

**Mission and Discipleship Council
Eldership Working Group**

Report of findings from Consultations held in April 2013

Introduction

The Eldership Working Group (EWG) is most grateful to all who participated in the consultations held all over the country in April 2013. (Inverness, Aberdeen, Perth, Cumnock, Glasgow and Edinburgh). Representatives from Kirk Sessions in 36 presbyteries were invited. Over 166 congregations from 30 presbyteries took part, and a small number of ministers were also participants. It was in the view of the EWG that it was of prime importance to hear from Elders directly as this matter is of concern to them in particular.

Comments

The EWG members were impressed with the energy and enthusiasm of those who attended the consultations. There appeared to be genuine interest and commitment in the discussions and engagement with the questions asked. All seemed willing to contribute ideas and views and assist other members of the groups in their learning by sharing of experience. It was quite clear that the Elders enjoyed working together.

One suggestion that came forward from many of the groups related to the document which the EWG is preparing for sending to Kirk Sessions later this year. These elders believe that when it is sent out, it ought to be suggested that Kirk Sessions in geographical areas meet together and have the opportunity of jointly considering it and making a response. The EWG will take this suggestion and commend it to Kirk Sessions, with the evidence of how helpful the mixture of participants was in the process of this consultation.

The task of summarising the many responses naturally alters the exact wording in some instances, but it is hoped that the summary is an accurate reflection, or picture, of the variety and consensus about some issues that are current in the eldership of the Church of Scotland today. These responses will enable the EWG to produce a discussion paper that is grounded in, and reflective of, the experience and perceptions of a proportion of the eldership. For this the EWG is most grateful. A number of written submissions were also received by email and these have also been incorporated.

Question 1

What does it mean for you to be an elder?

In setting this question the EWG was aware that there would be a number and range of responses, with distinct emphasis on some aspects. The intention was to enable the exploration of possible insights and issues which elders involved in the consultations brought to the meeting. It was the view of the EWG prior to the event that the variety of the responses which were likely would highlight the huge range of operational and personal experiential issues within the eldership.

The EWG believed, and this was confirmed by the results, that in this post-modern age, there is 'no one size that fits all' and any approach to development of the eldership has to take account of this. A cluster or group of several, sometimes quite distinct, meanings and comments were expected. What does seem to be a central and common thread in all of the groups is that the members of the eldership are nearly all agreed that eldership is something that results from a sense of call and commitment to the individual's faith, and is a means of expressing or demonstrating that faith in action.

Among the comments that were repeated in a variety of ways and in a number of expressions are the following:

- Honour to serve
- Privilege
- Provider of harmony
- Conduit of information to minister
- Example
- Use of talents
- Demonstrate commitment
- Influence future direction of the church
- Welcome
- Represent church
- Challenge Kirk Session to think differently
- Witness
- Fulfil own spiritual needs - helps growth
- Give back
- Humbling
- Hard work
- Part of the wider Church and its work
- Visiting on behalf of the Church
- Making Church commitment a priority
- Communication – channel of information – both to minister and Kirk Session and to congregation
- Share the load
- Be responsible for the Christian welfare of others
- Charity Trusteeship
- Helping people know each other
- Spiritual leader
- Sense of blessing and satisfaction
- A trusted friend of a stranger
- Spiritual confidant

Question 2

What range of gifts might a Kirk Session require to accomplish its mission?

In response to this question, the respondents identified a huge range of gifts, skills and abilities, characteristics and experiences which should, ideally, be available to Kirk Sessions. A few made it

clear that no one individual could be expected to demonstrate possession of all of these. Instead, it is important to the team – and many remarked that the Kirk Session should see itself as a team – that these gifts ought to be present for the good oversight, care and nurture of the congregation.

Comments made were as follows:

- Discernment
- Delegation
- Hospitality
- Spirituality
- Evangelism
- Ability to take tough decisions
- Patience
- The Biblical Gifts of the Spirit
- Mission orientation
- Big picture people
- Team spirit
- Wisdom to identify gifts in others that the outbuilding of the people of God requires, especially in those who are not elders
- Sensitivity
- Reflective
- Visionary about mission
- Able to lead worship
- Organisational skills
- Discipline the congregation
- Enthusiasm (qualified by one with ‘not too much’)
- Tact
- Diplomacy
- Faith
- Communication skills
- Conviction of calling
- Perseverance
- Ability to engage in debate and discussion
- Honesty
- Integrity
- Cross generational interest
- Reflective of the age range of the parish
- Grace
- Loving of one another and those we find it hard to love
- Have an eye for the vision of the Kirk Session beyond the mundane business
- Practical skills – computing, flower arranging
- Sincerity

It may also be important to note that the groups identified the need for

1. a sense of humour;
2. theological knowledge;
3. a thick skin;

4. problem solving skills;
5. an overriding awareness that the eldership exists 'to serve' the congregation and the wider community (and not the reverse);
6. the mission of a congregation determines the required gifts of the members of the Kirk Session;
7. 'talents for a time' – things change and needs change and we all require to be flexible.

There was a suggested mission statement of a Kirk Session:

'To form a unified, loyal, living spiritual body with a vision to reach out to others'

A further observation on the nature of eldership may be worthy of consideration:

'The only club that does not exist for the benefit of its members'

Question 3

What is attractive about being an elder?

There was often considerable debate among the groups about the phrasing of this question. A number regarded it as unhelpful and disliked it. Some suggested that it be changed to 'most enjoyable' or 'most satisfying' in the role of the eldership.

All the groups wrestled with the issues which allow the individual elder and the groups of elders who are on a Kirk Session believe they find fulfilment.

In the responses, the following were highlighted:

- Privilege of contacting people
- Privilege of working for God in church, congregation and community
- Being part of a team and receiving mutual support
- Enabled to speak about their faith and understanding of the Church becoming deeper
- Awareness of a call to be a leader
- Affirmed by the invitation to become an elder
- Building upon the training received to contribute to the life of the congregation
- Opportunity to broaden knowledge of the local and national church
- Granted opportunities for mission and engagement with witness to the Gospel
- Receiving inspiration from some visits
- Opportunity not otherwise available for service
- Support in good and bad times
- Involvement in and knowing what is happening and able to influence the future of the church
- Opportunity to learn
- Being supportive in the crisis times of others
- Building relationships
- Not about personal gain but being part of a team

Comments

It might be interesting to note that while many remarked on the spiritual aspect of the eldership being important there was no clarity about this aspect.

Also interesting was the lack of many stating the involvement in the celebration of Holy Communion as important, or integral to the role. This is, of course, a matter the EWG is aware of and it is clearly a relatively new role for elders to be so involved and it is not required that those who distribute the elements in services of Holy Communion are elders.

There was a strong sense in some that they were there to carry on the service of others whose age and infirmity prevented activity and that the example set before them was an inspiration and guide.

Question 4

What is unattractive about being an elder?

The responses here once again raised problems and objections to the phrasing of the question. What was suggested was that the EWG ought to have asked 'what is most challenging' or 'what is most difficult' in the eldership and the notion of being 'unattractive' seemed incongruent with what is a spiritual office. There was a sense that the eldership is not to be marketed like a commercial secular career choice, but experienced as a call to service and leadership which requires particular gifts, courage and tenacity.

The responses were varied, as anyone might expect, but among those of repeated significance were:

- The dead hand of outmoded tradition
- The lack of response to visits and difficulty of engagement by those 'on the edge'
- The time demands of eldership and the duties require serious effort and commitment
- Boring meetings, moderated poorly
- Handling conflict and confrontation and explaining decisions to congregational members
- The apparent need for elders to be appointed to districts to fulfil particular roles in the Session 'making up the numbers'
- The fact that some are expected to take on tasks without having the appropriate gifts and skills
- Modesty and reticence regarding the individual's call and gifts
- Apathy and indifference in congregations
- Stereotypical thinking about elders – in particular that young elders look after the young
- The fact that elders are now Trustees under charity law and this has serious legal obligations laid upon elders
- Undertaking bereavement visits
- Fear of being exposed as one who does not have enough biblical knowledge required
- Lack of knowledge regarding congregational life
- Time poverty – many committed people cannot take on any more due to the extent of their family and work responsibilities
- The term 'eldership' may have negative connotations
- Distraction of eldership duties from personal experience of public worship

- Feelings of being 'separate' or 'different'
- Public 'persona' or reputation of being life denying and old fashioned and out of touch
- Facing changing issues that is contentious
- Being unwelcome on district visits
- Communicating decisions that others do not like and may not be personally supported

Comments

Several other concerns were highlighted. The challenge of dealing with safeguarding issues came up several times which does indicate the seriousness with which some Kirk Sessions are taking this responsibility. Clearly there is an issue here of assisting Kirk Sessions to undertake this vital role more easily and presbyteries and the Safeguarding Service must be encouraged to take this into account.

Negative comments regarding the bureaucratic demands of presbytery and the Church Offices on Kirk Sessions are important to record, and more importantly, to address. Exactly what might be required may need separate formal investigation.

Stewardship issues also disturb some and the General Assembly resolution to instruct stewardship focus has certainly had an impact.

Some comments highlighted the lack of training which has been made available to some members of Kirk Sessions, and a hesitation to offer gifts through fear of the responsibility demanded and the limitation of specific knowledge on Church matters.

Question 5

What discourages your fellow members of the Church from taking on an Eldership role?

In replying to this question much attention was given to the negative self-evaluation of those who might be asked, and the issues of what the membership of the Kirk Session might involve, as popularly perceived, and in reality.

The main points here were:

- Demands of the time commitment
- Not being good enough
- Lack of understanding of the role
- Not enough time
- Timing of meetings not fitting current lifestyles
- Lack of training offered in a way that suits life today
- Fear of being perceived as 'holy' as or 'better than others'
- Lack of confidence in their knowledge of spiritual matters
- The life long commitment
- A suspicion that becoming an elder will lead to unlimited demands being placed upon a person
- Fear of the unknown
- The reputation of some Kirk Session as bodies of intimidation
- Not owning the right attire

- Fear of leadership responsibility
- Trustee responsibility
- Isolation
- Fear of being asked to take on things they do not understand or so not want to do
- Lack understanding of the denomination and its structure
- Fear of giving 'wrong answers' to spiritual, Biblical or theological questions
- Perception that it is a 'life sentence' not congruent with other spheres (eg, the Council of the Church which have limited terms)
- Ignorance about the roles and varied means of accomplishing them
- Fear of ignorance in finance and ability to communicate the issues appropriately to members
- Sense that the elder gives a huge amount, but gets little or nothing back from exercising the role.
- The need to do things that could be done by non -elders under the unitary constitution
- Age profile of many Kirk Sessions is not attractive to younger people
- Lack of training
- Demands may be thought to be increasing on individual elders as congregations shrink in numbers

Comments

The EWG does not intend to raise the question of whether or not elders should be ordained for life. When the issue has been raised before, the General Assembly has been quite categorical in its decision that elders are ordained for life and that this is widely supported throughout the Church.

The EWG does, however, believe that there is enough flexibility in the current structure to allow diversity of use of elders who are ordained for life and different ways and means of service currently exist. The Group would wish congregations to explore whether or not there are ways in which elders may undertake particular responsibilities for a shorter period, or even be given sabbatical leave, according to personal circumstances.

There were those who remarked on the freedom and assistance given by the unitary constitution that allowed the use of those who are not elders to serve and utilise their gifts appropriately. Some are most enthusiastic about the models which are available to encourage and involve the gifted individuals who are not elders – in particular in pastoral care – so that they may serve the congregation, while not accepting the obligations, vows and responsibilities of eldership and membership of the Kirk Session. Some assistance with understanding the various constitutions of the Church also became apparent as a much needed and urgent resource.

What also became clear is that there is a need for some job description of an elder to be made available for recruitment purposes. It must not be rigidly prescriptive, but perhaps include examples of types of elder who can be seen as making a contribution to the life of the congregation and Kirk Session.

There are also issues raised here (as in the response to Question 6) of how the training courses already available for elders and potential elders are known and engaged with – particularly by ministers. There were some suggestions that ministers were too keen to ensure that elders and potential elders are 'shaped' for a particular congregation and not given the opportunity of interaction and engaging with others who have been called to undertake the education and support of the formation of elders (the current Presbytery Adult Trainers). There is a need for both

particular, and for generic, training in eldership which could be done on a group basis and not confined to one Kirk Session.

Flexible meeting times and adaptation of traditional patterns of service are concerns. It is not the belief of some (and indeed it is not true) that it is 'of the essence of eldership' that the elder has a district and undertakes pastoral visits. A common misapprehension exists that the number of districts in a congregation dictates the number of elders serving the congregation on the Kirk Session. It is a perception that some believe requires to be challenged.

The issue of how the Church deals with the adherents of the congregations - in particular in the north of Scotland who attend regularly, but do not become members - is a further concern. The adherent may be thoroughly involved in the life of the congregation, but unable to take on the role of an elder. This needs to be noted appropriately.

One observation may be of real importance – how the approach is made to a person to consider the eldership is vital. The offer of mentoring or support is seen as important and the clarity of the expectations and the way in which the invitation is expressed and how the person issuing it and how he or she responds to any questions and issues being raised are all seen as crucial. The presentation of the call to eldership may be one of the strongest influences for good or ill.

Question 6

What can the Church do to support your development as an elder?

This question elicited almost unanimous support for training, education, continuous professional development of elders. There is apparently strong endorsement of the concept of pre-ordination training and elders being given the opportunity, through locally arranged groups, the chance to learn more about their faith and role and responsibilities. Only a few wanted this to be compulsory (or expressed this directly), but obviously there are many elders who believe they are vulnerable due to the lack of appropriate training.

Some identified the need for the Minister to be supportive and encouraging of continuing vocational development of the elders. There were many who are aware that there are courses and training of value, but little sign that these resources are being utilised effectively.

Strong support was expressed for mentoring and support systems, not just for new and inexperienced elders, but for all members of a Kirk Session. Presbytery support of eldership development through prayer and courses was also mentioned.

In relation to training, a wide variety of possible courses was suggested:

- Sharing faith
- Historical understanding of the Church
- Introduction to the ethos and history of the Church of Scotland
- Leading prayer and worship
- Pastoral care, especially in relation to bereavement
- The Westminster Confession of Faith

Requests were made for a handbook for Elders to provide short, easily accessible information on a wide variety of topics to be used as a reference tool by elders.

The use of video clips showing 'best practice' or 'alternative models of service' was also reflected upon as useful and easily accessible by all, no matter their geographic location.

The need for new technology to be developed to allow flexible and appropriate training methods to be used in delivery of courses for elders was also highlighted.

Encouragement of group meetings across parish boundaries - as in the consultations themselves – was seen as positive and helpful. There appeared to be strong and enthusiastic support for opportunities of learning from other elders and hearing about 'new ideas'.

Among other suggested issues for the support of elders were the following:

- Elders going in pairs on visits to give support and observe
- Trial periods before ordination for those considering the eldership
- A regular system of open forums, 'explore and equip' opportunities on issues of eldership run by presbyteries
- Regular encouragement of members of congregations to attend Kirk Session meetings as observers to allow them to understand what happens
- Regular and appropriate acknowledgement and expression of appreciation of elders and what they contribute to the congregation
- Retreats and 'Away Days' to support elders and develop knowledge of each others' strengths and gifts
- Session meetings where the business is restricted and some time – like an hour - is devoted to an aspect of the work of an elder
- The need of the language used in Church to be simple and comprehensible to allow full participation
- More ministerial support of elders individually
- Social events for elders to create better relations in meetings

Question 7

What other issues about the Eldership should the Group be addressing?

Some of the comments here did not relate to the Eldership and touched on a range of topics relating to the General Assembly and its composition and the power of former Moderators; all not within the remit of this group to adjudicate or comment upon.

The complaints about the state and ineffectiveness of the Church of Scotland website must be heard by the Communication Group of the Council of Assembly and a response given as this is a major area that is not as effective as elders would like. The Church is missing a vital modern means of communication here and if it was more attractive and easy to use and able to include issues on eldership this would be much appreciated. There was a strong wish for the communication used by the central Church to be more 'user friendly' and easy to follow and not so complex in its presentation and expression.

More listening to the eldership by both presbyteries and the central Church is a common theme and the unusual nature of this consultation process was remarked upon favourably. The need for feedback from such events is also seen as crucial.

Some took the opportunity of raising questions on the following:

- The need to allow more members to become elders and experience the privilege and responsibility
- The provision of a handbook for elders
- The support of elders in times of ministerial shortage and numerous vacancies
- Should there be a retrial age for elders
- The provision of thanksgiving and recognition services for elders
- The clearer identification of what tasks those who are not elders can tackle in a congregation
- The support of courses in understanding new forms of church life
- More help with worship skills development for elders
- Material for the encouragement of young elders
- Preparing elders for change as the number of full time ministers' declines and more part time ministers are being used
- 'How to guides' on issues like 'Encouraging strategic thinking at Kirk Sessions' or 'Helping the Kirk Session to be outward looking'
- Does the church need to make appointments for elders to visit members?
- How does the presbytery become less critical and more helpful to support the Kirk Session in avoiding or correcting mistakes?
- The use of social media to transmit data from Presbytery and Kirk Session
- The need for some elders to be given freedom to move to other roles as time and talents and opportunity permits
- Concerns re buildings and the need to change some assumptions about the way they are retained and not changed or shut
- More support for elders at a local rather than a national level

Nigel J Robb (Revd)
Secretary
Eldership Working Group
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