

“OH NO! ... NOT ME!! ... NOT CLERK!!!”

ON BEING A CLERK OF PRESBYTERY

By Rev. James A. Smith

Dedicatory

TO: More “decently and orderly” - that the Church Visible may better glorify “Him”; With Thanks to Marilyn for always bearing with my negatives, whatever their source but particularly those of the “Office”; and above all with praise to God for all the “positives” ...

Forward

As most people, I tend to be a bit impatient with human faults. This trait is no less apt to express itself in my church-related dealings than in personal relationships. Over the years, exasperation would frequently be my reaction to the failures of other stated clerks, sometimes even when the shortcoming did not bother me directly.

It doesn't take much thought to realize that such a response is not very productive. A little objectivity usually reveals that we ourselves probably cause more than enough chagrin to others to remove all justification of any attitude of indignation. Sensing this it occurred to me several years ago that an instruction manual might help to lessen some of this inappropriate stress.

I was encouraged by the response of Dr. Morton Smith to my suggestion of the need for such a pamphlet, to think further about trying to produce one. At odd moments, ideas were sketched out and little-by-little the following took shape. In hopes that it will make life better for those called upon to be clerks and that, in that way as well as possibly many others, it will glorify God, I offer this booklet.

OUTLINE

- I. A Different Perspective
- II. Sources for Guidance
 - A. *BCO* References
 - B. *RAO* References
 - C. Clerk's *Handbook*
 - D. Presbytery Standing Rules
 - E. Clerks' Conference
- III. Presbytery Duties
 - A. Keeping Minutes
 - B. Maintaining Files
 - C. Corresponding
 - D. Directing of Presbytery
- IV. GA Responsibilities
 - A. Liaison with General Assembly
 - 1. Clerk's *Handbook*
 - 2. Reporting Changes
 - 3. Annual Reports
 - B. Minutes for Review

I. A Different Perspective

Oh no! ... Not me!! ... Not clerk!!! Have you voiced such sentiments? Maybe you've just felt them? Most, when asked to take on the position of stated clerk, probably feel that way whether it is expressed or not. If you have been asked to be the clerk of your Presbytery and feel that you aren't cut out for the job, if you are already a clerk but a bit restive or thinking there just isn't time to do the job and you're flagging in enthusiasm, please consider the following thoughts. They may help you to a new appreciation for, perhaps even joy in, carrying on.

Presbytery may have been totally off base in selecting or asking you to be clerk. Perhaps you are just not "cut out" for it. I don't know, and you may not either. If you are really convinced that this is so, I suggest you explore it with your Presbytery or some individual who may help you come to a clearer view of the calling of God for you and of the part that opportunity and willingness might play in your decision to accept or continue in the job. However, the fact that you have been selected deserves consideration as one part of the picture, which may indicate that you are meant for the job after all.

One of the basic concepts in Presbyterian government as it has developed in our tradition rises from Paul's statement in I Corinthians 14:40, "But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (NIV, "decently and in order" in the KJV). The topic under discussion is the worship service, but the principle would seem to be equally applicable to the whole function of the church and, in fact, is usually understood that way.

Thus the keeping of records and the establishing of orderly lines of communication are clearly necessary. Logic dictates then, that it is God's will for men to do these tasks. We also conclude that if God wills it, He will provide men with the gifts to do it. Time and priorities press us all, but they too must be incorporated into the recognition of the fact that what ought to be done can be done, and if I'm the one to do it, I can do it and should do it the best way I know how. Incidentally, these principles apply equally to the Session as to the Presbytery and General Assembly.

The patterns of the Old Testament abundantly reinforce these conclusions, as we can see in the "begots," the tribal lists and other records, sometimes tedious to wade through, but found to be helpful, sometimes in unexpected ways. The very existence of the Bible is clear and eloquent witness for the same conclusion. Its reliability should inspire and challenge each of us to diligence and care in all the work we do.

Jesus told his disciples that the pattern of leadership in the Kingdom was that of servanthood. This can be a very frustrating path, but to allow our "nature" to keep us from it is surely to be out of step with Him. Have you never taken on a job that you thought was simply "out of the question" only to find, in doing it, the realization of great satisfaction – even a new sense of what your calling was? Before you too hastily decide to refuse the position of clerk, resign from it, or give it only token attention, consider that the Lord may be leading you to the role in which you can most effectively glorify him. "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men." Col. 3:24.

II. Sources for Guidance

There are four places where the functions of clerks in the PCA may be presented. It is not our purpose here to elaborate on the content or to be a commentary on them, but to point them out and try to direct you to the specific locations so you may find for yourself the requirements of the office as well as the help these documents provide.

A. *The Book of Church Order (BCO)*

It goes without saying that the basic compendium of principles for the operation of the church as we understand it is the first place we would expect to find material to help us understand the functions of the clerk. However, it is also true that we should not expect too much detail here as the more cumbersome nature of the process for change in this document, coupled with the need for flexibility in modifying job descriptions, suggest a better place for such material is a more readily amendable vehicle. Here we should find only principal matters presented.

The references in the *BCO* cover all of the courts and in some cases are limited to a specific court. However, they may be helpful to understanding the job in general and so are included here for your consideration.

The clerk is mentioned specifically in *BCO* 10-4, 13-11 and 12, 14-1 (11), 14-3, (Chapter 14 deals with the Assembly), 25-5 (dealing with the congregation), 32-3, 32-4 and 32-18 (Judicial Process). The clerk is also the reasonable agent of functions required by *BCO* 11-4, 12-7 and 8, 13-7 and 13-10. No doubt there are other places such as these that might be listed in sections dealing with duties of the various courts of the church.

B. *The Rules of Assembly Operation (RAO)*

Chapter XVI in the “Rules for Assembly Operation” deals with the “review of presbytery records.” There is considerable material here that defines the minimum acceptable content of the minutes of Presbytery, and the processes of review of those minutes by the General Assembly, as well as the response required of Presbytery to that review. It is essential that the clerk of Presbytery study this chapter in order to carry out his responsibilities effectively.

C. *The Clerk’s Handbook*

The Stated Clerk of the General Assembly provides a *Handbook* to the clerks of Presbyteries each year. This very helpful volume supplies a great deal of material, much of which is the practical material to enable the clerk to carry out the duties of his office. It may seem cumbersome at times and one might be tempted to ignore it, but the diligent pursuit of its pages can deliver one from embarrassment and failure.

D. Presbytery Standing Rules

Of course the Standing Rules of one's own Presbytery almost certainly have some things to say about your duties. These will no doubt vary from Presbytery to Presbytery so we can do no more than to remind you to check them out.

E. Clerks' Conferences

Another source of help are the conferences held annually in late November/early December by the Administrative Committee of General Assembly. These are intended to improve the functions of the church, by educating the clerks and thereby to encourage them to better functioning. Every Presbytery clerk ought to attend if at all possible, as their value serves not just for increasing knowledge but also for refreshment and renewed enthusiasm.

III. Presbytery Duties

A. Keeping Minutes

1. General Concerns

This task is perhaps the one that most nearly describes the stated clerk's position. It is certainly the one with the highest visibility. Good minutes should describe what took place with as little ambiguity as can be achieved. For research purposes, they should also be structured in such a way as to make it as simple as possible to find whatever one might later need to know. These two concerns seem to me to be of first importance, second only to accuracy and faithfulness of recording and, in fact, they are a part of faithfulness.

For the required contents of the minutes, the clerk is directed to the whole of "RAO" 14. Here will be found the minimum acceptable matters and also some helpful ideas as to style.

For clarity, short simple sentences are usually best. The vocabulary ought to be as understandable to everyone (not just the initiates) as one can make it without requiring excessive elaboration or explanation. Considerateness suggests explanation whenever technical terminology is used, this out of regard for any who may have occasion to read the minutes but who do not possess the technical vocabulary. Why not just make it simpler from the start?

For ease in research, it is good (and I am sure that clerks who try this will find it very helpful) to give a short descriptive title to each major paragraph. The most effective form here is to print the title in capital letters. The value of such a practice will be quickly seen the first time one has to look for a specific action.

A clerk may also find it desirable to use a system of consecutive numbering of these paragraphs, such as that used in the Journal of the General Assembly Minutes. In this way it is possible to provide a wider index that not only marks the location of an individual action in a meeting but also provides a quick reference to the place of the meeting itself in the over all history of the Presbytery.

2. Style

It goes without saying that the clerk himself will largely determine the style of the minutes. This is not only true of the language patterns but also of the amount of material, beyond the essential minimums, which is included. Strictly speaking, the motions passed are about all that is absolutely necessary. But there is little interest in reading a repetition of the formula, “moved, seconded and passed.” A little extra to make the account “flow” or become more interesting to follow will certainly be appreciated by any who find it needful to read the minutes. It is also true that “bare” motions give little information of historical import.

Generally speaking, only motions actually passed need to be recorded. An obvious exception is any time a member of the body might request his vote to be recorded. However, it seems to me that lost motions, and more complete recording of the various motions such as amendments or substitutes that are made in coming to the final action do add to the ability to understand what actually took place in a meeting. The complete picture becomes more significant as time passes. Minutes are not just “data banks” but a form of history. Whether we like it or not, or think our area of life insignificant or not, we are part of history and when it falls to us to record it, we should do so in a worthy manner.

One may also include additional material to increase interest and raise the historic value of the minutes. If one chooses to do this, he should be careful not to distort the record or contribute to a prejudicial perception of the meeting. The recording of the minutes should be done as impartially as possible.

B. Maintaining Files

The record, or “history” is not just the recitation of what went on. That surely is important but may not be fully understandable without long, complicated and perhaps clumsy incorporations of reports, correspondence etc, into the text. Thus files of such material are essential. The clerk ought to keep such files, and try to preserve them for the archives. They also enable him to keep track of his own fulfillment of duties. In this connection, it is advisable to preserve copies of his own responses to incoming correspondence. One must also keep in mind that there is always a possibility of the need for such material in the event of judicial process, either ecclesiastical or civil.

C. Correspondence

The first image that comes to mind when the title clerk is given may well be “keeper of the minutes.” But the reputation of the clerk is possibly more dependent on his handling of correspondence than on how well he records the meetings. This will certainly be true in the company of one’s fellow clerks and also, although perhaps not as likely to be noticed or to “get back” to one, from among those outside the church with whom the clerk is called upon to exchange information. And it is exactly here that the reputation of the whole denomination is may be built up or torn down. So it is important to keep in mind that though there is little positive reinforcement in this area there is good reason for great diligence in doing a quality job.

Be quick to handle these duties. If you are required to respond directly, do so promptly and file the letter with your response. If the response is to come from Presbytery, make copies for all who should see them and file the original as soon as possible so nothing gets lost in

the “shuffle.” Of course it goes without saying that the distribution of the copies should be handled in ample time for action at the next meeting of Presbytery if at all possible.

The Presbyterian concern for orderly and businesslike process requires a good deal of correspondence. Timely handling of it is not only good business, it is just plain thoughtfulness. It is easy to see the need for the initial sending of information, but the one receiving this contact may forget that, often, he must respond before the transaction can be considered complete. When transferring credentials the transfer is really not effected until the receiving Presbytery acts and then notifies the dismissing body. When we do business by mail, which is preferable for the proper maintenance of records, it is important to keep in mind that acknowledgment should be a part of the procedure.

The telephone is a wonderful device, and so quick! But taping phone conversations requires additional machinery and tapes are space-consuming in storage. The emerging “fax” technology may be helpful, but again, considerable expense is involved and not everyone can afford it. We must remember that we do not know when proof will be needed either for our own well-being or in case of judicial process, so good correspondence practices are wise.

Emerging e-mail technology opens another area for handling correspondence. Here also the keeping of hard copies is advisable for historic and, possibly, judicial reasons. The speed and ease of this method should not deceive us into incomplete recording.

In the PCA, convenient forms are provided for handling the transfers of ministers and the communication of the information to the clerk of the General Assembly. The forms are structured so as to indicate the sequence to be followed in sending the forms and to provide copies for all needing them, the receiving body as well as the General Assembly. But it is nice and, really a helpful part of the process, if a little information about the history of the transferee is included. Thus a letter along with the form is a thoughtful addition as well as being a part of the man’s full credentials.

When dismissing or receiving a minister or church to or from another denomination, the *BCO* requires that the exchange be in order. So again, correspondence is obviously required. Inter- denominational correspondence, in the technical sense of the term, is not carried on at the Presbytery level. When “correspondence” is officially in place there is no question as to the appropriateness of the exchange of letters with the corresponding officer in the other body. But even where “correspondence” doesn’t exist, the necessary responsibilities demand that we determine the transfer to be in order. In such cases, no significance attends the writing and receiving of letters beyond the needed exchange of information.

Presbytery meetings almost always generate a good deal of business that requires the clerk to write letters. Promptness in attending to these duties may seem onerous but, as with all duties, it is almost always best. It is helpful to keep a list of such items as the meeting progresses and then check them off as they are completed. The order in which they are tended to will depend on their urgency. Notification of General Assembly in transfers, etc. has a requested and sometimes mandatory timeframe, which can be found in the clerk’s *Handbook*.

D. Direction of Presbytery

Because the clerk is so much a part of the transaction of Presbytery business, it is obvious that he can be very helpful. The more efficiently he does his job, the smoother the whole function of Presbytery will be. Because this is so, it is a good idea to keep an effective and willing clerk in office. But always with the good comes the potential for the bad. The clerk must be sensitive to his heart motives and actions, to be as helpful as possible without using the office inappropriately. It is doubtful that a foolproof system for protection from such eventualities can be contrived so everyone needs to be alert. None is immune to the potential for evil, for “the heart is deceitful above all things...” (Jer. 17:9). Apart from the grace of God this would be an unbearable world.

The exact nature and limits of the way the clerk can be of help will largely be determined by the Presbytery’s structure and the gifts of the individual clerk. The clerk is the one most likely to be first contacted in the introduction of business, so he will be very important in the production of the docket for the meetings. It is also wise for him to refer matters to the committees best equipped to bring the business to the floor efficiently.

At the very least, the moderator should be involved in the production of the docket, if for no other reason than that he may be familiar with what is to take place. But even better, if you can get it, is the erection of a committee for the task. Representatives of each committee should be involved to make sure everything is considered that will affect the meeting.

It is very helpful in the functioning of the meetings if the clerk is knowledgeable in parliamentary procedure. However, it may be preferable to have a parliamentarian who is responsible for this duty. This will be indicated partly by how involved the stated clerk is in the actual recording of the minutes at the meeting itself. If he does a major part of this work, then it is clearly wise not to load him with tasks that might complicate the production of good minutes. If he has a competent recording clerk and is skillful in parliamentary procedure then the clerk is one obvious possibility for the job.

IV. GA Responsibilities

A. Liaison with General Assembly

All official communications in the church take place through the clerks of the various courts. This is also true of communications that go outside of the church. As mentioned earlier however, in the latter case, the nature of any given communication is regulated by the relationship between the PCA and the other church. So, as Presbytery relates to other ecclesiastical organizations, it will be through the clerk. Thus it is that other churches, Presbyteries or the General Assembly only truly “know” something when they receive notice officially signed by the clerk.

1. Clerk’s *Handbook*

We previously pointed out the clerk’s *Handbook* as a source of help. It is in the required functions that the *Handbook* is most helpful, in fact, necessary. The functions of the church require that Presbytery provide information and manpower to the General Assembly. Thus, the clerk of Presbytery needs to be sure that he is aware of the specific areas and their timeframes so that Presbytery will not fall short on its responsibilities. Included here are elections of (and/or appointments to) nominees for permanent committees and agencies, representatives on Committees

of Commissioners, Review of Presbytery Records (RPR) Committee and (General Assembly level) Nominating Committee. The clerk's *Handbook* lays out the schedules for all of these requirements and gives other helpful material as well. Thus it is obvious that it must be one of the clerk's main tools in planning for the meetings of Presbytery and staying up on all his duties.

2. Changes

When ministers transfer, are ordained or demitted, when churches are formed or dissolved (missions also), when addresses change, the clerk of Presbytery must notify the office of the Stated Clerk of General Assembly. Helpful forms are provided by the GA Clerk's office and their use is requested. In recent years, with the prevalence of electronic mail, usage of the forms and the formality of mailing the signed original have been relaxed where possible. All forms from the GA Clerk's Office have been updated to specify the options available for submitting information.

3. Annual Reports

The rolls of Presbytery must be reported in full [promptly] at the first of every year. The Stated Clerk's Office sends copies of the current list to each clerk to make corrections and return. This is another clerk's requirement that has been relaxed to ease the clerk's workload and facilitate more prompt communication, thus more accurate records. Pastoral relationships and presbytery committee assignments are the primary pieces of information to be reviewed, and changes can be emailed, if convenient, to the Stated Clerk's Office at records@pcanet.org. Along with this information, it must be noted that the RPR Committee requires several other items in addition to the complete roll. These requirements will be found listed in chapter sixteen of "RAO."

B. Minutes for Review

The primary way that General Assembly exercises oversight of the Presbyteries is by the review of minutes. The review takes place annually at the time of the General Assembly meeting. Only Official minutes can be considered for review and only "approved" minutes and minutes signed by the clerk are official. Copies are acceptable for review purposes, but they must be "photocopies" of the official minutes. There are many other details pertaining to the acceptable form and practice of submitting minutes for review. They are explained in "RAO" 14 and do not need further amplification here. Please give careful attention to that section of the Assembly's Rules of Operation and keep them handy for reference purposes. They will almost certainly be needed and help you avoid problems in the Review process.

V. Afterward

In closing, let me add a word or two on how the clerk should view himself and his functions in relationship to the various courts of the church. Keep in mind that you serve Presbytery. The specifics of the job are Presbytery's responsibility, not yours. You are in the truest sense, a servant. This understanding is important in helping you to know how to relate to Presbytery and when consultation or immediate authorization may be required.

One major area where a right understanding of this attitude may alleviate or help one avoid unnecessary pain or frustration is in the matter of the review of Presbytery's minutes. It is clear that you will determine their "flavor" or style to a large extent, but the actions are not yours, they are entirely Presbytery's. It is Presbytery that approves the minutes, thereby taking full responsibility for them. Any later criticism, as in the review process, should

therefore not be taken personally. And the required response must be from Presbytery, not the clerk. You answer, not to the RPR Committee of GA, but to the Presbytery. If the cause of the criticism is your fault, plead your case in the lower court and let Presbytery handle its responsibilities, whatever the failures may be, before the higher court. It is true that this will take place through your offices, but always remember, you are only the agent of Presbytery.

NOTE: Rev. James A. Smith served for many years as the stated clerk of New Jersey Presbytery. He has also served as chairman of Presbytery Records Committee in the RPCES before the joining and receiving of the RPCES into the PCA. He has been a consistent and faithful servant to the church.