4. The approval of previous minutes
5. All items discussed by the Kirk Session and what was agreed. It can be helpful to put what was agreed in italics to differentiate it from any notes on the discussion. For major decisions there should be a proposer and seconder and it should be noted if the decision was unanimous or carried by a majority – or if it was not passed.

Code 253 and Code 254 provide further rules on minutes – the main essentials being that previous minutes should be signed by the Minister once approved by those who were at the previous meeting (provided there are no corrections) and that historic copies of minutes belong to the church and should not be discarded.

### **Understanding the decision making process**

Especially in larger Kirk Sessions and for major decisions, it is useful for the Clerk to be familiar with the 'rules of debate' as described in the Code 148 to 155. These rules are more applicable to the General Assembly and Presbytery but the general principles are useful for Kirk Session meetings. The Moderator will lead the meeting using these principles but it is also useful for the Clerk to know them to give structure for recording the minutes. The pattern is as follows:

1. An agenda item is presented and explained (this might be very brief or it could be a lengthy report – such reports are better sent out to be read by elders in advance)
2. Any questions for clarification (these sometimes merge into the discussion but it is better if questions are asked first so that everyone is clear on what is being discussed).
3. Discussion of the issue. In the minutes it can be helpful to note pros and cons for a course of action as they are raised in the discussion and any information shared that is not known to everyone but that is useful for making a decision (for example, statistics or insights from a particular perspective). If a point is raised that is confidential, it is better to avoid recording it unless absolutely necessary or instead to make a general

observation rather than record a specific comment. For example, write 'from comments made, it appears that some members of the congregation feel they are not being visited enough by the Minister' rather than writing 'Mrs Smith and Mr Jones had both said to their elder that the Minister had not visited them for two months'.

4. Making a decision. After the discussion the Kirk Session must arrive at a decision (which could be to discuss this further at a later date or to take no action). For major decisions this may be a formal resolution which is proposed and seconded and then voted upon. Note that a resolution can be amended before it is voted upon (this also needs a proposer and seconder). If the amended resolution does not succeed then the original resolution is returned to and voted upon. For many decisions taken in Kirk Session, these formal procedures are unnecessary but for major decisions that could be contentious, it is best that the rules are followed so that the decision making process is seen to be fair – and therefore it is vital that the process is accurately recorded in the minutes.

### **Taking the minutes while also engaging in the discussion**

It can be difficult to record minutes and also play an active role in the discussions – the following guidelines may be helpful:

- While the Clerk of Session must endeavour to record the minutes impartially, he/she may still voice his/her own position in any discussion.
- Reflecting beforehand on the agenda items allows the Clerk to write a note in advance of something he/she might say so that it is easier to record if necessary.
- When a written report is presented to the Kirk Session a brief note in the minutes is all that is necessary if the report is included as an appendix.
- Depending on how quickly the Clerk can type, it may be easier to record the minutes during the meeting on a laptop or by pen and then type them up later. Brief bullet points can be noted during the discussion and expanded to full sentences later (it helps to write the full minutes as soon as possible after the meeting in order to remember anything that wasn't noted down).
- Headings of items on the minutes should be kept consistent with items on the agenda – always aim for simplicity to provide clear communication.

### **Distributing minutes**

Minutes should be distributed to the members of Kirk Session to remind them to act on the decisions agreed (it should be clear in the minutes who is to do what and when). Some Kirk Sessions prefer not to distribute the minutes because of confidential information they might contain. In that case, a shorter list of action items can be sent to the Kirk Session so that nothing is forgotten about before the next Kirk Session meeting when the minutes are read out by the Clerk for approval. Another way round this is to send out the minutes with confidential sections left out – these sections can then be read out to the Kirk Session by the Clerk at the next meeting when the minutes are approved.

## **Sample Minutes (all names and details are fictitious)**

### Minutes of meeting of First Anytown Presbyterian Church Kirk Session

Monday 5<sup>th</sup> September 2016 at 8pm in the Minor Hall

#### **1. Opening devotion and prayer**

George Smith opened the meeting with a devotion from 1 Peter 5:1-5 reminding elders that we are undershepherds to the chief Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ. He encouraged elders to pray by thanking God for this high calling while at the same time seeking to be humble servants of the flock. There followed a time of open prayer on this theme which was closed by Rev John Johnson.

#### **2. Attendance and apologies – noted in the attached register**

#### **3. Approval of minutes of the meeting held on Monday 13<sup>th</sup> June 2016**

The minutes of the previous meeting, having been previously circulated by email to the Kirk Session were *agreed with no amendments* and signed by the Moderator.

#### **4. Matters arising**

##### **Holiday Bible Club**

The Youth and Children's Worker submitted a report (circulated in advance and attached to these minutes) on the Holiday Bible Club held in August. She answered a number of questions and a few comments on what had gone well and what might be improved were made. She noted these and said that these comments along with other feedback would be used to shape any future events. The Kirk Session thanked her for her work and noted that the Minister had also thanked all those involved from the pulpit. It was agreed that the Holiday Bible Club had successfully reached unchurched children and that the barbecue at the end had been a helpful way to get to know their parents. In light of this *it was agreed unanimously to run the Holiday Bible Club again next year.*

#### **5. Major review item: pastoral care**

After discussion *it was agreed unanimously to appoint a subcommittee* consisting of Jane Smith, Joe McDonald and convened by George Smith to consider the effectiveness of the current pastoral care provided through the elders' district system. The subcommittee is to consult widely with elders, the Minister and a range of people from the congregation of different age groups and life circumstances including those on the 'fringe' of the congregation as well as the very committed and report back to the November meeting of Kirk Session with their findings.

#### **6. Upcoming events**

No upcoming events were noted for September. Elders were reminded that a Christianity Explored course is planned to commence in October as previously agreed

and that they should lead by example in prayerfully considering who they might ask to come and also to accompany them if that would encourage them to come.

#### **7. Leadership of organisations**

Jane Smith, the Child Protection designated person, advised that Mrs Susan Burns had been Access NI checked and approval of the Kirk Session for her appointment as a Sunday School teacher was requested. This was proposed by George Smith who has known Susan and her family for a long time; it was seconded by Joe McDonald and *agreed unanimously by the Kirk Session.*

#### **8. Report from committee**

The minutes of the congregational committee had been previously circulated to the Kirk Session – no further discussion was required.

#### **9. Report from Presbytery**

There was no report from Presbytery on this occasion.

#### **10. Reports from districts and prayer**

There were no administrative items to report from districts. Elders split into smaller groups to share and pray about people in their districts.

#### **11. Correspondence**

The Clerk of Session informed the Kirk Session of an elders' training event to be held in November. Elders were strongly encouraged to attend and to confirm attendance with the Clerk of Session along with their seminar choices. The Clerk of Session is to make sure if possible that all the seminars are attended by at least one elder so that anything relevant to the Kirk Session can be reported back to the December meeting.

#### **12. Date of next meeting**

The date of the next meeting was noted as Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> October at 8pm as agreed in the June meeting when meeting dates for 2016/2107 had been set.

#### **13. Closing prayer**

The meeting was closed in prayer by Rev John Johnson.



## **5. Other duties and relevant issues**

Apart from preparing agendas and taking minutes, there are other duties which may be the responsibility of the Clerk of Session.

### **Preparing for the Lord's Supper**

Responsibility for making practical preparations for the Lord's Supper does not necessarily belong to the Clerk of Session. Like many of the tasks listed here this could be delegated to another elder (or to a Deputy Clerk of Session). Often, however, it falls to the Clerk to make sure elders are assigned to serve the Lord's Supper. It may also be the responsibility of the Clerk to keep a record of members of the congregation who have attended communion.

### **New communicants or transfers**

It may be the responsibility of the Clerk to keep the record of communicant members up to date. There are different ways to receive new communicants (see Code 40 for what is required). For example, in larger Kirk Sessions it is preferable for new communicants to meet with the Minister and the Clerk or a smaller group of elders before being presented to the Kirk Session.

### **Annual General Meetings**

The main purpose of an Annual General Meeting is to submit a statement of accounts to the congregation for approval. This does not have to be a special meeting – it could simply be at the end of a Sunday service – but it should be announced in advance. It may be a special service including reports of what has been happening throughout the year. In order to make such a service spiritually meaningful this should be a celebration of what God has been doing with time to pray about all aspects of congregational life and witness. Normally the Clerk of Session has a particular role in communicating the statement of accounts and presenting the report of the Kirk Session if there is one (accounts are prepared by the congregational committee but must be approved by the Kirk Session – see Code 257 (2a)).

### **Annual Report to the Charity Commission (NI) and the Charity Regulatory Authority (RoI)**

Once charity registration has been completed for the congregation, the Kirk Session will be required to report annually to either the Charity Commission (NI) and the Charity Regulatory Authority (RoI). This report will include the financial report of the congregation, as approved by the Kirk Session (see Code Par 257(2)(a)) and a short written report from the Kirk Session. The Clerk of Session will often have a lead responsibility in drawing up this written report, following the guidelines provided by the General Assembly, and ensuring it is submitted within the required time period.

### **Keeping names and details of Charity Trustees up to date**

The Clerk of Session should ensure that the names and details of Charity Trustees are kept up to date, via the Charity Commission website (in Northern Ireland) with, for example, new elders, elders dying or becoming 'elders emeritus' etc. This task could be delegated to another member of Session.

### **Managing elders' districts (where a district system is used)**

Often the Clerk of Session has the task of assigning elders to districts and ensuring that districts are relatively balanced in size. This is done in consultation with the Minister, the individual elders concerned and the Kirk Session.

### **Electing new elders**

One of the main tasks for the Clerk of Session in electing new elders may be preparing the voting register. For a detailed explanation of this and the process of electing new elders see the resources listed on page 11.

### **Vacancy procedures**

During a vacancy, one of the major roles of a Clerk of Session is to be a channel of communication to supply any necessary information to Presbytery and the Linkage Commission. As for election of elders, a voting register will be required.

### **Pulpit supply**

Responsibility for who takes services and preaches belongs to the Minister or to a convenor of a vacancy. However, a Minister who is off sick, on holiday or on sabbatical may give a list of names that he/she has approved to the Clerk of Session to contact for pulpit supply.

### **Pastoral cover while the Minister is on holiday/sabbatical or off sick**

If there is no other ministerial staff (an Assistant Minister, pastoral worker, Deaconess, etc.) or if both the Minister and other staff person are off, the Clerk is often called upon to act as a contact person in the event of major pastoral needs such as a death or admittance to hospital for serious illness or accident. The congregation should be made aware of this and/or the Manse phone number forwarded to the Clerk's phone. Again, this responsibility could be delegated to another responsible person but, as the Clerk is meant to be a communication hub, it would be normal for him/her to provide this service.

### **Handling correspondence**

The Clerk of Session will handle a number of items of correspondence either by email or letter and bring them to the attention of the Kirk Session or others as appropriate. The Clerk should be aware that Ministers often receive a large amount of correspondence and relieving some of this burden can be helpful especially in ensuring the right correspondence goes to the right people, for example, information about youth events to a youth worker.

### **Greeting official visitors and preachers**

The Clerk, like other elders and church members, should endeavour to greet visitors to the congregation. The Clerk often has a particular role in greeting official visitors and especially visiting preachers who are taking the service in the absence of the Minister (again this could be delegated but it is the Clerk who is normally the most appropriate person to do this). The Clerk should ensure that visiting preachers are introduced in good time to those who are serving with the sound system (and projector system if necessary). The Clerk should also ensure that the visiting preacher has everything they need and are prayed for before the service. It may be necessary for the Clerk to introduce the visiting preacher to the

congregation and to make any important announcements. The Clerk should also ensure that the congregational treasurer pays the appropriate pulpit supply fee and travel expenses where necessary.

## **6. List of further resources**

Unless otherwise stated, the following resources are available to download from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland website.

### **Rethinking the Kirk Session meeting**

A resource giving detailed suggestions and guidance notes for forming agendas for Kirk Session meetings for small, medium and large congregations.

### **Leading from the Middle**

A short resource on how Ruling Elders can exercise their leadership well as part of the Kirk Session.

### **Navigating to New Places**

A resource on leading change in the congregation available as a detailed version or as a shorter 'quick start' guide.

### **Useful questions to ask when setting up an initiative**

A short resource on vital questions to ask when starting something new to avoid problems in implementation – this resource was written based on actual experience of things not going smoothly in a congregation.

### **Kirk Session Away days**

A resource on organising Kirk Session away days with suggestions for material to use.

### **Electing elders and training elders elect**

A long and short version of a resource on electing elders is available including references to the relevant parts of the Code. Also available is a leaflet on electing elders to distribute to the congregation (this can be downloaded and copied and pasted into church notices or alternatively, free copies can be picked up from Assembly Buildings reception). There is also training course for elders elect, Prepared to Lead, which is available by email – this course can also act as a refresher course for existing elders.