

Presbytery of Wabash Valley

THE ROLE OF THE CLERK OF SESSION

Church leadership is a ministry, and you are one of those leaders

- To contribute to that which enables the church to be “the Body of Christ”
- The ministry of leadership and administration is essential
- Provides an opportunity to serve Jesus Christ in and through the church
- Spiritual gifts

What does it mean to be “Presbyterian?” Our form of government means

- The church is administered by presbyters (pastors/teaching elders and ruling elders)
- The church is connectional among its councils
- Presbyterian Churches are constitutionally governed
 - The Book of Confessions
 - The Book of Order

The Connectional Structure of the Church

- United through councils that we know as sessions, presbyteries, synods and General Assembly
- Presbyterian systems rests upon delegated authority in the group of persons who constitute from congregations to presbytery to General Assembly plus Synod as a middle-governing-body.
- Presbyterian system is participatory, rather than “representative,” democratic or “monarchic” and rests upon belief that the Holy Spirit informs our deliberations and discernment together.

The Clerk of Session’s Qualifications

- Ruling elder, member of the church and regular in attendance
- Elected by the session for term as set by session
- Devoted to the work of the clerk’s congregation and its mission in Christ
- Able to command the respect of the congregation
- Accuracy, clarity and speed
- Connected to presbytery and wider church of Christ

Clerk of Session first holds the Office of Ruling Elder

- Church elders mentioned in 13 different passages or verses in the New Testament
- 125 references to Elders in the Old Testament
- Greek word for Elder in New Testament is *Presbyteros*
- Duties and functions of Church Elders mentioned in Acts 20:28-35; I Timothy 4:1 and 5:7; James 5:1 and Peter 5:1-3

When ordained to office, teaching elders, ruling elders and deacons are asked:

- To function in obedience to Jesus Christ
- Under the authority of Scripture
- Be guided by the Confessions
- Be governed by polity of Book of Order
- To honor its discipline

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BOOK OF ORDER: References to Clerks in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

- **G-1.0505 Secretary and Minutes** The clerk of session shall serve as secretary for all meetings of the congregation. If the clerk of session is unable to serve, the congregation shall elect a secretary for that meeting. The secretary shall record the actions of the congregation in minutes of the meeting.
- **G-2.0407, G-3.0105, D-3.0106** Clerk receives and distributes key communications of the congregation
- **G-3.01...** Each council shall elect a clerk who shall record the transactions of the council, keep its rolls of membership and attendance including the rolls... preserve its records, and furnish extracts from them when required by another council of the church. Such extracts, verified by the clerk, shall be evidence in any council of the church. The clerk of the session shall be a ruling elder elected by the session for such term as it may determine...
- **G-3.0106...** Each council shall develop a manual of administrative operations that will specify the form and guide the work of mission in that council. All councils shall adopt and implement a sexual misconduct policy...
- **G-3.0107 Records and preservation** Each council shall keep a full and accurate record of its proceedings. Minutes and all other official records of councils are the property in perpetuity of said councils or their legal successors. When a council ceases to exist, its records shall become the property of the next higher council within whose bounds the lower council was prior to its cessation. The clerk of each council shall make recommendation to that body for the permanent safekeeping of the body's records with the Presbyterian Historical Society or in a temperature and humidity controlled environment of a seminary of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).
- **G-3.0108 Review** Presbytery reviews annually or biennially, the proceedings and actions of all entities related to presbytery, all ordained officers eligible to act on behalf of the congregation, and determine whether the proceedings have been correctly recorded, in accord with Constitution, whether they have been prudent and equitable, and are faithful to the mission of the whole church, and whether "lawful injunctions of the higher bodies have been obeyed." GA (2010, 61, 330, Item 05-12) reminds that "Sessions are required to produce any articles of incorporation and bylaws adopted by the congregation as part of the annual review of session records..."

Session clerk often reminds session of its duties:

- G-3.0202 Relations with Other Councils
Sessions have a particular responsibility to participate in the life of the whole church through participation in other councils. It is of particular importance that sessions:
 - a. elect, as commissioners to presbytery, ruling elders from the congregation, preferably for at least a year, and receive their reports;
 - b. nominate to presbytery ruling elders from the congregation who may be considered for election as commissioners to synod and General Assembly, and to serve on committees or commissions of the same, bearing in mind principles of inclusiveness and fair representation in the decision making of the church (F-1.0403);
 - c. see that the guidance and communication of presbytery, synod, and General Assembly are considered, and that any binding actions are observed and carried out;
 - d. welcome representatives of the presbytery on the occasions of their visits;
 - e. propose to the presbytery, or through it to the synod and General Assembly, such measures as may be of common concern to the mission of the church;

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and

f. send to presbytery and General Assembly requested statistics and other information according to the requirements of those bodies, as well as voluntary financial contributions.

Besides all this, what do Clerks actually do?

- Write minutes for Session and congregational meetings
- Serve as corporate secretary
- Send and receive correspondence
- Keep policies accessible and provide as needed
- Keep legal documents, bylaws and archive with Presbyterian Historical Society, or in Indiana, Hanover College (“preserve records...”)
- Maintain rolls of ministers, ruling elders and deacons, active and affiliate members, baptisms...weddings, deaths and a record of inactive members (if any) are optional
- Convey information –emails, newsletters
 - Between presbytery and session
 - Between presbytery and congregation
 - Between session and COM
 - Among clerks of presbytery, with other congregations
- Relationship with pastor
 - What about during a vacancy in the pulpit?
- Plan meeting agenda with moderator
- Advise on parliamentary procedure and *Book of Order* questions
- Keep and report annual statistics, Clerk’s questionnaire on ministry, terms of call, contributions, changes for presbytery directory
- Participate in records review

What spiritual gifts does it take to be a Clerk?

- Committed to mission of Christ
 - Focus upon Christ and the joy and responsibility of serving him through the mission and ministry of the church; bring the perspective of the Gospel
- Leader
- Organization
- Details
- Listening
- Understanding
- Prayer
- Tact
- Perspective broader than current comments
- Writer of the ministry story

Resource people:

- Rev. Frank Vardeman, General Presbyter: frank@ourpresbytery.org
- Ruling Elder Linda L. Long, Stated Clerk: linda.l.long@gmail.com
- Ruling Elder Vicki Dreibelbis, Church Relations Coordinator: Vicki@ourpresbytery.org
- Gladys Sargent, Office Manager Gladys@ourpresbytery.org

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- Rev. Doug Tracy, Stated Clerk for Synod of Lincoln Trails: douglasitracy@hotmail.com
- COM roster, Teaching Elder Terri Thorn, Moderator, rev.thorn@att.net
- Presbyterian Historical Society (PCUSA) <http://history.pcusa.org/>
Records Archivist
425 Lombard Street
Philadelphia, PA 19147-1516
- Hanover College <http://library.hanover.edu/archives/presbyterian.php>

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR MINUTES

- Many items of church action point to the future
- Without reliable record, these transactions soon become dim and intent not carried out
- Eventually, without record, sessions are confused about what happened and why, and actions are lost
- Tell the story of your congregation's ministry, not just the parliamentary procedure; that includes financial resources available to support the ministry
- Some items on the checklist are not required by the Book of Order, but will benefit your congregation
- **Topic for discussion this year at Records Review Meetings: How shall we record, review, provide access to, and preserve electronic records? Bring your experiences and your questions to help develop a policy for our presbytery.** After dabbling with this idea for several years, the time has come to settle on some shared understandings.

Accuracy is essential

- What is truth? How complete do we need to be? What about conflict?
- Future generations (and sometimes the courts) will refer to minutes in time of need
- Inaccurate or incomplete records fail to accomplish the very purposes for which they are made

Taking the Minutes

- The Clerk or substitute must be present at all regular and special meetings (to take notes and later inscribe them accurately in the permanent record)
- *The minutes may be made in permanent ink but preferably typed – on numbered pages in a bound record book*
- *Minutes may be written electronically; print with laser (not inkjet) on non-acid paper to preserve; some clerks use laser copier to print to paper for binding into records book.*
- *They are entered into the permanent record book when they have been approved by the session at the next regular meeting*
- The minutes should be as brief as possible but long enough to tell the story
- As soon as possible after the meeting, send copies of minutes to pastor/moderator as there may be items of unfinished business that require thought and preparation before presentation at the next meeting

Avoid Descriptive Terms or Subjective Judgments and Opinions

- Be discreet – avoid terms whether complimentary or otherwise
- Avoid such entries as:
 - “vigorously urged”
 - “convincingly denounced”
 - “offered a deeply moving prayer”
- Descriptive terms more often than not simply reflect the clerk's state of mind – it may be an accurate state of mind – but church records are not a place to mirror the clerk's moods and opinions

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The following guidelines should be helpful in deciding what to record:

- ❑ Record only that which is vital to the transactions of the meeting, including affirmative votes and significant negative votes.
- ❑ Details of discussions, or of plans which have not been adopted, or suggestions which have not been followed should not generally be recorded, except by special order of the session. That special order should be noted in the minutes.
- ❑ Reference to a previous action should include the page or pages of the official minute book on which that action is recorded.
- ❑ Should you include the annual report to the congregation? Usually that is the best review that tells the story of the ministry of the congregation.

Rolls and Registers

G-3.0104 “Each council shall elect a clerk who shall record the transactions of the council, keep its rolls of membership and attendance..., preserve its records, and furnish extracts from them when required by another council of the church. Such extracts, verified by the clerk, shall be evidence in any council of the church. The clerk of the session shall be a ruling elder elected by the session for such term as it may determine.

G-3.0204 a. Membership Roll

There shall be rolls of baptized, active, and affiliate members in accordance with G-1.0401, G-1.0402 and G-1.0403. The session shall delete names from the roll of the congregation upon the member’s death, admission to membership in another congregation or presbytery, or renunciation of jurisdiction. The session may delete names from the roll of the congregation when a member so requests, or has moved or otherwise ceased to participate actively in the work and worship of the congregation for a period of two years. The session shall seek to restore members to active participation and shall provide written notice before deleting names due to member inactivity. [Also G-2.0406]

G-3.0204 b. Registers

There shall be registers of baptisms authorized by the session, of ruling elders and deacons, of installed pastors with dates of service, and such other registers as the session may deem necessary.

[Note that the difference between what is mandatory (There shall be...) and optional (as the session may deem necessary). That means you certainly may continue to keep your former rolls, if the session wishes. Church registers are frequently the source of essential information (proof of age, marriage, genealogy).

- Former Book of Order: The session shall keep complete registers of
 - G-10.0302c.(1) Marriages, including marriages of all members of the church, all marriages conducted by the ministerial staff of the church, and all marriages performed on church property;
 - G-10.0302c.(2) Baptisms;
 - G-10.0302c.(2)(a) Infant Baptisms. Include name, parents' names, and date of birth of those being baptized and the names of persons presenting the children for Baptism.
 - G-10.0302c.(2)(b) Adult Baptisms. Include name, parents' names, and date of birth of those being baptized.

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- G-10.0302c.(3) Elders, with the name of the church in which each was ordained, the date of ordination, terms of active service, and the record of removals;
- G-10.0302c.(4) Deacons, with the name of the church in which each was ordained, the date of ordination, terms of active service, and the record of removals;
- G-10.0302c.(5) Pastors, co-pastors, associate pastors, assistant pastors, interim pastors, stated supplies, and parish associates serving the church, with dates of service

As an overall principle, it should be understood that the Register does not function independently, but is to be based upon the session minutes. Consequently, all information which is required on the church's rolls and registers should be reported to the session and appear first in its minutes.

Essential legal documents that should be preserved along with minutes and registers:

- Articles of Incorporation
- Bylaws
- Deeds
- Corporate reports
- Insurance documents

What are new possibilities?

- How can we support one another from one congregation to another? We are the "presbytery" who are gathered here.
- Do you envision new ways you could serve your congregation as Clerk? Are there new ways you realize you could be a leader?
- What might we learn from one another? [relationships, listening, perceiving] What ideas do you have to share about how we clerks can support one another, from congregation to congregation and between presbytery leaders and congregation?
- Will the ministry of your congregation be enhanced by partnering with other congregations?
- What is God calling us to be, when we listen with the mind and ears of Clerk?