

What duties are required of an elder?

Elders co-operate with the minister of the congregation in the oversight and government of the parish. They are usually assigned elders' districts and oversee the welfare of the people in their district.

Among other things they visit the aged and the sick, take an interest in the growth and development of the young, guide and encourage inquirers, and build up the faith of believers.

Their leadership is spiritual in its nature and they should always seek to promote the spiritual welfare of their people.

What qualities should an elder possess?

For the reason already mentioned, elders should be people of mature faith, who have tested their beliefs in the 'real' world and have grown in confidence and strength as a result. They should be people who read the scriptures regularly, know what they believe and can share it with confidence. They should be people of prayer who walk with God with assurance.

Their personal, ethical, moral and family lives should be above reproach and ideal as role models for others

An elder needs to be a person of discretion with a readiness to listen and an ability to keep a confidence. They need not be people of dynamic energy but should always be people that others have confidence in. The ability to be a friend is a great asset.

It is an important principle in Presbyterianism that elders are elected by the congregation, whose members need to recognise the leadership qualities of the nominees in order to elect that person to office. Even elders transferring from other congregations do not transfer onto the session. They have to expect to have their leadership qualities recognised by the congregation before they can go onto the session of their new congregation.

Questions:

1. At which point of spiritual maturity might a person be identified as a potential elder?
2. How should the church view situations when elders or potential elders engage in such practices as a having a beer after work, or a small flutter at the TAB?

Who may be elected as an elder?

Any communicant member, male or female, who is over the age of 21, who leads a godly life and who participates fully in the life of the congregation is eligible to be elected as an elder in New South Wales. The Victorian and Queensland churches only allow the election of men to the office of elder.

How is an elder elected to office in a congregation?

When a vacancy on a session is to be filled, an announcement is read to the congregation concerning the timing and method of the election.

Nominations can come from members of the congregation or the session as a whole. The election can be by open voting, by ballot or by circulating a list of eligible members of the congregation.

An elder coming from another congregation must be elected by the members of the new congregation. However a session can read an edict over two successive Sundays of its intention to admit the new elder to the session. If no objection is received, the induction proceeds.

What vows does an elder make at the time of his or her ordination?

At the induction or ordination of a new elder the following questions are asked:

1. *Do you believe the Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, to be the only rule of faith and life?*
2. *Do you own and accept the Westminster Confession of Faith, read in the light of the Declaratory Statement contained in the Basis of Union adopted by the Church on 24th day of July 190, as an exhibition of the sense in which you understand the Holy Scriptures, and as a confession of your faith; and do you engage firmly and constantly to adhere thereto, and to the utmost of your power to assert, maintain and defend the same?*
3. *Do you own and accept the purity of worship as practised in this church?*
4. *Do you own the Presbyterian form of government to be founded on the Word of God and agreeable thereto? And do you promise that through the grace of God you will firmly and constantly adhere to, and to the utmost of your power, in your station, assert, maintain, and defend the same?*

5. *Do you adhere to your acceptance of the call of this congregation, to exercise among them the office of ruling elder?*

6. *Do you engage through Divine Grace to discharge with diligence and faithfulness the various duties of your office, watching over the flock, showing yourself a pattern of good works, and giving a conscientious attendance on the meetings of Session, Presbytery and Assembly, when duly called to do so?*

7. *All these things do you profess and promise through grace, as you shall be answerable at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.*

All questions must be answered in the affirmative and a formula containing the substance of the questions must be signed by the new elder.

How much freedom of conscience does an elder have?

The commitments contained in the answers to the questions above are broad enough to allow a great deal of freedom of conscience. Nothing commits the elder to a particular view of scriptural interpretation.

The vows allow elders to support change and development in church organisation and newer forms of worship.

Questions:

3. At what point does an elder, in exercising his or her freedom of conscience, become a liability to the church? How should elders regard diversity of opinion?
4. How might an elder's role be affected by membership of such organisations as political parties, service organisations, lodges and unions?

What authority is vested with each individual elder?

An individual elder's role is basically pastoral, although many elders are given individual responsibility for a particular area, e.g. running the Sunday School or Kids Club, leading a bible study, maintaining the church roll, etc. In these instances they are accountable to the session and exercise their authority by delegation.

Sometimes an elder may be part of a commission or a committee of a court and in this role he or she operates

within the wording of the commission.

An elder commissioned to represent a session on a higher court has full authority to vote on an issue according to conscience. This is because that elder is the only member of that session to be party to the debate on a matter.

What are the circumstances in which an elder can be removed from office?

An elder holds office for life and remains on a session indefinitely. However that elder can cease to be a member by

- resignation,
- transfer of membership,
- declaration by the session after twelve months of poorly-explained absence or detachment from the life of the congregation,
- removal from office by the session or a superior court, or
- judicial process

Of particular interest is the provision for an elder to be removed from office without process of discipline when the elder's "usefulness as an elder in the congregation has been seriously impaired".

The right of appeal is preserved in all instances.

Question: What circumstances might cause an elder's "usefulness as an elder in the congregation" to be seriously impaired?

What happens when an elder becomes too old or infirm to perform his or her office?

A session has the power to grant the status of *elder emeritus* to an elder for whom age and infirmity has rendered unable to perform his or her duties. It is a status in which the person retains the honour of the office but is no longer expected to perform the duties.

To which body is an elder accountable?

Elders are accountable, pure and simply, to their sessions although each session, in turn, is accountable to the presbytery

When pastoral relationships break down, how can they be resolved?

The Presbytery of the bounds has sweeping powers to visit congregations, to make recommendations and to act directly to resolve a situation

The NSW State Assembly maintains a Pastoral Relations Committee which has considerable powers to investigate and act. It only becomes involved on request.

Some Questions for further Discussion

1. How can an elder effectively criticize and promote change in the church and still remain loyal to his or her vows?
- 2.. What is "quality" in worship and how does the elder promote it in his or her parish?
3. If an elder perceives that an organisation in the church, or an individual within it, is experiencing trouble, what can that elder do about it?
4. If a session and the Presbytery of the bounds have differing opinions on whether a Session, or even individual elders within it, are not performing their responsibilities, how might they seek to resolve this in a Christian way?
5. At what point in a deteriorating pastoral relationship might it be necessary to seek the intervention of the Presbytery or the Pastoral Relations Committee?

Elders Association



Understanding the office of the Elder in the Presbyterian Church

In this study,

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