

## Clerks of Session: New Roles and Possibilities

*A Leader Reader by Paul Rack*

### The New Clerk

Under the old Form of Government it was often the job of the clerk (of session and presbytery) to interpret its detailed rules and procedures. In this role, the clerk had to give balanced, neutral advice uncontrolled by other agendas (like those of pastors or executives). We clerks were always primarily responsible to the constitution.

Our new Form of Government emphasizes flexibility and permission-giving. The rules and regulations have been significantly trimmed, leaving more room for local presbyteries and sessions to organize themselves according to their own mission. This means that the *Book of Order* has a more general and less immediate influence on our daily work, while we will be increasingly governed by the body's administrative manual.

As a presbytery stated clerk, also charged with resourcing and advising session clerks, I feel a need to rethink our work for this new way of operating. We clerks have skills and expertise that our councils will require as they reorganize for mission. But we have to see ourselves less as "canon lawyers" and more as functional and critical enablers of mission. This is a very exciting time for us!

As we move forward with the flexibility and permission given by the new Form of Government, sessions and presbyteries will require insight in developing new approaches to mission. It is the clerk who is often already equipped with the knowledge, background, and experience that the council will need to advance its mission. This expertise emerges in three areas.

#### Clerks Hold Institutional Memory

First, clerks carry the institutional memory of the body. While it may no longer be expressed in terms

#### Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for the gifts and dedicated service of our clerks. Give them continued energy, creativity, and humor as they help the church live into a new era of mission. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

of detailed legislation to be enforced, our institutional heritage is still relevant to the decisions we make today. This is true even if our awareness of our past often tells us more about what not to do and what didn't work, or at least won't work today. Having this longitudinal scope is essential if a session or presbytery is going to avoid some of its previous mistakes. The clerk is the person in the structure who has most direct access to this data.

Clerks are, in a sense, story-keepers. We maintain the narrative that constitutes the group's identity. On one level this story is given in our constitution and written in the minutes. But on a more subtle level, presbyteries and churches have an "oral tradition" of anecdotes, memories, habits, and even legends. Clerks, especially those who have been around a while, and who have served in many different areas, are intimate with this stash of material. We conserve and integrate both the written and oral stories of the body, making it available to inform its current witness.

#### Clerks Know Structures and Relationships

Second, clerks have extensive knowledge of organizational structures and relationships. We have

always dealt with the interactions among many different entities, on both the congregational and presbytery levels. Therefore, we can give cogent and sometimes pointed advice about the promises and consequences of particular decisions and proposals. Instead of resisting an initiative by stating, “The *Book of Order* says you can’t do that,” now we can respond, “That might work, but here are the pitfalls; and here are some examples of where that sort of thing worked well.” Now it’s not just about what the Book says, though that is important. Moreso, we need to ask about how a proposed action is effective, fair, authentic, or faithful.

In other words, the role of the clerk is evolving to have more to do with assisting a presbytery or congregation in turning its often vague, abstract vision into actual working structures, procedures, and relationships. We are moving away from the role of referees and toward that of structural architects.

### Clerks Ensure Inclusion of All

Third, this knowledge about structures and history also entails a commitment to the openness and inclusion that are hallmarks of our history, as reflected in the new Foundations section of the *Book of Order*. Clerks are still called to ensure that all of a council’s

constituencies have a voice and that minorities are not shut out or marginalized.

Clerks have always been called to give unbiased assistance and advice to those wanting to do things that went against the grain of the leaders. The clerk is still the one best positioned to “watch the back” of those called to risk-taking or innovative ministries. From their perch near the center of ecclesiastical leadership, clerks can work actively to slow the momentum of initiatives that threaten to roll over weaker parties. At the same time, the clerk can also clear a way for new things to happen, chipping away at the crippling inertia and distrust for which many sessions and presbyteries are justly infamous.

### Living into the New Order

In short, the new clerk will serve as the agent and guardian of the spirit of flexibility and permission-giving embodied in the new Form of Government.

But for our church to live into this new order, two things will have to happen. In the first place, clerks will have to realize that we are indeed in a new ecclesiastical world now. Functioning under the new Form of Government as if it were the old will simply not work. Too often we were simply the “brakeman,” enforcing detailed rules and regulations. At the same time, we always had a positive and enabling role, seeing the “rules as tools” for mission. This aspect of our work now moves to the center.

Moreover, our knowledge of the old rules gives us credibility and creates trust among those who are unsure of and even threatened by these changes. We can convey to people that we will not be mindlessly rushing into the latest fad. Rather, we will be guided with care, discernment, and circumspection.

Presbyteries especially will also have to realize the potential major asset they have in a good, forward-looking clerk. Fortunately, many do. But those others that are carelessly folding the clerk’s job into that of the executive in order to save money are robbing themselves of invaluable insight and perspective. Most importantly, they are possibly severing the council from the most fruitful connection it has to its own story, structures, and commitment to inclusion. And they are removing the only independent agent upon whom churches and the presbytery may rely for clear and neutral insight. The trust that clerks

#### Continuity and Change (*Book of Order* F-1.0401)

The presbyterian form of government set forth in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is grounded in Scripture and built around the marks of the true Church. It is in all things subject to the Lord of the Church. In the power of the Spirit, Jesus Christ draws worshiping communities and individual believers into the sovereign activity of the triune God at all times and places. As the Church seeks reform and fresh direction, it looks to Jesus Christ who goes ahead of us and calls us to follow him. United with Christ in the power of the Spirit, the Church seeks “not [to] be conformed to this world, but [to] be transformed by the renewing of [our] minds, so that [we] may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2).

have earned by being above the agendas of various forces may be lost if their position is subsumed under something else.

Understood wisely, clerks now have more to do and, arguably, greater importance. And councils have a deeper need for someone in leadership who brings the skills clerks have. We carry the memory, the organizational understanding, and the commitment to inclusiveness that presbyteries need if they are to fulfill their vision and missional vocation.

## About the Writer

Paul Rack is stated clerk of the Presbytery of Elizabeth, which is based in Plainfield, N.J.

## Editor's Note

This article was originally published by The Presbyterian Outlook on September 3, 2012, accessed at <http://www.pres-outlook.com/infocus-features/current-features/17208-the-new-clerk.html>. Used by permission.