



The Church of Scotland

Mission and Discipleship Council

**AN INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY AND THEOLOGY OF
THE ELDERSHIP WITHIN THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND**

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INTRODUCTION

The Report of the Mission and Discipleship Council to the General Assembly of 2014 notes the creation of the Eldership Working Group following the 2011 Assembly, whose purpose is ‘to look at patterns and models of Eldership currently in use across the Church today and to bring to the attention of the General Assembly ways in which these could be shared, reflected upon and in some cases adapted to encourage appropriate practice in our changing contexts’.¹ Deliverance 21 of the 2014 Report asks the General Assembly to commend the Kirk Sessions for their participation in widespread and detailed consultations nationally, and ‘their desire to enhance the effectiveness of the office of elder’.

This paper has been commissioned in that context to set out an introduction to the history and theology of the eldership within the Presbyterian tradition in Scotland, in order to contribute to the process of reflection, assessment and potential reform of the role and duties of eldership.

The paper seeks to highlight aspects of eldership which in times past defined its existence, a recovery of which may be beneficial. It also highlights the area of missional focus as a potential ‘supra-narrative’ for the future of the eldership, which might provide an lens through which to view decisions as to the purposes and duties of the office, beyond a concentration on narrower areas of contention, such as ‘spiritual’ status or ordination.

The paper is not intended to provide comprehensive solutions, but instead to identify and consider in depth the scope of the central questions whose resolution might inform the future direction of the eldership, and to reflect upon opposing standpoints.

It is therefore not in all parts a work of original scholarship, in some instances paraphrasing existing material, nor can it be comprehensive in the timescale available. Instead, it should be viewed as a collation of sources which may provide focus for the direction ahead. This paper is thus intended to inform the discussion further, and to act as contextual reference to the proposals outlined by the Eldership Working Group in Appendix VII of the 2014 report, in the light of the data that has been collected from the eldership consultation process.

This paper will seek, however, to provide a summary and outline of the issues and their possible consequences for future consideration of the existence, commission, nature and role of the eldership in the Church of Scotland. It is to be hoped that the considerable resources of personnel and spiritual gifts that exist within the eldership can be imaginatively

¹ Appendix VII, 5/37.

empowered and enhanced, so that the Church might play its full part as the only self-conscious agent of the *missio Dei*; the mission of God in the world.

The structure of the paper is as follows. The first section will examine the formation of the office of eldership at the Reformation, both in Calvin's Geneva and by the Scottish Reformers, and its development in the immediate post-Reformation period to the present day. The section concludes by summarising the consideration of the office of eldership by the Church of Scotland nationally in recent times, both in terms of Church Law and reports and deliverances proffered to the General Assembly over the past half-century.

The second section discusses the averred basis for the existence of the office of eldership, in particular under the theological controversy of the 'presbyter/lay theory', thus addressing the following:

- Is the 'ruling' eldership a directly scripturally-derived institution, or is it a Reformation creation requiring broader justification? If the latter, is there indeed other theological or practical support for the office?
- Arising from the answer to the first question, is the 'presbyter' theory of eldership to be preferred, whereby 'ruling elders' form one of two types of 'presbyter' of equal standing, the other being the 'teaching elder' or minister? On the other hand, is the 'lay theory' to be favoured, which sees the minister as the only 'presbyter', and the elder as a lay assistant to aspects of ordained ministry? As a further alternative, should eldership be more properly considered as a hybrid of both options?

In the third section I will address directly further issues which arise from that debate, considering the effect of Church of Scotland law and practice in relation to the 'laying on of hands' by elders in ordination, and the their role in preaching, namely:

- Informed by the answers to the questions above, is eldership a 'spiritual' office for life of a 'semi-clerical' nature, or is an elder instead a lay 'representative' of the congregation who might thus hold office for a fixed term office or set purpose?

- In like manner, should an elder be ‘ordained’, or is ‘commissioning’ more relevant?

In the fourth and concluding section, I will then draw potential conclusions from the material in the preceding sections. What of the future? Can the competing arguments which characterise the response to each question above be decided so as to produce a victor, or be reconciled, so as to produce a single, definitive blueprint of the nature, status and duties of eldership? Alternatively, is a more positive and creative course to now re-assess all duties and purposes of eldership under an over-arching narrative which is elevated above such disputes, by which yardstick any future role for eldership can be judged?

SECTION ONE – THE FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF ELDERSHIP IN THE SCOTTISH PRESBYTERIAN TRADITION

INTRODUCTION - THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LAITY TO REFORMED THEOLOGY AND PRESBYTERIAN GOVERNANCE

The term ‘Reformed’ refers to the branch of Protestantism centred particularly on the teaching that emerged in the cities of the Swiss Confederation in the second quarter of the sixteenth century. It denotes the attempted and continuing reformation of a Church according to the Word of God.² In Scotland, through the primary influence of John Knox, ‘Reformed’ theology and doctrine pays particular heed to the theology and ecclesiology in Geneva of John Calvin (1509-64), and is worked out in a series of confessions or creedal statements, principally the Scots Confession of 1560 and the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647.³

Doctrine is often distributed in the Reformed tradition through the teaching of catechisms, and a strong emphasis on individual biblical study and learning, reflecting the importance of personal piety and justification by faith alone. The creedal and confessional nature of the Church of Scotland, and its traditional emphasis on biblical education and learning as a formative root of faith, lend importance to the presence of lay⁴ teachers and overseers in three ways: (a) to disseminate biblical knowledge; (b) to encourage the nurturing of personal and corporate faith amongst the people; and (c) in the upholding of doctrinal and sacramental uniformity through lay oversight and ‘discipline’ over the congregation.

‘Presbyterianism’ by distinction is a form of governance of a Church, and not necessarily reflective of its theology, albeit that Reformed churches such as the Church of Scotland tend towards Presbyterian governance given their core beliefs. Its common features, as stated by the church historian G.D. Henderson, are as follows:

Presbyterianism is strictly a form of Church Government adopted by certain Christian and Protestant Churches, in which the main characteristic is control by a graded

² As in the motto often cited by Reformed Churches including the Church of Scotland: ‘ecclesia reformatum, semper reformanda’, or ‘the reformed church, always requiring to be reformed’.

³ The Reformed Church in Scotland further approved for use as Confessions of Faith the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) and the Second Helvetic Confession (1566).

⁴ Whilst the use of the word ‘clergy’ is often decried in Reformed ecclesiology as inferring an unjustified divide, and ‘lay’ and ‘laity’ are clumsy terms as strictly speaking *laos* means the whole people of God, for convenience ‘clergy’ and ‘lay/laity’ are used in this paper to denote those who are ordained as ministers of Word and Sacrament, and those other members of the Church who are not.

series of ruling bodies whose members are ordained ministers and lay elders, all the ministers having equal status and all the elders having the same rights and responsibilities as the ministers in the matter of discussion and voting.⁵

The Church of Scotland is manifested in governance by an ascending series of three courts, namely the Kirk Session, Presbytery and General Assembly⁶. The structure seeks to reflect both local independence and corporate unity, and a collaborative form of decision-making according to conscience and the movement of the Spirit.

The Church of Scotland shares common features of Presbyterianism worldwide, which are dependent on the existence and participation on a lay cohort of elders for the exercise and balance at every level of the governing structure. The courts form a system of government which looks to maintain the unity of the church over the wide geographical area of the Scottish nation. The lowest court is the Kirk Session, being a gathered body of ordained elders from the congregation, moderated by the minister. The territory of the nation is divided into districts, in which all the local congregations are bound together under the common administration of the Presbytery, where the minister and one or more elders of each congregation are represented. Presbyteries are conjoined into a General Assembly with exclusive legislative power, with a certain proportion of ministers and elders of each Presbytery again represented.

The concept of ‘parity’ or equal voting rights of all presbyters is key within the system, both ministerial and lay. The system is not, however, a true democracy – as considered below, elders may to an extent ‘represent’ the people, but they are not delegates and may take their decisions autonomously in exercise of their spiritual calling. Ministers are elected by congregations, but hold office and are disciplined by authority of the ministers and elders of Presbytery, and are accountable for their life and witness to them i.e. they are not ‘employed’ by a congregation or Kirk Session and are not disciplined or removed by them. The elder within the higher courts thus plays a significant role in the oversight of congregations and ministers, and in forming the law of the Church.

In all of the above, it is clear not only that lay people have a key role in expressing and overseeing the development and nurturing of the tenets of Reformed theology, but also have a definitive position in the of governance within a Presbyterian church. The office of ‘eldership’ is thus an attempt to make those vital provisions, without which the Church might be a paler reflection of the goals of the Reformers.

⁵ G.D. Henderson, *Why We Are Presbyterians*, (Aberdeen: Church of Scotland Publications, 1954), 82-83.

⁶ Formerly four, with Synods being abolished in 1992.

The first angle within this first section to inform our present-day consideration is to address how ‘eldership’ came into being within the Reformed church in Scotland, what its purpose was, and what Scriptural grounds were employed by the Reformers in so doing. In other words, what is the basis of the ‘eldership’? How did it come into existence, and what was the warrant for its creation?

(A) HOW DID THE OFFICE OF ELDERSHIP EMERGE, AND WHAT WAS ITS WARRANT?

The Eldership from John Calvin

The theological and social circumstances were apt and opportune for the emergence of the eldership within Calvin’s Geneva in the 1530s, and its replication in post-Reformation Scotland in the decades following 1560.

Key theological emphases of the Reformation sought the emancipation of the laity in relation to the Word of God, such as justification by faith asserting a direct relationship of the individual to God without mediation, and Luther’s precept of the ‘priesthood of all believers’. These emphases, combined with the vacuum caused by the removal of the prior church governance by prelacy, its perceived degeneracy, and the emergence of a theologically literate lay class, provided the means, desire and necessity for some form of lay expression within the structures of the new entity of the Reformed Church.

The new Reformed governance would naturally incline towards the removal of the prior order that reflected clergy supremacy. If the Reformation was to break down the barriers between the ordinary person and God through access to vernacular Scripture and liturgy, all people must have some entitlement to the public reflection of their theological standpoints within the Church structures. Furthermore, if the Pope was to be deposed as the ultimate hierarchical authority within the *magisterium*, and the absolute acceptance of clergy power was to be decried, the need for some counter-balance to prevent relapse and recurrence to such a state pointed to the laity as a necessary source.

Lay awareness of Scripture and of theological expression became one of the hallmarks of the European Reformation. In the immediate pre-Reformation years of the early 16th Century, ‘the sharp division between clergy and laity was no longer a necessity of social

existence⁷, with the emergence of a newly educated, literate and intellectually inquisitive class of merchants and craftsmen within a growing urban society. The exchange of ideas within such a class nationally and internationally, fuelled by the invention of the printing press and developments in cross-border trade, provided a seedbed for the spread throughout Europe of principal Reformation doctrines.

John Calvin was banished from Geneva in April 1538, and remained in Strasbourg until late 1541, an exile which ‘was definitive in the history of the Eldership’.⁸ Within the city, Martin Bucer had appointed lay officials to oversee Church discipline in 1534, later seen as distinct from the civil authorities and exercising a specific spiritual capacity. Writing in 1536, Bucer mentioned the four offices of the minister of the Word, doctors, elders and deacons, and in 1538 made first use of certain Scriptural passages in support of the Eldership that were later adopted by Calvin, in particular 1 Timothy 5:17.

On his return to Geneva, under the influence of his long acquaintance with Bucer, Calvin framed the *Ordonnances Ecclésiastiques* which were adopted in November 1541, reflecting Bucer’s position on eldership and turning further to the early Church Fathers in support. So what was Calvin’s view, and how did he elaborate its basis?

Alister McGrath, in his book *A Life of John Calvin*, stated:

Whereas Luther regarded the organization of the church as a matter of historical contingency, not requiring theological prescription, Calvin held that a definite pattern of church government was prescribed by scripture. Curiously, the lists of ecclesiastical offices (IV, iii.3; IV, iii.4; IV, iv.1) which Calvin presents within the Institutes...do not harmonize, and leave both the status of elders (or presbyters) and the number of ministries in some doubt.⁹

In seeking to delineate the offices, Calvin identified two types of ministry, the ‘ordinary’ and the ‘extraordinary’. The latter comprised apostles, evangelists and prophets, and was said by Calvin to have ceased, albeit with the potential to re-emerge according to the will of God.¹⁰

⁷ G.D. Henderson, *The Scottish Ruling Elder*, (London: James Clarke & Co Ltd, 1935), 15.

⁸ G.D. Henderson, *The Scottish Ruling Elder*, 21.

⁹ Alister McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in Shaping Western Culture*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 171.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Henry Beveridge trans., (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrikson Publishers Inc., 2008), IV.iii.4.

From the root of Ephesians 4:11, Calvin identified the ‘ordinary’ offices as, firstly, pastors and teachers, and then, utilising Romans 12:7 and I Cor. 12:28, ‘two of perpetual duration, i.e. government and care of the poor’, the latter two being assigned by Calvin to ‘seniors’ or ‘elders’, and to ‘deacons’. As to ‘seniors’, he provided the following explanation of their purpose:

By these governors I understand seniors selected from the people to unite with the bishops in pronouncing censures and exercising discipline. For this is the only meaning which can be given to the passage, "He that ruleth, with diligence," (Rom. 12: 8.) From the beginning, therefore, each church had its senate, composed of pious, grave, and venerable men, in whom was lodged the power of correcting faults. Of this power we shall afterwards speak. Moreover, experience shows that this arrangement was not confined to one age, and therefore we are to regard the office of government as necessary for all ages.¹¹

The Greek word commonly employed in the New Testament of ‘presbyteros’, focused upon the clerical ‘teaching’ role of ‘bishops’ and ‘pastors’. Calvin reserved the term ‘bishop’ for ‘presbyter’ as ‘teaching elder’. Therefore, as Boer comments, ‘all bishops were pastors and all pastors taught’. However, not all teachers were pastors, as Calvin distinguished also the ministerial office of ‘doctor’ or ‘teacher’, from an exegesis of Ephesians 4:11. The role of the ‘doctor’ was to keep pure doctrine, but not to administer sacraments or enforce discipline.¹²

‘Deacons’ were separately accounted for by their repeated reference in the Pastoral Epistles and early Church Documents. The New Testament ‘deacon’, as summarised by T.F. Torrance, held:

...an important ministry in the Church in association with bishops and presbyters, and had particularly to do with ministry of the divine mercy and with seeking fruit of it in the life and mission of the community, and that they assisted Presbyters or Bishops in serving communicants at the Lord’s Supper.¹³

¹¹Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.iii.8. Scripture indicated to Calvin the diverse and overlapping terminology relating to the four ordinary offices: ‘But in indiscriminately calling those who rule the church ‘bishops’, ‘presbyters’, ‘pastors’ and ‘ministers’, I did so according to scriptural usage, which interchanges these terms’.

¹² See Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.iii.4.

¹³ T.F. Torrance, ‘The Eldership in the Reformed Church’, Scottish Journal of Theology, Vol 37, Issue 4, November 1984, 503-518, 512.

So were there not simply two branches of office: ‘presbyters’, meaning clerics of whatever description who would preach and teach the Word and administer sacraments, and also ‘deacons’ who would seek to grow the fruit of the ministry of ‘bishop’ or ‘pastor’ in the community, and assist them in the sacramental dispensation?

How could there be a further branch and office, a second class of presbyter, so that ‘seniors’, or ‘elders’ as we describe them, might be accounted for? Calvin sought to identify a division of classes of ‘elder’, both of them to rule but only one to preach, which forms the basis of our commonly-held understanding in the Church of Scotland today. As Boer summarises, ‘John Calvin consistently preached and taught that the Scriptures make a clear-cut distinction between teaching elders and ruling elders’. Whilst the ruling elder had no teaching function, ‘there was overlap between the two offices, in that both were ruling and governing offices in the church’.¹⁴

Appeal was further made by Calvin, as above, to the role of ‘seniores/gerontes’, literally ‘old men’ or ‘elders’ in the North African Church, who helped maintain public morals, and to patristic scholars whose words were said to suggest the same.¹⁵ In asserting the existence of the two sub-sets of ‘teaching Elder’ and ‘ruling Elder’, with the latter particularly concerned with the censure of morals from 1 Cor 5:12 by a ‘consistory of elders’, Calvin thus relied further on the comment of Pseudo-Ambrose to the effect that ‘The ancient synagogue, and afterward the Church, had elders, without whose advice nothing was done, this has grown obsolete, by whose fault I know not’.¹⁶ There was additional reference by analogy with the elders of the Old Testament who served with Moses, and the twelve Apostles.

However, as regards direct scriptural authority for the existence of an office distinct from ‘deacon’ and established as a ‘presbyter’, in the words of the principal nineteenth century attacker of the ‘ruling elder’ concept, Peter Colin Campbell, ‘this theory has for its sole basis an inference from 1 Tim 5:17’.¹⁷

Calvin’s prime scriptural focus was that very passage, where the apostle Paul wrote (KJV):

¹⁴ Jeffrey K. Boer, ‘Calvin’s View of the Teaching Elder-Ruling Elder Distinction’, in Mark R. Brown ed., *Order in the Offices: Essays Redefining the Roles of Church Officers*, (Duncansville, PA: Classic Presbyterian Government Resources, 1993), 135-153, 135.

¹⁵ See T.F. Torrance, ‘The Eldership in the Reformed Church’, 504; and Peter Colin Campbell, *The Theory of Ruling Eldership*, (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1866), 6-12.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xi.6.

¹⁷ Peter Colin Campbell, *The Theory of Ruling Eldership*, quoted in Mark R. Brown ed., *Order in the Offices*, 82.

Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.¹⁸

The passage was taken by Calvin to indicate that there were two classes of presbyter, one being what we would now refer to as the ‘teaching elder’ or ‘minister’ who labours in the word but retains a ruling function, and the other being a ‘ruling elder’ or ‘elder’ who rules but does not preach. The ruling elders ‘were joined with pastors in the spiritual government of the Church’.¹⁹ Calvin summarised his reading thus:

In the Epistle to Timothy... [Paul] mentions two kinds of presbyters, some who labour in the word, and others also do not perform the office of preaching but rule well (I Tim. 5:17). By this latter class there is no doubt he means those who were appointed to the inspection of manners and the whole use of the keys.²⁰

Calvin therefore concluded:

As we have stated that three kinds of ministers are set before us in Scripture, so the early Church distributed all its ministers into three orders. For from the order of presbyters, part were selected as pastors and teachers, while to the remainder was committed the censure of manners and discipline. To the deacons belonged the care of the poor and dispensing of alms.²¹

In this view, the first two offices of ‘pastor/teacher’ and ‘elder’ were both ‘presbyters’. As further examined below, the key scriptural and practical definition for Calvin of the role of the elder, adopted by the Scots reformers, was as above in the regulation of the censure of morals and of ‘discipline’, being the support of the internal structures and courts of the church, and the enforcement of moral discipline in the congregation and broader community.

Therefore, if we were to seek to duplicate the Calvinian model of the ‘eldership’ in the present, the foundation for its presence within the Presbyterian system, it would have the following basic purposes: the censure and correction of morals, with the exercise of internal and external ‘discipline’, without direct involvement in such as the public preaching of the Word (for ministers), or in finances or care of the poor (for deacons).

¹⁸ NB – ‘elders’ is the KJV translation of ‘presbyteros’.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xi.1

²⁰ Ibid. Also IV.xi.6 re ‘two classes’ of ‘presbyters’– ‘Some were for teaching; others were only censors of manners’.

²¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.iv.1.

Did Calvin get the distinction right from 1 Timothy 5:17? There are alternative interpretations. One is that the word ‘labour’ in fact refers to the degree of application of the presbyter to his work in word and doctrine – thus it refers to the one class of presbyter/bishop/minister, some exercising greater diligence than others. This alternative is the one most urgently expressed in Scotland by T.F. Torrance in the mid to late 20th Century²², based on the attack of Hodge and Campbell in the mid-19th Century, which shall be considered below; namely, that it can only indicate one class of presbyter as pastor/minister, with two classes on the basis of a clerical/lay distinction being nowhere else clearly expressed in the New Testament.

If supporting a direct Scriptural basis for the office of eldership on the basis of Calvin’s exegesis, the other stark anomaly which requires consideration is that it was based upon a marked Biblical role for ‘ruling elders’, which separated them as a distinguishable class of ‘presbyter’: in the censure of morals and the exercise of ‘discipline’. That role has faded from view since the mid-nineteenth century. Does this make any significant difference? Does it mean that if Calvin’s scriptural justification has disappeared in practice, even if correct, that the whole office is not justified? Or can other Biblical references be prayed in aid? Can the developed role of the elder still conform in any event to a broader Biblical vision, albeit in different specific terms to those envisaged by Calvin?

How Did the ‘Eldership’ Come To Be Created Within the Presbyterian System in Scotland?

This part will consider the central tenets of the Scottish office of eldership to be found, particularly, within the *First Book of Discipline* (1560) and the *Second Book of Discipline* (1578), with the promotion of eldership from the annual, lay ‘amateur’ post envisaged in the former, towards an ordained ‘semi-clerical’ office for life in the latter.

In the Scottish Reformation, when it came to the translation of the offices of the church, and in particular the existence of the eldership and its function in discipline, although lessons were also drawn from Lutheran and Scandinavian churches it was the experience and loyalty of Knox from his time in Geneva under the influence of Calvin and the Helvetic church which was dominant. Knox had described the church polity in Calvin’s Geneva as ‘that most perfect school of Christ that there was on earth since the days of the Apostles’: a Church ruled by councils of ministers and lay elders (the ‘Consistory’), and by theology set out in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

In relation to Calvin and Geneva, as Henderson summarises:

²² e.g. T.F. Torrance, ‘The Eldership in the Reformed Church’, as above.

The Scripture foundation, the four ecclesiastical offices, the ideal of spiritual independence, the granting of responsibility to others than ministers, consistorial control of moral discipline, education and the poor, even details with regard to General Sessions, and the division of parishes into elders' districts, the particular duties of elders, the special points to which discipline should be directed...the share of the elders in the Communion service – all this was simply taken over in Scotland.²³

The following are the key documents in the Scottish formation of eldership within a Presbyterian system of governance, with the principal aspects summarised.

The First Book of Discipline (1561)

The key features were:

- Calvin argued for four offices which were replicated: pastors, doctors (or teachers), elders and deacons.
- Elders and deacons were to be chosen annually from the congregation, to prevent interference with their livelihood and ensure that the liberty of the Kirk was not endangered by a lengthy term, although they could be retained for longer than a year on re-election.
- Their chief purposes were: 'The elders being elected must be admonished of their office, which is to assist the minister in all public affairs of the church: to wit, in judging and discerning causes; in giving of admonition to the licentious liver; in having respect to the manners and conversation of all men within their charge; for by the gravity of the seniors, the light and unbridled life of the licentious ought [to] be corrected and bridled'.²⁴
- Ministers were responsible for maintaining discipline along with the elders.
- The office of 'reader' was introduced to meet immediate demand.

²³ G.D. Henderson, *Why We Are Presbyterians*, 30. See further e.g. Chapter 3, 'The Calvinist Contribution to the Scottish Reformation', in James Kirk, *Patterns of Reform: Continuity and Change in the Reformation Kirk*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989).

²⁴ *The First Book of Discipline*, Eighth Head.

- ‘Superintendents’ were to exercise an oversight role in ten dioceses, conforming to old bishoprics. Only five were ever appointed, bearing marked similarity to the pre-Reformation office of bishop, later being replaced in structure by presbyteries.
- Proposed attribution of the assets of the income of the existing Church to pay for a national, territorial parish system with a pastor in every one; for public education in each parish and at university level; and for relief of the poor.

The Second Book of Discipline (1578)

Maintaining the separate roles of pastors and doctors (teachers), who were also elders, there was a clearer differentiation made here with the eldership, since ‘in this our division we call these elders whom the apostles called presidents or governors’.²⁵ Once they were elected from the congregation, elders were ordained and obliged to remain in office, but allowance was made for a period of sabbatical: ‘one part of them may relieve another for a reasonable space, as was among the Levites under the law in serving the temple’.²⁶

Whilst eldership was recognised as ‘a spiritual function as is the ministry’²⁷, this was not a significant departure from the practise of eldership since the *First Book*. Kirk remarks:

If the elder of the second Book of Discipline could be mistaken for an order in the ministry, if an elder, as is sometimes argued, now ceased to be a layman as generally understood, then it was neither his election for life nor even his ordination which made him a ‘minister’, but only that divine calling which was of course common to the elders defined in both Books of Discipline.²⁸

Even if in some sense eldership had become an order in the ministry through its spiritual and ecclesiastical nature, the office was not, however, to be considered in any way clerical, nor to attach any indelible character to the elder.²⁹

The *Second Book* further contained a proposal that not all parishes needed elders, but that several adjacent parishes could join together to form a common eldership (particularly in rural areas). This did not transpire in the intended manner, but instead laid the seed for the emergence of model presbyteries in 1581.

²⁵ *The Second Book of Discipline*, VI, 1-3, my translation. On this, the text of the *The Second Book of Discipline*, and much valuable consideration of the content, see James Kirk, *The Second Book of Discipline*, (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1980).

²⁶ *The Second Book of Discipline*, VI, 7, my translation.

²⁷ *The Second Book of Discipline*, VI, 5, my translation.

²⁸ Kirk (1980), 92.

²⁹ See Kirk (1980), 93.

The key features of the *Second Book* therefore were:

- Election and ordination of elders for life, as elders were called by God to a special vocation and office within the Church, a departure from the norm of an annual term of the *First Book*. Ordination in practice was rare until the late 17th Century.
- Both pastors/doctors and elders were viewed as ‘presbyters’.
- The main roles of eldership as set out in the *Second Book of Discipline* were:
 - ‘Elders...labour not in word and doctrine’.
 - ‘The eldership for good order and administration of discipline’.
 - The office is ‘perpetual, and always necessary in the kirk of God’.
 - ‘It is not necessary that all elders be also teachers of the word, albeit they ought chiefly to be such and so are worthy of double honour’ (referring to 1 Timothy 5:17).
 - ‘Their office is, severely and conjunctly to watch diligently upon the flock committed to their charge, both publically and privately, that no corruption of religion or manners enter therein’.
 - ‘As pastors and doctors should be diligent in teaching and sowing the seed of the word, so the elders should be careful in seeking the fruit of the same in the people’.
 - ‘Assist the pastor in the examination of those that come to the Lord’s Table and in visiting the sick’.
 - ‘Cause the acts of the assemblies to be put into execution’.
 - ‘Their principle office is to hold assemblies with the pastors and doctors for establishing good order and execution of discipline’
 - ‘To give diligent labour... that the kirks be kept in good order to inquire diligently of naughty and unruly persons and work to bring them in the

way again, either by admonition or threatening of God's judgment or by correction'.³⁰

- A recommendation, unlike its predecessor given the life-long commitment rather than yearly, that elders be paid in their duties, which did not transpire due to a lack of attribution of finances from the assets of the old church.

The *Second Book of Discipline* sums up the breadth of an elder's duties thus:

It pertains to the eldership to take heed that the word of God be purely preached within their bounds, the sacraments rightly ministered, the discipline maintained and the ecclesiastical goods uncorruptly distributed.³¹

The key to understanding why the office that we presently recognise as 'eldership' was created by Calvin and adopted by Knox and the Scots reformers is to encompass all of those duties under the one broader heading of 'discipline', both internal and external. In the absence of hierarchical Papal or episcopal authority, and regarding the perception that the Word and sacrament of the pre-Reformation church had been corrupted, the enforcement of discipline by lay elders in conjunction with the minister, was the required 'glue' to hold the Presbyterian system together. Upon it depended not only the right preaching of the Word and the untainted celebration of Holy Communion, but the attempt to establish which was later described as a 'parish state' or 'Godly Commonwealth' involving supervision and education in the public sphere, with the Church and Reformed theology as the moral beacon and touchstone of the nation. At the core definitional meaning of the office, no matter the practice, there thus remains to the present day the emphasis that the eldership is 'much more closely associated with the administration of Discipline than with the administration of Word and Sacrament, for it is in the administration of Discipline that the ministry needs most help from the Body for the right exercise of ministerial duties'.³²

What then was/is 'discipline', and are present day elders in any way called to fulfil the scriptural justification given for them by Calvin, and Knox and his successors?

The internal machinery of the Kirk was to be designed to ensure adherence to the 'three notes' set out in the Scots Confession of 1560: true preaching of the Word of God, the right

³⁰ *The Second Book of Discipline*, VII.1, II.7, VI.4, 6, 9, 11-17, VII.17, my translation.

³¹ *The Second Book of Discipline*, VII.18, my translation.

³² Geddes MacGregor, *Corpus Christi: The Nature of the Church According to the Reformed Tradition*, (London: MacMillan & Co Ltd, 1959), 217-218.

administration of the sacraments and ecclesiastical discipline uprightly administered. Therefore:

The Book of Discipline set forth a scheme for the organisation of a whole nation. ‘Discipline’...is used in two senses; in the general sense it connotes the form and order of the Church as opposed to its doctrine; but one of the properties of the society to be produced was the maintenance of ‘discipline’ in the other sense, namely, the insistence under severe sanctions of a high standard of moral conduct throughout the Kirk—and indeed throughout the land, since in this great conception the whole land was in once sense the Kirk of Christ.³³

As Dawson has recently expressed, ‘discipline’ in the immediate Post-Reformation is a ‘portmanteau’ word, thus capable of two meanings: ‘it described both the specific process of ecclesiastical censure and the entire polity and governance of the Scottish Kirk’.³⁴

It is important to note that both within the Church and outwith in society, discipline was held essential in order to protect the upholding, purity and sanctity of the first two ‘notes’, preaching and sacrament. Without the input of the elder (and minister) not only into the order of the Church structure, but also into the upholding of discipline as moral conduct, the anticipation was that preaching and sacrament would become corrupt, and the whole Reformed church would founder into apostasy.

The enforcement of public moral discipline was enacted in two contexts: the drama of the weekly exhibition of those identified by the Session as necessary penitents in Sunday worship for the commission of moral offences, and the role of the elder in the ‘fencing of the tables’ via the system of communion tokens by excluding those who were unrepentant, or had failed the pre-communion examination, from the Lord’s Table.

Rather than the common modern view of a ‘spiritual tyranny’, in his Baird Lectures of 1935, P.D. Thomson argued that ‘At a time when the moral tone of the society was low, and when the forces of law and order were comparatively weak and unorganized, it set up a standard of personal and social behaviour which had an enduring influence on the character of the Scottish people’.³⁵

What was such ‘enduring influence’ of the exercise of ‘discipline’ by the elder within the Kirk Session? Dawson argues that the courts of the Kirk in exercising discipline, ‘brought a new

³³J.D. Mackie, *A History of the Scottish Reformation*, (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland Youth Committee, 1960), 140.

³⁴Ibid, 123.

³⁵P.D. Thomson, *Parish and Parish Church*, (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1948, Baird Lectures of 1935), 125.

standard of religious and moral uniformity to Scotland and they were instrumental in helping to produce a strong confessional identity among the Scots', with 'the progressive internalization of discipline' producing 'a lasting impression upon the Scottish mentality'.³⁶

In summary, the role of the elder in enforcing 'spiritual discipline' was therefore held essential within a Presbyterian system to the very existence of the Church itself, and was formative, for better or worse, in the spiritual development of Scotland and its national psyche. The Presbyterian elder in the Church of Scotland has been a major figure in Scottish public life for four hundred and fifty years. With the waning of public influence, however, there is a danger that the office of eldership might retain the vestiges of esteem and internal authority which may make it attractive for those sole reasons, without the added dynamism of external, public purpose for which it was partly fashioned. It may take a re-capturing of the latter to ensure the validity and right exercise of the former.

To consider how the office of eldership has changed, the second angle within this section that might inform us now is to examine the developing and evolving duties assigned to it over the centuries. Does the changing nature of those duties retain substance within the theological premise and purpose of eldership? Is anything being missed that can be revived?

(B)- DEVELOPMENTS IN THE ROLE AND DUTIES OF THE ELDER SINCE THE REFORMATION

What of the period immediately following? Were these merely words on a page, or were they translated into practice? How was the status of the office of the elder understood and implemented in Scotland in its infancy in the period from the 1561 until the Westminster Assembly, resulting in the *Form of Presbyterial Government* of 1647?

The Booke of the Universal Kirk of Scotland [1560-1616], provides a description of the role of elders in that period, reflective of the *Books of Discipline*, which MacGregor equates as persisting as an ideal in the mid-Twentieth century (my translation and emphasis):

...to watch diligently upon the flock committed unto their charge, both publicly and privately, that no corruption of religion or manners enter therein. As the pastors and doctors should be diligent in teaching and sowing the seed of the word, so **the elders**

³⁶ Jane E.A. Dawson, 'Discipline and the Making of a Protestant Scotland', in Duncan B. Forrester & Doug Geads, *Worship and Liturgy in Context : Studies and Case Studies in Theology and Practice* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 123-136, 125. See also, Alistair Mutch, *Religion and National Identity: Governing Scottish Presbyterianism in the 18th Century*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

should be careful in seeking the fruit of the same in the people. It appertains to them to **assist the pastor in examination of them that comes to the Lord's table, and in visiting the sick...** They should be diligent in admonishing of all men of their duties...Things that they can not correct be private admonition, they should bring to the assembly of the eldership. Their principal office is to **hold assemblies with the pastors and doctors...for establishing of good order, and execution of discipline...**³⁷

In carrying out those duties, and in consideration of their perceived nature within the Church, a revealing comparative study by Abbott between the early post-Reformation churches of Scotland, England and New England identifies the struggle in Scotland at this early stage to identify the true status of the 'ruling' elder in Scotland, whether 'clerical' or 'lay'. Speaking of the period prior to the Westminster Assembly of 1643-47, Abbott writes that in Scotland 'the spiritual status of the ruling elder had been placed somewhere in between that of the lay parishioner and that of the preaching elder, but theologians and civil authorities had been notably imprecise in determining just where along the spectrum he resided'.³⁸

The English 'Long Parliament' passed ordinances in 1645 and 1646 which introduced a truncated system of Presbyterian governance, leaving parliament as the ultimate authority in ecclesiastical discipline, and parish elders entitled only to judge specified sins. The English system was descriptive of 'Erastianism: a desire for state control over the church'³⁹ on the basis that all punitive sanction should be reserved for the magistrate and Parliament.

Abbott asks, 'Why could not ruling elders, laymen that they were, provide the necessary guarantee against clerical power?',⁴⁰ just as they had been 'as a bridge between magistrates and ministers in the seventeenth-century Scottish kirk'⁴¹. In the Scottish system, the power and control of the elder in society was magnified by the reservation of sanctions to the jurisdiction of the Kirk Session rather than the civil magistrate, whilst also retaining spiritual oversight over the congregation, and the minister via Presbytery – an widespread influence in almost all aspects of the Church and society.

³⁷ MacGregor, *Corpus Christi*, 545.

³⁸ William M. Abbott, 'Ruling Eldership in Civil War England, the Scots Kirk and Early New England: A Comparative Study of Secular and Spiritual Aspects', *Church History*, Vol. 75, No.1, (Mar. 2006), 38-68, 38.

³⁹ Ibid, 40.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid, 41.

One consideration that led to a restriction in the power of the eldership in England was a prominent view amongst the clergy and theologians that ‘ruling eldership’ was not *jure divino*, and therefore the concern that parishioners might refuse to recognise any warrant or right for elders to exercise discipline, if the clergy could not provide elders with such credibility and authority. This became a key issue at the Westminster Assembly of 1643-47: the Scottish divines realising that the power of their version of eldership might be significantly weakened by a failure to recognise ‘divine right’, as opposed to a mere recognition of the benefits of the office.

In Scotland, Abbott notes the ‘differences of opinion and practice’ between the Reformation and the Westminster Assembly, in relation to the ‘fundamental contradictions’ within the ‘ruling elder’s office. With reference to the work of Makey, Abbott draws attention to the ‘extensive differences between the *First Book of Discipline*, which would have elders as unpaid, unordained annually elected amateurs, and the *Second Book of Discipline*, which called for ‘ecclesiastical persons’, who, like ministers, would work full-time, serve for life, be ordained and receive salaries. Whilst economics prevented full-time paid employment for elders, the idea persisted in divines such as George Gillespie, of ‘the professional elder, separated spiritually from the rest of the congregation’.⁴²

As Abbott notes: ‘many members of the Westminster Assembly of Divines...did not support ruling eldership *jure divino*, but were still willing to accept it as at least agreeable to and warranted by Scripture or, as Richard Baxter described it, ‘prudentially’⁴³. Whether or not it was *jure divino*, ‘ruling eldership’ was valued by some ‘as a means of social and religious stability’.⁴⁴

Furthermore, there was broad agreement that the elder lay somewhere in the spectrum between ‘clerical’ and ‘lay’, whilst not fully matching the criteria for either. Therefore, for Abbott, there was common ground in Scotland and England that: ‘No one in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries made the ruling elder the exact spiritual equal of the minister, while all authorities agreed that he was something more, in a moral and spiritual sense, than the average layman’.⁴⁵ Abbott concludes that ‘the sixteenth and seventeenth-century kirk clearly gave the ruling elder a spiritual respect analogous to that given to the minister, while

⁴² Ibid, 46-47, quoting Walter Makey, ‘Presbyterian and Canterburyan in the Scottish Revolution’, in Norman MacDougall ed., *Church, Politics and Society: Scotland 1408-1929*, (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1983), 152, and *The Church of the Covenant, 1637-1651*, (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1979), 124-125.

⁴³ Abbott, *The Ruling Elder*, 41.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 42.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 43-44.

not concerning itself overmuch with precise placement of the elder along the lay-clerical spectrum'.⁴⁶

Margo Todd sees a shift in Scotland in the period, as compared to England, whereby elders 'fell more on the clerical than the lay side of the divide', so that they 'occupied an at least semi-clerical status'.⁴⁷ The greater the clerical status, the higher the 'spiritual respect' and power that could be exercised, and vice versa.

This 'spiritual respect' emanating from *The Second Book of Discipline* was reflected in practice, in relation to an elder's duties. *The Second Book of Discipline* had indicated that 'it is not necessary that all elders be also teachers of the word, albeit they ought chiefly to be such and so are worthy of double honour'.⁴⁸ This was repudiated by later divines, particularly James Guthrie, arguing that the elder should not preach or teach, but be restricted to instructing, exhorting and admonishing' sinners. However, the elder in the exercise of the extensive powers of discipline would be required to catechise parishioners, and to account for the doctrine of minsters. Not only would the role in that sense require education and biblical knowledge, such knowledge would accent the 'semi-clerical' role, with elders from the educated farming and urban middle classes becoming used to voicing theological opinion on a near-like level to the minister.

Therefore, Abbott identifies the position 'in Scotland or early New England, where the Calvinist stress upon the spiritual equality of the layman and cleric strengthened a willingness to let the ruling elder assume much of the function and attendant honor of the minister'.⁴⁹

At the Westminster Assembly, 'The importance of their office was not in doubt, the point of contention was over where the scriptural authorization for the office was to be found'.⁵⁰ With the increase in semi-clerical status by 'divine calling' and life ordination for the ruling elder in the period from 1578 to 1643, and the importance of its credibility, it is not surprising that the Scottish divines fought for the recognition at the Westminster Assembly of ruling eldership as *jure divino*: as a divinely-instituted office clearly recognised in Scripture, in particular within 1 Timothy 5:17. Their efforts, however, did not succeed in full and gained only a compromise

⁴⁶ Abbott, 'The Ruling Elder', 48.

⁴⁷ Margo Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 370-71.

⁴⁸ *The Second Book of Discipline*, VI.9, my translation.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 68.

⁵⁰ Iain H. Murray, *Scottish Christian Heritage*, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), 339-366,348.

solution. The majority of the Westminster divines did not support the Scottish contention that the office of eldership was derived directly from Scripture.

The Form of Presbyterial Church Government (1645) which emerged from the Westminster Assembly of 1643-47 defines the ‘officers of the church’ who are ‘ordinary and perpetual’ as ‘pastors, teachers, and other church-governors, and deacons’.⁵¹

As to ‘other church governors’, the following passage was agreed as a compromise between the Scottish and English divines, after considerable deliberation and conflict:

As there were in the Jewish Church elders of the people joined with the priests and Levites in the government of the Church; so Christ, who hath instituted government, and governors ecclesiastical in the Church, hath furnished some in his Church, besides the Ministers of the Word, with gifts for government, and with commission to exercise the same when called thereunto, who are to join with the Minister in the government of the Church. Which officers reformed churches commonly call Elders.⁵²

It can be adduced from the passage that it contains a theological justification based on the institution of the Presbyterian form of government being in alignment with the will of Christ, and with his endowing of gifts of government upon certain people besides ministers (not there said to be clerical or lay). A comparison is made with the Jewish Church, but it is not said, as the Scottish divines urged, that the office of eldership is ‘spiritual’ in nature, nor are elders equated with the ‘presbyters’ of the New Testament. In other words, whilst there are people who will join with ministers in the government of the church, called ‘elders’ in the reformed churches, their scriptural foundation is not agreed in a like manner to the office of deacon: ‘the scripture doth hold out deacons as distinct officers in the church’.⁵³

As Burleigh summarised the outcome:

The nature of the eldership was long and hotly debated at the Westminster Assembly, where the Scots...contended for it as a Scriptural office and therefore divinely authorised. They did not gain their point, and the *Form of Presbyterial Church Government*, which is still among the official standards of the Church of Scotland, accepts the eldership (office-bearers ‘such as in the Reformed Churches

⁵¹ ‘Of the Officers of the Church’, *The Form of Presbyterial Church Government*, within Church of Scotland, *The Confession of Faith, The Larger Catechism, The Shorter Catechism, The Directory for Publick Worship, The Form of Church Government*, (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1969), 172

⁵² ‘Other Church Governors’, *The Form of Presbyterial Church Government*, within Church of Scotland, *The Confession of Faith...*(Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1969), 174.

⁵³ Ibid.

are commonly called elders') as 'warranted' by Scripture, but does not include 1 Tim. 5:17 among the proof-texts.⁵⁴

Why is this important? It can lead to such as James Cooper, then Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Glasgow University, stating in 1907: 'The elders we have are not the Christian elders of the New Testament. There was, at one time, an effort to make out that they were; but the Westminster Assembly rejected the idea'.⁵⁵ This, in turn, may lead to the conclusion that the status of elders is comparatively low and 'near-lay', questioning much of their power, authority and right to ordination and life-term.

'Warranted by scripture', as Burleigh summarises the final terms of the *Form of Presbyterial Government*, does not accept the 'presbyter' theory as set out below which would grant two forms of 'presbyter' being 'teaching elder' (minister) and 'ruling elder' (elder), but inclines instead towards a 'lay theory' of eldership which would delimit the only spiritual, scriptural office of 'presbyter' to that of minister of word and sacrament. The approach of the Westminster Assembly, if accepted, might lead to the conclusion that the eldership, having been implemented by the Reformers and having great practical significance, is not directly derived from Scripture but requires theological justification that instead must be retrospectively obtained by then referring back to Scripture for broader comparisons or more general principles.

Is it not enough, however, for the Westminster divines to offer reference to the Old Testament church and 'gifts for government' provided by Christ as justification for the existence of the 'eldership'? The difficulty in the minds of the Scots reformers was the centrality of the Word at the heart of the Reformation, and that without 'express biblical institution', they may be 'allowing prudence and expediency to rule instead of express Scripture'.⁵⁶

As the Scottish divine Robert Baillie wrote in November 1643 at the height of the debate:

All of them were ever willing to admit Elders in a prudential way; but this to us seemed a most dangerous and unhappy way, and therefore was peremptorilie

⁵⁴ J.H.S. Burleigh, *Relations between Anglican and Presbyterian Churches*, (Edinburgh, 1957), 45. Thus James Cooper, Professor of Ecclesiastical History at the University of Glasgow, *The Elder: The Nature of His Office, and His Opportunities of Usefulness in the Present Day*, (Dundee: John Leng & Co Ltd, 1909), 5.

⁵⁵ Cooper, *The Elder: The Nature of His Office*, 5.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

rejected. We trust to carry at last...their divine and scriptural institution. This is a point of high consequence.⁵⁷

As the majority of the Westminster Assembly, however, refused to fully recognise *jus divino* for the office of eldership in the *Form of Presbyterial Government*, any assertion is questionable that a direct correlation of 'elders' as we know them with the 'presbyters' of the New Testament has been established in the Church of Scotland. However, as Scriptural 'warrant' for eldership was recognised by the Westminster Assembly, there was a refusal by the divines to endorse that position but not an explicit rebuttal. There remains the potential, as discussed below, for broader theological argument to establish the basis of such 'warrant', and also potentially still the avenue to assert the direct correlation, albeit it is weakened by the outcome of the Westminster Assembly.

In the following section, we shall return to the resultant issues: what does that say about the nature of the eldership? What is left? Can its existence be justified in other theological or practical ways? Is it really a 'lay' office, being non-clerical, 'non-spiritual', and non-ordained in nature? Should eldership be more properly re-adjusted in that light towards the New Testament office of 'deacon', as argued by T.F. Torrance in 1984? How do those difficulties inform the answers to our central questions outlined above?

What then have been the principal purposes and duties of eldership historically since the Westminster Assembly? How have they changed over the centuries, and what implications does that have now for the basis of the office and its future?

18th to 20th Centuries

This part will consider the diminution of the broader exercise of discipline by the eldership from the nineteenth century onwards; the restriction of the duties of eldership thereafter to pastoral visiting to the congregation within a district, and the proper administration of church business through involvement in Church courts and in Sunday worship; and the need for a re-orientation back towards a focus on the spiritual vitality of the congregation and mission in the parish and world.

If the eighteenth century saw the high point of the power of the elder in Session in relation to 'discipline' through the administration of the sacraments and the regulation of public morality, the vast urbanisation of the early nineteenth century diminished the power of the eldership

⁵⁷ Robert Baillie, *Letters and Journals*, David Laing ed., (Edinburgh: Ogle, 1841, Vol.2), 111, as quoted by Murray, 348

through the collapse of the rural model of parish and increased secularisation, with a distancing of the urban working class.

Henderson indicates that ‘the condition of the Eldership early in the century does not seem to have been very healthy’.⁵⁸ Indeed, Henderson refers to Dickson’s book on eldership in 1886, which suggests that but for the necessity of elders to attend the General Assembly, the office may have died out altogether by then.

The ‘national church’ being fractured by the continuous secessions in the 18th Century, and most significantly by the Disruption of 1843, the Auld Kirk lost control to the state in the mid-century of poor relief (1845) and of University and general education (1872). Public censure for moral errancy was increasingly ignored and fell into desuetude, also given the increased powers of the police and local government. The role of the elder as of right in public life dissipated considerably. In that light, ‘the Church could no longer compel general obedience, and had to be content with ruling its own professed members’.⁵⁹ Even in the case of internal ‘discipline’, ‘opinion was now very largely against any form of public repentance, and the tendency was towards personal private dealing by minister or elder’.⁶⁰ Regular Kirk Session meetings for discipline having been abandoned, the eldership was increasingly purposeless barring ‘fencing the table’ for communion, and struggled to find recruits, with resulting inefficiency in the discharge of duties.⁶¹

Writing in 1935, Henderson summarised that: ‘The Nineteenth Century clearly made a great alteration in the actual function of the Ruling Elder. There was no theoretical change... Yet as far as outward duties are concerned, the twentieth century elder is only a shadow of his ancestor’.⁶²

Henderson lamented: ‘What a pity it is that the elder was thus more or less relieved of particular activities and other distinctive tasks were not set apart for him!...The eldership has lost its significance, and is in need of modification and exaltation’.⁶³

The well-known writer on the eldership in the late 20th Century, Stewart Matthew, contended that the functions of elders by the 1950s and 1960s, whilst sometimes onerous in a business sense for the internal affairs of the Church, had become emasculated in their public face to

⁵⁸ G.D. Henderson, *The Scottish Ruling Elder*, 229.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 241.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 242.

⁶¹ There were, of course, exceptions, such as the role of elders and deacons in the vigorous exercise in attempted social relief through the oversight of spiritual discipline of Thomas Chalmers in the urban Glasgow parish of St John’s in 1815-22.

⁶² G.D. Henderson, *The Scottish Ruling Elder*, 287.

⁶³ Ibid, 287.

'The Doorman' (at Sunday worship), 'The Spiritual Postman' (delivering communion cards), and 'The Royal Cup-Bearer' (at communion).⁶⁴

A publication from 1937 entitled *The Elder and His Work*, written by G.F. Barbour⁶⁵ and distributed to all elders and office-bearers in the Church of Scotland, sets out what was then understood to be the roles of the elder, and conforms to the stereotypes criticised by Matthew. It indicates that the duties are, in summary:

- 'The Elder in His Work' - regular attendance at church; being diligent, punctual and welcoming in attitude;
- 'The Elder in His District' – contact with members in delivering communion cards at least twice a year;
- 'Planning for the Congregation' – maintaining close contact with organisations within the Church, letting the minister know of who he should visit, and appointing employees;
- 'Planning for the Church's Wider Work' – the pamphlet states that 'leadership in fostering...missionary spirit naturally falls to the minister'⁶⁶ - elders should spread knowledge of what is happening at home and abroad, and ensure that money is directed that way;
- 'The Old and the New' – to look out for other potential elders;
- 'Criticism and Encouragement' of the minister; and
- Work in other courts of the Church

This inward-looking, 'Christendom' approach to the duties of eldership was readily assumed as normative, and has been held 'traditional' for the past century, whereas in reality it is anything but 'traditional' given the purpose of eldership in the post-Reformation period: to directly work towards the fruit of the seed sown of the Word within the congregation and also in broader society. In 1935, Henderson was critical of a restricted approach focused on internal business and Church function:

⁶⁴ Stewart Matthew, *Session Matters: A Book on Eldership*, (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1990), iv-v.

⁶⁵ G.F. Barbour, *The Elder and His Work*, (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland Publications Committee, 1937)

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 11.

The National Church is concerned not simply with those who serve and give willingly, but with those who almost resent its existence and whom we yet dare not thrust aside from all connection with Christian ordinances. The Church must continue to say: 'You may not want us; you may not like us; but here we stay in your midst, showing forth an ideal, preaching the Word, offering Christ...We will not let you go.'⁶⁷

The 21st Century

If the 'ruling elders' are truly to 'rule', what would that mean collectively as to their purpose? MacGregor summarises their form of 'rule' in the following sense:

The elders rule not only Discipline. They rule the Sacrament (that is, they dispense' the elements to the people) and they rule the Word, for it is part of their duty to go amongst the flock 'distributing' the Word that the minister proclaims.⁶⁸

Are elders in the present-day Church of Scotland being allowed to truly fulfil their calling within the tradition to rule both 'discipline', the 'sacrament' of Communion, and the 'Word', in the sense of distributing faith amongst the congregation and beyond? What could they be doing if they were?

There has been a persistent call over the past half-century for a departure from the 'one-size-fits-all' district approach, and the release of the gifts and talents of elders in different directions, always subsumed under a missionary purpose.

Matthew advocated 'as a real turning point'⁶⁹, the recognition by Wilkie in his Iona Community pamphlet of 1958, *The Eldership Today*, that the current appreciation of the eldership was redolent of the central community position of the Church in the Christendom era, and that now in post-Christendom the eldership must become the lay vanguard of mission in the parish. Wilkie wrote of times past:

The Church was a recognised institution in a stable society – an institution which continued the same from generation to generation. In such a situation, the Kirk Session could easily become the Committee which dealt with the routine matters of Church life.⁷⁰

With the diminution of the status and position of the Church, from a core contributor to the rhythm of society to its outer edges, Wilkie argued that the Church (my emphasis):

⁶⁷ G.D. Henderson, *The Scottish Ruling Elder*, 293-294.

⁶⁸ MacGregor, *Corpus Christi*, 217.

⁶⁹ Stewart Matthew & Kenneth Scott, *Leading God's People: A Handbook for Elders and Ministers*, (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, revised edition, 1995), 17.

⁷⁰ George D. Wilkie, *The Eldership Today*, (Glasgow: Iona Community, 1958), 2.

...must everywhere be on the offensive penetrating and permeating the new society...If this is to be accomplished, a new understanding of the position and function of the elder is essential. No longer will it do for the Kirk Session to be the Committee which keeps the age-old wheels of church life turning. **It must become a body of trained and experienced men directing and leading the mission of the congregation to the Parish and the World.**⁷¹

Therefore, this entailed for Wilkie the elder 'faithfully entering into the lives of those entrusted to him',⁷² though such as regular Elder's District Groups meeting to share faith and discuss mission in the parish.

The missionary focus for the eldership was echoed in the late sixties by David Anderson in the publication *The Elder in the Church Today*: 'The Church is a mission – a mission to the world. It exists primarily for one purpose – to proclaim to all men the Good News about God in Jesus Christ...The parish represents the missionary obligation of the Church to the whole population, and to every aspect of life'.⁷³

Section a.4.3 of the 'Church without Walls' report to the General Assembly of 2001 reflects on eldership in that context with a need to re-appraise the role so as to be fit for purpose:

We need leadership. We need elders with vision and flexibility. In our Presbyterian Church the role of elders is crucial. In the role of the elder the 'one size fits all' pattern of districts is prevalent, but that does not give room for variety of abilities to be exercised. There needs to be an honest appraisal of the gifts and callings of our elders, and to realise that not all elders are gifted in leadership, nor all gifted in pastoral care.

It is undoubtedly that re-orientation of the status and purpose of eldership has occurred nationally in some significant directions over the past half-century. First amongst those directions was the admission to eldership of women since 1964, which has brought significant gifts and insights to the office that were previously excluded. In addition, adoption of the unitary constitution and the creation of pastoral teams within certain congregations has served to emancipate some elders from the strictures of the district system and allow them to exercise their calling in different directions.

⁷¹ Ibid, 2-3.

⁷² Ibid, 5.

⁷³ David F. Anderson, *The Elder in the Church Today*, (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1969) 1 & 10.

How can these positive streams be taken further? The concluding section proposes a re-orientation along the missional direction to the parish proposed above from Henderson in 1935 onwards.

The Church of Scotland Nationally

To be included within the assessment of the development of the eldership to the present, and its potential in the future, is a consideration of how the Church recognises the role under church law; and has already considered the future potential of eldership in recent years, in reports and deliverances to the General Assembly.

(a) The role of Church Law – qualities for eldership and duties defined

The present legal requirements of the function of a Kirk Session, and thus of elders on the Kirk Session, are in terms of Section 37 of Act III 2000 (as amended), the Church Courts Act. They are summarised by McGillivray as follows:

'The responsibilities of the Kirk Session are detailed in Act III, 2000. In general they are:-

- (a) **Concern for the spiritual welfare not just of the congregation but also of the parish as a whole;** (my emphasis)
- (b) The provision of Services;
- (c) Concern for the organisational life of the congregation.

The Act also lists among the duties of the Kirk Session the need to: -

- (d) Maintain good order;
- (e) Judge and determine cases;
- (f) See that Assembly legislation be observed;

And further lays on the Kirk Session the need to –

- (g) Judge the fitness of those who desire to receive the Sacraments;
- (h) Maintain both the Baptismal Roll and a Communion Roll;
- (i) Appoint the organist, the Church Officer, and one of its number to represent it in Presbytery.⁷⁴

⁷⁴A. Gordon McGillivray, *Introduction to Practice and Procedure in the Church of Scotland*, (Church of Scotland, 2nd Ed 2001, updated to 2008), 8.

If those are the ‘bare bones’ of the performance of eldership in the expectation of the Church under its internal law, what qualities would Church law expect of an elder have in terms of knowledge of theology and doctrine?

The *First Book of Discipline* requires that elders be ‘Men of best knowledge in God’s word, of cleanest life, men faithful, and of most honest conversation that can be found in the church’. It further requires the following conduct in office:

The elders and deacons, with their wives and households, must be under the same censure that is prescribed for the ministers: for they must be careful over their office; and seeing that they are judges to the manners of others, their own conversation ought to be irreprehensible. They must be sober, humble, lovers and entertainers of concord and peace; and, finally, they ought to be the example of godliness to others. And if the contrary thereof appears, they must be admonished by the minister, or by some of their brethren of the ministry.⁷⁵

John Knox’s *Book of Common Order* states: ‘The elders must be men of good life and godly conversation, without blame and suspicion, careful for the flock, wise, and above all things fearing God’.

It is clear that the church requires the presence and upholding of spiritual knowledge and personal conduct in accordance with the doctrine of the Church, as a pre-requisite for admission or ordination to eldership, and for continuation within the post. Extant church law further presumes that there will be an enquiry by both the Kirk Session into the life and doctrine of an elder-elect prior to their ordination or admission.

Act X 1932, Anent Election and Admission of Elders and Deacons (as amended), in sections 6 and 7, permits the objection of any person within the congregation to the ordination or admission of an elder-elect on the basis of ‘life or doctrine’, which objection prevents the ordination or admission if ‘substantiated’. The prescribed edict to be read to the congregation set out in Appendix 2 to the Act indicates that ‘the Kirk Session has judged them to be qualified for that office and has sustained their election’

Act I of 2010 (as amended), Discipline of Elders, Readers and Office Bearers Act, sets out the process where the elder’s conduct in office may be subject to the discipline of Presbytery, via the investigation and recommended disposal of a Special Committee, and subject to an appeal to the Judicial Commission of the General Assembly. The Special

⁷⁵ *The First Book of Discipline*, Eighth Head.

Committee may be appointed to investigate a ‘disciplinary offence’. In addition to the breach of a lawful order of the any court of the Church, the term is defined in section 1 as ‘conduct which is declared censurable by the Word of God, Act of the General Assembly or established custom of the Church’.⁷⁶

In addition to expected duties of eldership in Kirk Session, church law therefore expects that the ‘life and doctrine’ of elders is adjudged before ordination and admission, and that in office his/her conduct will not be ‘censurable by the Word of God’.

To this extent, the ‘spiritual’ nature of the office of elder is emphasised, towards ‘presbyter’ theory: an individual’s personal knowledge of God and doctrine, demonstrated by the facets of their daily living, are essential pre-requisites for attaining and maintaining the office.

The role of the elder is further delineated by the impact of the civil law, in particular The Charities and Trustees Investments (Scotland) Act 2005. The Act defines ‘charity trustee’ as ‘the persons having the general control and management of the administration of a charity’⁷⁷. The General Assembly of 2007 approved the designation of the minister, elders who sit on the Kirk Session and members of any financial board, however termed, as the ‘charity trustees’ of a congregation. Thus, as McGillivray puts it, ‘the ‘active’ elders are designated ‘Trustees’ to enable the congregation to comply with the requirements of Charity Law’.⁷⁸ An elder who is effectively ‘retired’ may remain a ‘charity trustee’ if he/she remains on the Kirk Session. The solution is for a ‘retired’ and ‘inactive’ elder to formally resign from the Kirk Session, and to be placed on a separate list designating the same.

The 2005 Act created the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (‘OSCR’) to oversee charities, and potentially to initiate disciplinary and punitive measures against a ‘charity trustee’. The Church of Scotland has been recognised by OSCR as a ‘designated religious charity’, which entitles the Church to regulate its own disciplinary procedures against any ‘charity trustee’, including suspension and disqualification. The provisions apply of Act I of 2010 (as amended), Discipline of Elders, Readers and Office Bearers Act. Therefore, the elder as ‘charity trustee’ is subject to the discipline of the Session and Presbytery, as he/she would be in normal course.

Irrespective of the 2005 Act and the role of elder as ‘charity trustee’, the elder may still be liable personally for a due share of continuing, unmet financial obligations, albeit there is no known case. The Church of Scotland Law Department lays particular emphasis on

⁷⁶ The 2010 Act does not apply in cases covered by Act IV 2007 anent Bullying, which is subject to special provision and procedure.

⁷⁷ Duties defined in section 66 of the Act.

⁷⁸ A. Gordon McGillivray, *Introduction to Practice and Procedure in the Church of Scotland*, 5.

'unexpected liability', encouraging office bearers to ensure the prudent management of income to ensure that liabilities can be met.

Furthermore, if a decision is taken *ultra vires* of the Kirk Session, to which an elder had not dissented, which results in financial loss or obligation, once more personal liability could be involved.⁷⁹

As for inactive or 'emeritus' elders, the recommendation of the Church of Scotland Law Department is once more for inactive elders to formally resign from the Kirk Session, thus retaining the status of elder but without responsibility for Kirk Session decisions.⁸⁰

Thus, by way of redress in the balance, in this limited sense in the eyes of the civil law, both as 'charity trustee' and as incurring personal liability for unpaid debts and the consequences of ultra vires acts to which the elder has adhered, the elder can be considered as a 'representative' of the congregation (thus 'lay' theory).

Church law and civil law therefore expect elements of spiritual/semi-clerical and lay/representative functions within the office, which may strike at the very heart of the matter. In other words, the concrete reality is that an elder's duties require that person to be a hybrid of both – to adopt at once a representative character whilst at the same time maintaining a degree of elevated spiritual awareness that would enable oversight, encouragement and teaching of the congregation and beyond. Therefore, irrespective of the arguments as to the nature of the office in an abstract sense and the consequences, if the practical realities call an elder to be a hybrid of each extreme, then consideration ought to be given to defining an elder as such.

That being the background in expected duties as matters lie, how has the Church nationally addressed the future of the eldership in recent decades?

(b) Reports and Deliverances to the General Assembly

Reports to the General Assembly from 1964 to date have assessed in detail the creation, nature, duties and future of the office. They are set out in tabular form covering five main fields for the elder: the life of the Church; responsibility in relation to the parish in mission and service; 'presbyter/lay' theory; 'spiritual' or 'representative' office/ ordination or commissioning; and life/term service.

⁷⁹ *Guidance Notes for Congregational Office Bearers*, Church of Scotland Law Department, updated to August 2006, accessed at www.churchofscotland.org.uk/.../law_congregational_officebearers.pdf

⁸⁰ See Janette Wilson, Solicitor of the Church, 'Charity Trustees, Liabilities and OSCR', updated to July 2014, accessed at www.churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/22546/

The following is thus a collated table of recent reports, recommendations and decisions:⁸¹

(A) ISSUE – THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

REPORT	POSITION AND OUTCOME
Panel on Doctrine 1963, Appendix 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Close association to ministry, but distinct • Celebration of Lord's Supper a ministerial matter, Kirk Session to determine when and to assist in distribution • An example to other of the Christian life, and encouraging them • To be well informed • Diligent in public worship • Faithful re Kirk Session meetings • To encourage parents that children be brought forward for baptism • To see that all members know the meaning of church membership • For the exercise of discipline
Committee of Forty Report, 1974	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A majority of elders in the other courts as in the Kirk Session?
Panel of Doctrine 1985	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The pattern of ministry, including eldership, should be theologically justified, coherent and beneficial, not either disordered or too rigid
Panel on Doctrine 1988	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministry of each member contributes to the whole ministry of the church, in the use of each individual's gifts • Function of leadership is to enable • Kirk Session should exercise corporate leadership to unify, direct and energise the congregation
Panel on Doctrine, 1989	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Image of the servant preferable in context of rule of discipline by elder • No single model for eldership – past changes have been pragmatic and often political • Flexibility and the lack of a uniform tradition gives the freedom to develop corporate leadership as needs suit

⁸¹ I am indebted in collating the Tables to the summary of General Assembly reports prepared by Nigel Robb in January 2013– my grateful thanks to him.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elders without districts are recommended, in order to benefit from specialist elders with insight in particular areas
Assembly Council, 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consultations had been held in relation to a review of the office eldership, to discover the significance of eldership as a 'spiritual office'; suggestions included: Larger districts with a team of visitors rather than one elder per district More flexible patterns of service Some support by a small group for fixed terms of office A retirement age to allow graceful retirement Support for ordination for life, but a need for sabbaticals and re-commitment Pre-ordination training suggested with a probationary year; compulsory in service training; training at presbytery level and local development through discussions and retreats Differing views on whether it was a 'spiritual office', or whether more 'representative' of the congregation Elders saw their involvement in mission of the Church as consisting in their visits to church members Eldership to continue being diverse, adapting to local needs
Assembly Council, 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eldership is distinctive through leadership, pastoral responsibility, ordination and call A variety of different models operate Many involved in worship, but caution expressed due to limited theological knowledge and potential impact of ignorance on congregations – compulsory training important Elder not distinct from other members of the congregation by a deeper spirituality, or superior gift, but a call and commitment to oversee, or be responsible for, the life of the congregation in all aspects

(B) ISSUE – RESPONSIBILITY RE THE PARISH IN MISSION AND SERVICE

REPORT	POSITION AND OUTCOME
Panel on Doctrine 1963, Appendix 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For the commendation of the Gospel to those outwith the church and in the parish • Involvement with minister in the care of those in need • Involvement in the mission of the Church and encouraging a response to the Gospel
Assembly Council, 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Through the grace of the Holy Spirit the office of the elder empowers men and women to help release, realise and enrich the full Christian potential in the spiritual calling of all those in the Church and, indeed, in the wider society they encounter in everyday life’

(C) ISSUE – PRESBYTER/LAY THEORY

REPORT	POSITION AND OUTCOME
Panel on Doctrine 1964, Appendix	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noting Calvin’s position adopted in Scotland, the difference between First and Second Books of Discipline, and the arguments at the Westminster Assembly • Concluding that there is no clear evidence in the New Testament for our version of elders today – never interpreted that way by early Church Fathers, and only the Presbyterians so interpret • Perhaps some support from Old Testament concept of ‘elders of the people’ • Deacons in the early church acted in a similar way to elders of the contemporary church, i.e. in service • It is the post-Reformation church that has restricted the office of deacon to finances, and distribution to the poor

Panel on Doctrine, 1989	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Influenced by T.F. Torrance, as was the 1964 report, and in similar terms to his 1984 article New Testament evidence unsupportive, grave difficulty in relating elders as we know them to any office in the early Church Eldership is a distinctive feature of the Reformed tradition which had evolved in different ways in different national contexts. The focus for Calvin and Knox was the need for discipline, and the need for some authority to be placed in lay hands 'Elder/deacon' best model
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(D) ISSUE – ‘SPIRITUAL OFFICE’/ ORDINATION OR COMMISSIONING

REPORT	POSITION AND OUTCOME
Committee of Forty Report, 1976	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ordination to whole church emphasised, not just a congregation, elders to be reminded at all times
Panel on Doctrine, 1989	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Admission in context of worship Term 'ordination' inappropriate, instead 'commissioning', reflecting set period
Panel on Doctrine, 1990	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Following responses by Kirk Sessions and Presbyteries to the 1989 Report, ordination for life to remain, plus improved training
Panel on Doctrine, 1990, Appendix 2b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In context of such rejection, support instead in consultations with office of eldership for life, and 'ordination' to a 'spiritual office' Danger eldership was seen as a means of restricting ministerial power, and not as a concept of service to the church Panel emphasised if it was to be a 'spiritual office', this was not to demean the gifts and talents of others in the congregation Panel reflected that if the more flexible approach they proposed in 1989 was to be rejected, then the present model must be developed through training and reflection,

	so that elders were aware that all offices only exist for the sake of the church, and should focus on the release of the talents of all of God's people
Panel on Doctrine, 2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report on ordination to all forms of ministry • Ordination not an end to itself, it is to authorise and inaugurate ministries within the Church • Baptism is the prime means of entry into any ministry • A call to a particular office is as a result of God endowing an individual with specific gifts for that office • Calvin – ordination is the Church's recognition of a divine call, with the individual's call to be tested by those whom they are to serve (with elder – whole church); not the receipt of an 'indelible character' • Ordination is not 'setting-apart', as it is not elevating, it is a call to responsibility • In other words, ordination is not only 'ontological' re the person, or only 'functional' – authorising a person to do certain things, but is both held together • It does confer authority, but only in the context of service, as real authority belongs to God • Four purposes – keep the church faithful; those ordained answerable to whole church; wider church can test the vocation before ordination; ordained ministries are not temporary expedients
Panel on Doctrine, 2001 (my emphasis)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflecting further on ordination • Ordination gives order to the Church's ministry • Ordained ministries – the identity of the Church, its unity, and its calling to be Christ's witness and servant in the world; to hold the church to its true nature and calling • A dimension of oversight may call for ordination, 'oversight' meaning decision-making in all senses, including the government of the church, pastoral care, witness to Christ, worship and the sacraments • Differences in oversight mean that ordination is not the same in the case of a minister and an elder, which has in the past led to proposals that elders should not be

	<p>ordained</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The difference is in leadership – although they work complementarily, ministers ‘bear witness to Christ in preaching and sacraments’ and elders ‘can lead and guide the community in their response of faith, building communion, encouraging and exemplifying a spirit of service’ • Elders seek the fruit of the Word being sown by ministers – ‘presbyter’ theory ‘may obscure this character’: elders are more closely related to the New Testament office of deacon (agreeing with TF Torrance’s 1984 article) • Elders are a ‘reminder to the church that the call of service is addressed primarily to the [local church], to the whole people of God’ • No proposal, unlike 1989, that ordination should cease for elders • Form of ordination should recognise their office throughout the whole church, with possible representation of other local churches and Presbytery • This report too exercises a hybrid status for elders. Historically elders are not just ‘representatives’ of a congregation (‘lay theory’), but holders of a permanent spiritual office and should be ordained – they oversee the response of the people to the work of the Minister of the Word and Sacrament. However, in doing so, this complementary character would be obscured if at the other extreme they were held to be too close to ministers as a single category of ‘presbyter’ (under ‘presbyter’ theory) – analogies to the work of deacons hold this back.
Assembly Council, 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Idea of eldership as ‘spiritual office’ lacks content and needs to be explored

(E) ISSUE – LIFE SERVICE (RELATED TO ‘SPIRITUAL OFFICE’ / ‘ORDINATION’)

REPORT	POSITION AND OUTCOME
Committee of Forty Report, 1976	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommended two forms of elders – one in traditional sense, ‘serving elders’, acting for a prescribed period with a fallow year • After the fallow year, and appropriate training and reflection, the elder could enrol for a further period of active service by re-commitment, exploring new calling with duties shared amongst many according to their gifts • Also allowing older elders to retire with distinction • Training essential
Committee of Forty, 1977	<p>Reaction from survey and consultation to 1976</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Danger in five year rotation, especially in rural areas, resistance to it being imposed based on loss of continuity and devaluing ordination • A desire to give elders the chance to recommit
Panel on Doctrine, 1989	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Terms of office recommended, in similar manner to national committees • Lower limit of five years’ service, and upper limit of ten years • Opportunity for re-election, but at least one year ‘out of service’ • Elders must be elected with a voice for the congregation • Would enable gifts used for long periods re many, rather than opportunities for service limited to a few on life-long basis • Ordination not appropriate, ‘commissioning’ for a fixed period to be preferred
Panel on Doctrine, 1990	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideas rejected by consultations of Kirk Sessions and Presbyteries – elders should continue to be ordained for life • More training was needed
Panel on Doctrine,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expanding on above, resistance to any change from

1990, Appendix 2b	<p>consultations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some views proposed changes as radical, unsupported and an attack on the Reformed tradition • Fixed terms of office – difficulty of ensuring enough people
Panel of Worship and Doctrine, 2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concept of terms of service does not dispense with notion of service for life, but that we are all called to serve • Need for flexibility and imagination in office of eldership
Assembly Council 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support fixed terms and sabbaticals, but fear that this may lead to collapse of the district system

SECTION TWO - EXAMINING THE AVERRED BASIS OF THE OFFICE AND 'PRESBYTER/LAY' THEORY

- Is the 'ruling' eldership a directly scripturally-derived institution, or is it a Reformation creation requiring broader justification? If the latter, is there indeed other theological or practical support for the office?
- Arising from the answer to the first question, is the 'presbyter' theory of eldership to be preferred, whereby 'ruling elders' form one of two types of 'presbyter' of equal standing, the other being the 'teaching elder' or minister? On the other hand, is the 'lay theory' to be favoured, which sees the minister as the only 'presbyter', and the elder as a lay assistant to aspects of ordained ministry?

Andrew Herron in his summary *The Law and Practice of the Kirk* of 1995 stated:

The Kirk Session of a parish consists of its Minister (or Ministers) and Elders. Historically all alike are Elders the Minister being the teaching or preaching Elder and the others the ruling Elders; but today, in popular usage at least, the term 'elder' denotes exclusively the ruling variety. All alike are ordained, the Minister with, the Elders without, the laying on of hands. On occasion one hears the term 'lay elder', but this, clearly, is a contradiction in terms.⁸²

⁸² Andrew Herron, *The Law and Practice of the Kirk: A Guide and Commentary*, (Glasgow: Chapter House Ltd, 1995), 279.

With respect, the final sentence is a misrepresentation forming only one side of a divide. It is a simplification of the issue, ignoring the deeper theological contentions involved, as well as the consequences of the debate for the issues of ‘spiritual office’, ordination and life/fixed terms.

With its background in scriptural foundation and the practice and duties of the eldership, and in the light of the *Books of Discipline* and the *Form of Presbyterial Government* that emerged from the Westminster Assembly, the debate crystallised from the early eighteenth century on the ‘presbyter theory’ versus ‘lay theory’ of the eldership, and continues to this day. It reached a highpoint in the mid-19th Century through the work of Peter Colin Campbell at the University of Aberdeen, and has been revived in the late 20th Century by T.F. Torrance (both proponents of ‘lay theory’).⁸³

What then is the battleground in outline? The eminent church historian A.C. Cheyne set out the areas of contention. As to the advocates of ‘Presbyter’ theory, he wrote that:

- ‘these find in Scripture, above all in 1 Timothy 5:17, support for the belief that there were two types of presbyter, or elder, in the Apostolic Church – preaching presbyters and ruling presbyters, of whom the former are prototypes of the Scottish minister and the latter the Scottish elder’⁸⁴
- ‘The Presbyter theory...has at its heart the Lutheran doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (interpreted in a certain way), sympathises with those among the Covenanters who saw the distinction between clergy and laity as ‘popish and unchristian’, applauds Samuel Rutherford when he roundly calls it a ‘lie’ to say that the Church of Scotland has ‘lay elders’, and at times reciprocates the clericalism of its adversaries with an anti-clerical fervour of equal force’.⁸⁵
- ‘Looking to the example of the Free and United Presbyterian Churches, of the Dissenters who sprang from the Erskines and Thomas Gillespie and of the majority of Covenanting thinking’.⁸⁶

As to ‘lay theory’, Cheyne wrote that it formed the majority opinion at the Westminster Assembly ‘the New Testament hath nowhere distinguished the ruling elder’s office’.

⁸³ On ‘presbyter/lay theory’ in the 18th Century in Scotland, see Henderson, *The Scottish Ruling Elder*, 205-207, and in the 19th Century, 210-216.

⁸⁴ A.C. Cheyne, ‘Diversity and Development in Scottish Presbyterianism’, in *Studies in Scottish Church History*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd, 1999), 1-32, 10.

⁸⁵ A.C. Cheyne, ‘Diversity and Development’, 11.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Cheyne deferred to Henderson (1935) for the implications thereof:

...that Church Government is in the hands of the officers of the Church and not of the members, but with them these Church officers are the fully-ordained clergy, and all others including elders are 'mere' laymen...But the elder as a 'mere' layman is not 'ordained' in any full sense of the word. His function is regulative and administrative...simply a layman representing other laymen'.⁸⁷

The far extension of lay theory is to assert the following, in the words of MacGregor:

The eldership is a most useful institution; but it is not a divine gift to the Church and it is by no means indispensable...Its place in the life of the Church is determined by social and political circumstances rather than ecclesiological principles.⁸⁸

As to prominent historical supporters of such 'lay theory', Cheyne pointed to:

...drawing reinforcement from the pre-dominant ethos of the Auld Kirk in late-Victorian days, from the Moderates of the eighteenth century and from the men who favoured the restoration of Episcopalianism at the Restoration of 1660.⁸⁹

On that last note, one could perhaps posit further that T.F. Torrance's firm support for 'lay theory' set out below may have had as a motivating factor his bold ecumenism, and the desire to find areas of diminished difference between the Presbyterian governance of the Church of Scotland as compared to Episcopalianism, in order to encourage closer co-operation and potential union.

Late 20th Century Re-Emergence of the Presbyter/Lay Debate

In the late 20th Century, the dominant force within Reports to the General Assembly was 'lay theory', under the influence of T.F. Torrance and a seminal article and book from 1984;⁹⁰ attacking the basis of 'Presbyter' theory from 1 Timothy 5:17, supporting the 19th Century rejection of that argument by Peter Colin Campbell, and arguing that the present role of elders should be recast as 'elder-deacons', entailing the equation of 'elders' with the New Testament deacon and not with the teaching/ruling elder distinction.

⁸⁷ Henderson, *The Scottish Ruling Elder*, 214-215.

⁸⁸ MacGregor, *Corpus Christi*, 216-217.

⁸⁹ Cheyne, 'Diversity and Development', 11.

⁹⁰ T.F. Torrance, 'The Eldership in the Reformed Church'.

This led to the proposals above to the General Assembly of 1989, departing from ordination and from life terms, on the implicit assumption that ‘lay theory’ prevails. Torrance’s proposals were not followed by the national Church. Ordination for life has been retained, a seeming rejection of a unitary ‘lay theory’ and a re-assertion, at least to an extent, of ‘Presbyter’ theory, but with continuing questions remaining: is the office not more of a hybrid between the two, as above from Church law and the Panel on Doctrine of 2001? If indeed the eldership is a ‘spiritual office’, how ought that to be expressed in terms of its rights and duties?

What then did Torrance argue in his 1984 article?

Torrance noted the sometimes random and haphazard nature of the development of eldership, arguing that this was reflective of shaky biblical origins:

There have been persistent ambiguities and problems about the nature and justification of the elder’s office, not least over the question of explicit justification for it on grounds of biblical teaching and apostolic ordinance....[thus it has]...regularly tended to develop features of its own...⁹¹

Torrance considered the development of the office, from Calvin’s call to support within 1 Timothy 5:17 and the Early Church, to the difference in the nature of the eldership in Scotland between the First and Second Books of Discipline, to the disputes before the Westminster Assembly and their rejection of the ‘spiritual’ nature of the office, of the elder as ‘presbyter’, and finding only a ‘warrant’ from Scripture

Having been keenly debated in the Westminster Assembly of 1643-47, the argument revived in the mid-19th century. Torrance asserted that in the United States of America, the ‘presbyter’ theory of eldership was ‘demolished by Smyth of Charleston and Hodge of Princeton’, following on the work of Samuel Miller of Princeton in his book *The Ruling Elder* of 1831. The same ‘demolition’ was carried out in Scotland ‘more lucidly and succinctly’⁹² by Peter Colin Campbell in his book *The Theory of Ruling Eldership* of 1866.

The central force of Torrance’s argument is in agreement with the nineteenth century writers – support for a demolition of ‘presbyter’ theory in favour of a ‘lay’ construction:

⁹¹ T.F. Torrance, ‘The Eldership in the Reformed Church’, 503.

⁹² , T.F. Torrance, ‘The Eldership in the Reformed Church’, 508. As we have seen, that view was shared by Professor Cooper in 1907

There is no clear evidence in the New Testament for what we call ‘elders’, let alone the theory that there are two kinds of presbyter. The biblical passages to which appeal is made, when objectively considered, cannot be taken to bear the interpretation Presbyterians put upon them. Moreover, they were never understood in this sense by any of the Church Fathers...in the way that was sometimes alleged...Presbyterians are isolated from the rest of Christendom past and present in claiming that these biblical texts provide evidence for ‘elders’ in their sense. The conclusion is inescapable: Presbyterians adduced this ‘biblical evidence’ in order to have some authoritative justification for an eldership they found, not within the New Testament itself, but within certain sections of the 4th/5th century North African Church.⁹³

Torrance concluded that we ought to clarify the true nature of eldership as close to that of a New Testament deacon, ‘if we frankly acknowledge that we have misread the Holy Scriptures through the distorting lenses of a Presbyterian tradition’.⁹⁴ He called for urgent change: ‘It is imperative that we set about once again to reform our church polity in accordance with the revealed Word of God’.⁹⁵

Torrance endorsed biblical warrant for a complementary ministry within congregational life to those who are ordained to ministry of Word and Sacrament. However, he does not accept a hybrid office with some ‘spiritual/presbyter’ elements, and instead argues for the more extreme outcome of a stripping away of any pretensions of office that would suggest otherwise. Therefore, eldership does not carry the notion of being ‘ordained’:

...for ordination in the proper sense...carries with it the notion of the ‘power of order’...In the Church of Scotland, elders have never been regarded as invested with the ‘power of order’, even for the ‘ordination’ of other elders’.⁹⁶

The explanation for this, according to Torrance, lies in the separate and distinct purpose of the role and duties of the elder as compared to the minister:

...their distinctive ministry is not *the service of the Word* but *the service of response to the Word*...Whilst ministers are ordained to dispense the Word and Sacraments to the people, elders are set apart to help the people in their reception of the Word and in their participation in the Sacraments, and to seek the fruit of the Gospel in the faith ad life of the community. Elders are meant to *represent* the people, and to fulfil their

⁹³ T.F. Torrance, ‘The Eldership in the Reformed Church’, 508.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 518.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 510.

ministry *from* the people toward God. Thus their specific calling is to help the faithful from within their midst...⁹⁷

For Torrance, a reflection of what he described as the elder's 'diaconal/complementary' form of ministry lay in the oft-quoted passage in *The Second Book of Discipline* at VI.12: 'As pastors and doctors should be diligent in teaching and sowing the seed of the word, so the elders should be careful in seeking the fruit of the same in the people'.

Whereas this quote led the Panel on Doctrine of 2001 to conclude that the elder exercises a complementary oversight which requires ordination, it led Torrance to conclude the opposite! He encouraged the church to instead re-cast the nature and duties of the present-day eldership in terms of a definite New Testament precedent – the lay office of deacon who was engaged in seeking the fruit of the Word, and of assisting in the sacraments. Torrance thus coined the term 'elder-deacon' to describe the future of the eldership in Scotland. Both in his revision of Wotherspoon in 1980 and his 1984 article and book, he asserted that: 'It seems very clear that the Scottish Elder more nearly reproduces the deacon or deacon-elder of the Early Church than the 'deacon' in any of the other churches today'.⁹⁸

Torrance believed that if such a stripping back and re-casting occurred:

...the eldership, assimilated to the biblical and early Christian diaconate, would recover something of its wholeness as an essentially spiritual and evangelical *diakonia*...⁹⁹

This would mean that it 'would have the much needed effect of deepening mutuality and complementarity between the *presbyteral* ministry of the Word and Sacrament and the *diaconal* ministry of shared obedience to Christ'.¹⁰⁰ In other words, by denuding any 'spiritual' aspirations, the cleft between and eldership would be clearer, which would allow them to work in greater harmony without the pretence that one might be the other.

In exercise of their complementary, diaconal ministry of service to and for the people, elders for Torrance might thus:

...exercise a more central ministry in the responses of God's worshipping people, in leading their praise and thanksgiving, in guiding their intercession and witness, and in

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ H.J. Wotherspoon & J.M. Kirkpatrick, *A Manual of Church Doctrine according to the Church of Scotland*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1960, 2nd ed, revised and enlarged by T.F. Torrance and Ronald Selby Wright), 100.

⁹⁹ T.F. Torrance, 'The Eldership in the Reformed Church', 518.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

the translation of their love of God into a living liturgy of service in the depths of human need.¹⁰¹

In short, in Wotherspoon as revised by Torrance: '[The elder's] office is essentially diaconal and complementary to that of the Presbyter who is ordained to dispense the Word and Sacraments'.¹⁰²

What conclusion might we then reach in relation to the justification of 'Presbyter' theory, central to both 'spiritual office', ordination and life term, and to Torrance's criticisms thereof? On the one hand, Torrance's criticism of the cogency of any direct scriptural derivations may have some basis, under the suspicion that the creation or re-surgence of the office was more important to the Reformers than where its roots lay. As Henderson comments on the position which Calvin and Knox adopted:

It strikes one now as a little forced, and it seems evident that in different circumstances the Presbyters in the sense of ministers would have been left to attend to the ruling as well as to the preaching and the sacraments. But an attractive interpretation of Scripture sprang to mind and brought conviction with it.¹⁰³

The creation of the office in relation to Scripture may well have been 'the cart before the horse'. It does not mean, however, that the more extreme consequence of the supremacy of 'lay theory' that Torrance promoted must gain an absolute ascendancy, without consideration of a hybrid office, for two reasons: (a) there remain Scriptural arguments for eldership as a 'spiritual' office beyond 1 Timothy 5:17; and (b) even setting those aside, there are more over-arching theological grounds for arguing divine approval of the eldership within a Presbyterian system, not to mention practical support given the great benefit of the eldership, actual and potential, to the Church that has been apparent over the centuries. Even the main critics of 'presbyter' theory, and hence exponents of 'lay' theory, would not deny the enormous value of the 'eldership' as it has been formed within the Church of Scotland – they only seek to propose amended roles for the eldership by a re-consideration of what it is.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² H.J. Wotherspoon & J.M. Kirkpatrick, *A Manual of Church Doctrine*, 100. Thus 'Presbyter' singular, indicating the view that only the minister ought to be considered such on an interpretation of 1 Tim 5:17 and other NT passages.

¹⁰³ G.D. Henderson, *The Scottish Ruling Elder*, 27.

Other Theological Justifications for Eldership

(a) Potential Scriptural Foundations

The starting point is that the Church of Scotland has always held the eldership to be a ‘spiritual’ office since at least 1578, thus requiring ordination, implying a life-term and upholding, at least to some extent’, the ‘presbyter’ theory of two classes being ‘teaching elder’ and ‘ruling elder’. Unless anything changes, that position remains.

There is further Scriptural material which has often been cited in support of that position beyond 1 Timothy 5:17, such as the elder of the Old Testament, an elderly community leader who exercised authority often in judgment in a judicial context:

- Exodus 3:16 – Moses gathering the elders to give God’s message
- Exodus 18:13-27 – Moses giving the elders authority to judge minor cases
- 1 Samuel 15:30 – Saul to be honoured before the elders
- 2 Samuel 17:15 – elders appeared before David
- 1 Kings 8:3 – elders took part in the temple procession of Solomon
- 1 Kings 12:1ff – elders expected to advise in the election of a king
- Joshua 20:4 – elders served as local magistrates in the community, punishing disobedience (Deuteronomy 21:19); slander (22:15); and marriage law violation (25:7)

Further references from the New Testament that are often cited, other than those mentioned in Calvin’s *Institutes* above or by reference to the lay character of the twelve Apostles, include:

- The use of the word *presbyteros* for seniority, (Luke 15:25; Romans 9:12), with reference to the Jewish elders of the synagogue (Matthew 15:2; 16:21; 21:23), and in the context of spiritual overseers (*episkopos*) in the early church (Acts 14:23; 20:17; 1Tim 3:1-2)

It is not, therefore, a foregone conclusion that that the charge of a complete absence of direct Scriptural derivation for dual ‘presbyters’ by such as Torrance would be proved.

(b) 'Theological Expediency'

Not only do alternative Scriptural derivations dilute the potency of an absolutist 'lay theory', it may be argued that Torrance's extreme outcome is not necessary because a direct Scriptural derivation for eldership is not essential. That may be so, as long as there is 'warrant from Scripture' for the existence of this type of office within a Presbyterian form of governance, as in the compromise wording of the Westminster Assembly.

To this extent, a search for direct scriptural authority may not be required at all, and may be something of a 'red herring' in the broader picture. In other words, if the oversight of the moral and spiritual health of the church community and broader society by a lay cohort is theologically justified, direct reference within the canon of Scripture to such a group operating in those times may be a secondary concern.

There is an element of expediency in the office of eldership for the larger New Testament purpose of ensuring that Word and sacraments are not corrupted. That being so, 'Since oversight of public and private morals was a New Testament obligation as well as a social necessity, scriptural authority for the office was regarded as essential'.¹⁰⁴

In other words, in a church without the headship and authority of the Pope where the Word was to be central, Henderson suggested that the need for internal discipline was paramount, and a certain degree of 'shoe-horning' was necessary for Calvin to find Scriptural force for lay and not clergy presence within it: 'The demand for Elders sprang from the necessities of discipline, and scripture foundation was then discovered for the office'.¹⁰⁵

As Murray puts it, 'some of its features rest on experience and prudence rather than on proof-texts'.¹⁰⁶

However that 'expediency' in ecclesiological terms was in itself imbued with Reformed theological elements.

¹⁰⁴ G.D. Henderson, *Why We Are Presbyterians*, 50.

¹⁰⁵ G.D. Henderson, *The Scottish Ruling Elder*, 19.

¹⁰⁶ Murray, *Scottish Christian Heritage*, 361.

Although there were experiential and prudential requirements, they in turn reflected the implementation of the theological prominence of laity. It was the promulgation of a ‘third way’, consequent upon the theology and ecclesiology of the Reformation – that church organisation and moral discipline were not to be enforced by clergy alone, as pre-Reformation, nor was it to be subject solely to state control, but instead to reflect the force of Calvinism towards the personal relationship of the lay person with God, justification by faith alone, lay contribution to worship, and liturgy and Scripture in the vernacular. The redistribution of responsibility towards the laity matched the criteria for the office of eldership.

Therefore, as Henderson states:

Through the office of the ordained lay-eldership it was possible to keep discipline in the hands of the Church without putting people in the power of the clergy, employing appropriately the lay resources now available and, by appointing laymen to spiritual office, bridging the gap between clerical and lay, and substantiating the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.¹⁰⁷

(c) Theological – Eldership is in Accordance with Christ’s Will as Head of the Church

The argument that ‘the Presbyterian system, in its general principles, can appeal to Scripture’¹⁰⁸ came to the fore in the mid-nineteenth century debate on ‘presbyter’ theory in the United States.

On the one hand, it was argued that if a ruling elder was not a ‘presbyter’ and had no ‘divine right’, as a lynchpin of the Presbyterian system, then the system itself had to be abandoned. Thus Thornwell wrote:

To say that a Ruling Elder is not entitled to the appellation of Presbyter...is just to say that the fundamental principle of our polity is a human institution...Presbyterianism stands or falls with the distinction between Ruling and Teaching Elders.¹⁰⁹

On the other hand, considering the gifts of government mentioned in Romans 12:8 and 1 Cor 12:28, a theological justification was put forward that the Presbyterian form of governance including ruling elders conformed, no matter what, with the will and inspiration of Christ as head of the Church. The ‘divine right’ rested not with the office of elder, but with the

¹⁰⁷ G.D. Henderson, *Why We Are Presbyterians*, 50.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ J.H. Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of J.H. Thornwell*, (1875, repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), vol.4, 115 & 125, as quoted by Murray, 359.

entitlement of the Church to regulate its governance and discipline in a Presbyterian manner, including elders. Thus Charles Hodge wrote:

Christ has not made his grace to depend on external organization; nor has he bound his church to any one exact model of ecclesiastical discipline. If in the early church it was expedient and easy to have several presbyters in the same church, all clothed with the same office; and if we find it better, in our circumstances, to have one minister, assisted by a bench of elders, we have a divine right so to order it.¹¹⁰

Conclusion

The alternatives at each extreme of ‘presbyter’ and ‘lay’ theory are equally unattractive.

If an absolutist ‘lay’ theory is solely victorious, then a chasm in status is clearly established between the ordained ministry and all other members of the Church to create a power imbalance elevating the clergy. This would run contrary to fundamental Reformation principles such as the ‘whole people of God’ and the ‘priesthood of all believers’, and re-establish the clergy domination of the pre-Reformation era. The elder would then become a lay vassal of the minister to be called on as required, and not to be considered as a spiritual equal.

On the other hand, if ‘presbyter’ theory is held solely victorious, this might elevate the elder to a clerical status on close par with the minister, thus distancing the elder from the laity of the congregation, instituting a chasm in a different place.

Does the elder need to be pulled in the direction of either the minister or the congregation, or can the elder lie in-between within a hybrid office? Alternatively, is it better to consider the elder from a different standpoint, as proposed in the concluding section, not via the minister or the congregation, but in relation to the broader community and the furtherance of the Gospel?

T.F. Torrance’s argument is forceful in support of ‘lay theory’ but not conclusive on Scriptural or theological grounds, nor is his extreme outcome a necessary consequence of his argument, with a hybrid ‘spiritual/diaconal’ role for eldership a clear option.

It may be that the strongest theological justification for the existence of eldership rests on the assertion, as in Hodge’s argument, that eldership relies only on scriptural warrant but does not require scriptural proof. It thus relies, irrespective of the direct Scriptural detail pertaining to its existence at that time, on the Church’s right, inspired by the power of the Spirit and

¹¹⁰ Charles Hodge, *The Church and its Polity*, (London: Nelson, 1879) 275 & 284, as quoted by Murray, *Scottish Christian Heritage*, 360.

acting in accordance with the word of God, as set out in the Confession of Faith of 1560 ‘to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the government of the Church’, as:

There are some circumstances concerning...the government of the Church common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are to be observed.¹¹¹

We might then conclude that the eldership is an office whose presence reflects the concentration within Presbyterianism upon the laity in spiritual oversight and discipline; whose spiritual justification may lie in the assertion that the Presbyterian system is reflective of the will of God, and of Christ’s headship of the Church; and therefore, due to that nature, it is subject to reformation according to revelation of God’s will in the changing context of the times. It is thus a malleable office which could potentially be subject to innovative diversions in direction and purpose.

Given the above, it may be possible in doing so to seek a hybrid office by retaining both the ‘spiritual’ association of oversight which draws the eldership closer to ministry under ‘presbyter’ theory requiring ordination and life-term, and also re-emphasising the parallels of the office with the New Testament post of deacon and the need for service and seeking the fruit of the Word in that light, as argued by Torrance and agreed by the Panel on Doctrine in 2001, but without committing to the extremes of an absolutist ‘lay’ theory for which there seems no concluded necessity.

¹¹¹ *Confession of Faith*, XXX1.3 and 6.

SECTION THREE – ‘SPIRITUAL’ OFFICE AND ORDINATION

- Informed by the answers to the first two questions, is eldership a ‘spiritual’ office for life of a ‘semi-clerical’ nature, or is an elder instead a lay ‘representative’ of the congregation who might thus hold office for a fixed term office or set purpose?
- In like manner, should an elder be ‘ordained’, or is ‘commissioning’ more relevant?

Is eldership a ‘spiritual’ or ‘representative’ office?

Reference is made to the terms of the reports to the General Assembly above on this issue, and to the arguments on presbyter/lay theory in the previous section, which together to a large extent cover the spectrum of debate on the issue and offer potential answers in relation to a conclusion. The following remarks should be seen as additional.

What is the difference between the elder and the minister? Is the elder simply a lay ‘representative’ of the congregation in a democratic sense and responsible to it, or is eldership instead an ordained role, a ‘spiritual’ ruling office alongside the minister to exercise regulation and discipline in relation to the congregation? If the former, why do elders need to be ordained?

The traditional, core position of the elder in relation to the minister is aptly summarised by Wotherspoon, as revised by Torrance¹¹²: ‘The Church of Scotland has always taught that the Elder is not a minister; that he does not labour in the Word and doctrine or administer the sacraments’. *The First Book of Discipline* states (X.4): ‘The Elders, being elected, must be admonished of their office, which is to assist the Minister in all public affairs of the Church’.

That simple statement can lead, however, to either conclusion under ‘presbyter’ or ‘lay’ theory as to whether eldership is a spiritual or solely diaconal office.

On the one hand, it could be said that the difference creates a clear and unbridgeable distinction in the ‘spiritual’ nature of the office of minister as opposed to elder. As Warr put it, ‘Government...is not the exercise of the ministry of the Word and Sacraments, and orthodox

¹¹² H.J. Wotherspoon & J.M. Kirkpatrick, *A Manual of Church Doctrine*, 45.

Presbyterianism has never confused the two'.¹¹³ For example, 'the presence of an elder...in the service of Holy Communion is merely in the capacity of an assisting server at the Holy Table. He has no part in the celebration of the Sacrament...He assists at the invitation of the minister'. Furthermore, the minister is responsible to Presbytery alone for the form and conduct of public worship, which is a subject that is *ultra vires* the Kirk Session.¹¹⁴

The elder thus does not administer the sacraments in any form. The elder is as 'assisting server' in communion, involved not in the giving or dispensing of the sacrament, but in its reception by the people. Likewise, the elder has no formal role in the sacrament of baptism.

In summary, under 'lay' theory, the elder is 'assistant to the minister', and seeks the fruits of the Word sown in the congregation and the community in a diaconal sense.

On the other hand, under 'presbyter' theory, the elder ranks in a position of a certain spiritual equality with the minister, albeit their ordinations are different. The elder acts in tandem with the minister, casting the 'ruling elder' somewhere beyond the level of the congregation.

Under whichever theory, some degree of spiritual role towards the congregation and in the parish must pertain. Beyond assistance to the minister in worship, governance and discipline in relation to the local congregation, the elders' boundaries have always expanded beyond the mere internal and administrative. There remains a 'spiritual role' amongst the congregation and beyond into the whole parish, a pastoral care role with a set district area for regular visitation, and a role in Church courts, where elders have the same power as pastors.¹¹⁵

But does that involve the elder united 'as one' with fellow members of the congregation, a lay buffer against clerical domination? Or does it involve the elder siding with the minister in a 'semi-clerical' manner to ensure that the 'true notes' of the Kirk are upheld?

As noted above, various commentators have identified the eldership in its first century as being 'semi-clerical' in nature, entailing some of the honour attached to the ministerial office. The traditional viewpoint might therefore see the elder as being above the congregation, needing their tacit consent to be ordained into eldership, but not being responsible to them in terms of decision-making. The word 'representative' was not mentioned in either *Book of Discipline*, or the *Form of Presbyterial Government*.

¹¹³ Charles Warr, *The Presbyterian Tradition: A Scottish Layman's Handbook*, (London: Alexander Maclehose & Co, 1933), 373.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 374.

¹¹⁵ H.J. Wotherspoon & J.M. Kirkpatrick, *A Manual of Church Doctrine*, 101.

However, for Cheyne, ‘in the early eighteenth century the notion of the ‘representative elder’ begins to emerge. We find it in Robert Wodrow and in an Act of the General Assembly of 1731. It has not died out since’.¹¹⁶ The explanation may lie with the shifting nature of the elders’ duties, the gradual disappearance of spiritual oversight over the congregation, and a consequent leaning towards ‘lay theory’ through the change of duties. As Cheyne argues:

Its vogue at present tends...to lower rather than raise the status of the office, for it minimises the fact that the elder of tradition has exercised discipline over the congregation rather than been representative of it or responsible to it.¹¹⁷

If ‘representative’ is pressed, in a manner akin to ‘lay’ theory it would entail that position being such as the following, according to Wotherspoon (as revised by T.F. Torrance):

Unlike the Presbyter the Elder is a *representative* of the people who takes part with the ministry (1) in assisting at the celebration of the Holy Communion (i.e. not the dispensing but in the receiving), (2) in matters of discipline (3) in government and in the administration of affairs.¹¹⁸

In summary, when considering the internal responsibilities of the elder within a local congregation if ‘representative’, according to Warr, ‘The function of the lay elder is administrative, it is in no sense ministerial’.

On the other hand, if ‘spiritual’ is pressed, the principal functions begin to depart from close association with the congregation at the same level and instead must be more closely focused on dispersion of the Word in mission and oversight of the spiritual development of the congregation.

If the eldership is indeed to retain ordination with life status, in keeping with ‘presbyter’ theory, should this not mean a return to spiritual oversight and missional focus for the parish? Adopting Cheyne’s reasoning above, a recovery of ‘discipline’ in that amended sense would re-ignite the justification of ‘presbyter’ status and dispel any suggestion that the elder is a mere ‘representative’ of the congregation and administrative helper to the minister.

¹¹⁶ Cheyne, ‘Diversity and Development’, 10.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ H.J. Wotherspoon & J.M. Kirkpatrick, *A Manual of Church Doctrine*, 100.

Informed by the answers above, should an elder be ‘ordained’, or is ‘commissioning’ more relevant?

Once more, reference is made to the table above in relation to General Assembly reports, particularly the rejected recommendation for ‘commissioning’ from the Panel on Doctrine of 1989, and to the discussion of ‘presbyter/lay’ theory. The following remarks are again supplementary.

Can the method of ‘ordination’ or ‘admission’ to eldership cast any light on a non-clerical or semi-clerical role?

The traditional starting point is that the post of elder, whilst associated with the corporate ministry in the administration and governance of worship and the sacraments, and retaining a spiritual role in the oversight of congregation and parish, is not a minister of word and sacrament in any sense.

The role of the minister and the elder being firmly delineated, the method and effect of the process of ordination must be different. Thus, for Murray, ‘to all be ordained equally is unworkable and diminishes the place of the minister’.¹¹⁹

Traditionally, due to this distinction the elder was not ordained through the laying on of hands, and could not do so in ordination themselves. As MacGregor asserts: ‘For it is plain that since the elders have no part in the *imposition manuum* and do not themselves receive this, they are no sense within the corporate ministry in the Reformed Church...The elders, though associated with the ministry, do not participate in it’.¹²⁰

Reflecting his dismissal of ‘presbyter’ theory, James Cooper wrote:

I think it better to say of an elder that he is *admitted* than that he is *ordained*, because in the Church ‘ordination’ has come to mean two things – the laying on of hands, and the giving of grace of the office of the Holy Ministry; whereas the laying on of hands

¹¹⁹ Murray, *Scottish Christian Heritage*, 361.

¹²⁰ MacGregor, *Corpus Christi.*, 216-217, f1.

has no place in the making of an elder, neither is he a minister of Word and Sacraments.¹²¹

The traditional view in church law was therefore, as Warr expressed it, that 'it does not permit lay elders to take part in the act of ministerial ordination, and for reasons that are obvious. Only a lawfully ordained minister of the Word and Sacraments can ordain another into office'. Only the laying-on of hands and prayerful intention of ministers would be efficacious 'both as apostolic precept, and as hallowed by the continued observance of two thousand years'. Therefore, 'an Elder...cannot possibly entertain a valid Intention to convey to another that divine commission which he himself does not possess. In connection with a ceremony so august and solemn, no self-respecting man would associate himself with so presumptuous an unreality'.¹²²

That view is by no means current in the Church of Scotland, hence Act III 2004, Anent Ordinations by Presbyteries, which permits the elder to lay on hands at the ordination of a minister or deacon.

The distinction between minister and elder thus being somewhat blurred in the laying on of hands in ordination, it is also becoming so in relation to the provision of worship, albeit in practice rather than Church law. Given that the minister is held to be solely responsible for the provision of the Word and of public worship, should elders take church services?

Other than the allowance to read scripture and prayers in the absence of the minister, *The Second Book of Discipline* following Calvin, formative in our present office of eldership, stated that 'Such as commonly called Elders labour not in Word and Doctrine'.¹²³ Steuart of Pardovan exclaimed 'the Elder is to speak nothing to the Church from the pulpit'.¹²⁴

This stance is still prevalent in the law of the Church, albeit it may be more honoured in the breach than the observance. Act II 2002, Ministry Act (as amended) states at section 20(1):

¹²¹ Cooper, *The Elder and His Work*, 4.

¹²² Warr, *The Presbyterian Tradition*, 372.

¹²³ VII.1. Although, as previously stated, elders will have to be knowledgeable to some extent if exercising spiritual oversight and discipline with the congregation and parish.

¹²⁴ Collections, I., vi., 7-8.

The Ministry of the Word, the conduct of public worship, the dispensing of the Sacraments, and the instruction of the young, belong to the minister, subject to the control and direction of the Presbytery.¹²⁵

Sections 24 and 25 of the same Act indicate that the minister may ‘occasionally and for special reason invite an unqualified person to lead worship’, provided that there is intimation to Presbytery with fourteen days’ notice.

At least in terms of Church law, it is clear that whilst an annual service by elders supported by the National Church, such as ‘Souper Sunday’ would be permitted, the regular provision of worship by a ‘preaching team’ consisting of a number of elders is not permitted. How realistic is such a restriction, for example, for churches in extended, rural vacancy with little access to pulpit supply? On the other hand, if elders regularly lead worship, again the sharp distinctions from ministry which justified and defined the creation of eldership and its purpose again begin to fade from view.

Therefore, whilst strictly elder ordination cannot be equated with ministerial ordination, and leading worship is the concern of the minister with elder participation at an ancillary level, the practical diminution of those divides also calls into question whether the original role and purposes of eldership can be adhered to. It may be, in any event, that a ‘hybrid’ office is of necessity in a church declining numerically, irrespective of past theological boundaries.

The ability under Church law to lay on hands at ordination, and the practice of the regular provision of worship of elders, blurs the prior distinctions with ministry that formed the definitional basis of eldership, and also places the elder in the same region of status as the minister, again departing from Torrance’s absolutist ‘lay’ theory towards ‘presbyter’ theory.

Practical continuance of both of those practises by elders suggests an ongoing ‘spiritual’ aspect to the role, and therefore the continued need, irrespective of the theories above, for their reflection in ordination.

¹²⁵ To be held to include the trained offices of Ordained Local Minister and Reader.

SECTION FOUR – POTENTIAL CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Insofar as definite conclusions are possible or intended, on balance they include the following:

- (a) The eldership is a pragmatic institution at least in its present form, whose principal direct Scriptural claim in 1 Timothy 5:17, for ‘ruling elder’ in distinction to ‘teaching elder’ as one of two forms of ‘presbyter’, is generally held to be weak in strength.
- (b) The eldership nevertheless plays a key role in the Presbyterian system of governance, with its existence justifiable otherwise;
 - (i) It may have Scriptural justification elsewhere;
 - (ii) Its presence reflects the concentration and importance within Presbyterianism upon establishing a lay cohort in church governance, and in spiritual oversight and discipline both in relation to the congregation and the parish; and
 - (iii) Its broader theological justification is a ‘warrant from Scripture’, lying in the assertion that the Presbyterian system is reflective of the will of God, and of Christ’s headship of the Church.
- (c) On that basis, it is a malleable office which could potentially be subject to innovative adaptations in direction and purpose.
- (d) From the terms of the *Second Book of Discipline* (1578), and in the light of the eldership’s principal role until the nineteenth century in congregational and community discipline, the eldership became ‘semi-clerical’ and ‘spiritual’ in nature, recognising a ‘divine calling’; that appreciation persists to a significant extent, for example being reflected in continuing support within the eldership for ordination and a life-term.
- (e) The traditional starting point is that the post of elder, whilst associated with the corporate ministry in the administration and governance of worship and the sacraments, and retaining a restricted spiritual role in the oversight of congregation and parish, is not ordained in like manner to a ‘minister’, nor to perform the same tasks.

- (f) Whilst elder ordination cannot be equated with ministerial ordination, and leading worship is the concern of the minister with elder participation only permitted at an ancillary level, the practical blurring in present practice of those divides calls into question whether the original definitions of eldership are still relevant. It may be, in any event, that a ‘hybrid’ office which engages in some traditional ‘ministerial’ roles is of necessity to meet need, irrespective of past theological boundaries.

- (g) The preference for the writer, in any event, would be to consider eldership as a ‘hybrid’ office between ‘presbyter’ and ‘lay theory’; at once a ‘spiritual’ office due its role in oversight which requires ordination and may permit a life-term, whilst also a ‘lay’, part-representative office which to both assist in the ministry of word and sacrament and maintain a close connection with the laity of the congregation and parish.

- (h) The alternative of establishing a single, set definition of the nature of the role would depend largely on the conclusion preferred between ‘presbyter’ and ‘lay’ theory:
 - (i) If the choice is ‘lay theory’ and thus the elder is a ‘representative’ of the congregation, as stated by Charles Warr, ‘The function of the lay elder is administrative, but is in no sense ministerial’.¹²⁶ Commissioning to a fixed term thus becomes appropriate.

 - (ii) If, on the other hand, the choice is ‘presbyter theory’ and a ‘spiritual’ nature retaining ordination and life term, the principal functions begin to depart from close association with the congregation at the same level and instead become more fully focused on oversight of the spiritual development of the congregation and dispersion of the Word in mission.

(i) The delineation of elders’ duties changed significantly in the nineteenth century, accelerated within the present ‘post-Christendom’ era: we are now, for the most part, reliant upon a ‘one size fits all’ district system. The well-known writer on the eldership

¹²⁶ Charles Warr, *The Presbyterian Tradition: A Scottish Layman’s Handbook*, (London: Alexander Maclehose & Co, 1933), 374.

in the late 20th Century, Stewart Matthew, contended that the functions of the elder by the 1950s and 1960s, although onerous, had become emasculated to ‘The Doorman’ (at Sunday worship), ‘The Spiritual Postman’ (delivering communion cards), and ‘The Royal Cup-Bearer’ (at communion).¹²⁷ Successive reports to the General Assembly have called for the recognition of a diversity of spiritual gifts within the eldership, and the re-structuring of the office to encourage their expression.

- (j) If ‘oversight’ now encompasses forms of decision-making including worship, pastoral care and mission, a prime focus in present times has to be beyond such limitations: guiding the community, both internal and external, in their response to faith, the challenge being to work out the nature of the contextual mission that elders will lead.

As mentioned above, identifying the appropriate direction for the eldership is partly bound up in two concerns: (a) theological: the implications of presbyter/lay theory, depending on which side is favoured; and (b) practical: whether concerns to fill gaps in ministry and in the servicing of the district system dictate that the future of eldership should be directed to trying to maintain the present structure, rather than re-considering its purpose and broader goals.

If the argument needs to be fully engaged, a hybrid office is proposed. However, instead of narrowing the debate to those issues, a further alternative may be to identify an over-arching focus for the eldership, which might elevate the deliberations beyond those concerns, no matter which view is taken of them. In other words, providing an ‘outside-in’ focus would render those concerns as secondary, and provide a start and end point to decide future directions of the eldership.

The problem of concentrating only upon those concerns is the danger of stasis. There may be no definitive conclusion to the debate on ‘presbyter/lay’ theory and its consequences for eldership, which has now been rumbling on for over four centuries, or indeed much potential for lasting compromise.

The findings of an international consultation on the eldership under the auspices of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1990 concluded that ‘much of the Biblical evidence used in the past can no longer be definitely maintained’. The consultation did not, however, take this Biblical perceived absence of ‘presbyter’ theory as indicative of an authoritative stamp for ‘lay theory’. The participants instead correctly identified the result as an intractable

¹²⁷ Stewart Matthew, *Session Matters: A Book on Eldership*, (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1990), iv-v.

problem in the ‘presbyter/lay’ debate: ‘one clearly defined church will be discerned only through selective reading and weighing of some Biblical passages over others’.¹²⁸

Is there a more creative way out of such an impasse?

The Third Article Declaratory entails an acceptance by the Church of Scotland of ‘its distinctive call and duty to bring the ordinances of religion to the people in every parish of Scotland through a territorial ministry’.¹²⁹ That commitment was re-affirmed in stark terms by the General Assembly in the Declaratory Act passed by the General Assembly in 2010 (my emphasis):

- ‘(1) The Church of Scotland...declares anew its commitment to be a national church with a distinctive evangelical and pastoral concern **for the people and nation of Scotland**, recognising
- ‘(4) ...**its continuing responsibility to engage the people of Scotland wherever they might be** with the Gospel of Jesus Christ’.¹³⁰

Are those simply words? If not, surely that responsibility does not fall only on the ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament, but must fall too on the laity, particularly the eldership?

As the great church leader and evangelist Tom Allan stated in 1963, emphasising the importance of this broader responsibility:

Jesus orders us out into the highways and byways, into the streets and lanes of the city, to meet with people wherever they are, and whether they recognise their need for God or not.¹³¹

As long ago as 1990, Will Storrar wrote that the Church of Scotland required radical adjustment to a Church for Scotland, displaying a ‘distinctive life from the rest of the secular community, and yet with an overriding sense of responsibility for that nation in mission, social criticism and service.’¹³²

The tone of recent Reports to the General Assembly also seeks to recover a broad definition of eldership duties in the same context, such as within the Assembly Council Report on

¹²⁸ Both quotations at Lukas Vischer ed., *Eldership in the Reformed Churches Today*, (World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1990), 9.

¹²⁹ Articles Declaratory of the Constitution of the Church of Scotland in Matters Spiritual, 1921, Article III.

¹³⁰ V 2010, Declaratory Act Anent the Third Article Declaratory of the Constitution of the Church of Scotland in Matters Spiritual.

¹³¹ Tom Allan Archive, University of Edinburgh, AA6.5.2 & AA6.11.7, *Evening Citizen*, ‘My Friend the Criminal’, 10/08/63.

¹³² William F. Storrar, *Scottish Identity: A Christian Vision*, (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1990), 223.

Eldership of 2003, describing an Elder's position as 'The call and commitment to undertake, along with the minister, responsibility for the life of the congregation in all aspects, including worship, mission, and service to the wider community'.¹³³

The Church thus declares itself nationally to be responsible to engage all people of the nation with the Gospel. That duty locally requires all members of the Church to be engaged in so doing, but particularly its office-bearers.

The question then arises, 'engaged in what'? What might local, contextual mission look like to reflect the expression of that responsibility by the eldership?

Since World War II, the Christian Church globally in all denominations has undergone a seismic shift in thinking about mission, based on the recognition that 'it is not the Church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission that has a Church in the world'.¹³⁴ This is described as *missio Dei* ('Mission of God') theology.

The following two global definitions of 'mission', amongst many others, are drafted in the light of that realisation. The first definition is offered by the World Council of Churches:

- (a) "Mission" carries a holistic understanding of the proclamation and sharing of the good news of the gospel by word (*kerygma*), deed (*diakonia*), prayer and worship (*leiturgia*), and the everyday witness of the Christian life (*martyria*); teaching as building up and strengthening people in their relationship with God and each other; and...reconciliation into *koinonia* - communion with God, communion with people, and communion with creation as a whole.

- (b) "Evangelism", while not excluding the different dimensions of mission, focuses on explicit and intentional voicing of the gospel, including the invitation to personal conversion to a new life in Christ, and to discipleship.¹³⁵

Therefore, under this broad definition, 'evangelism' by the explicit voicing of the gospel for conversion is potentially an element in the exercise of all other constituent parts of 'mission',

¹³³ As quoted in the Mission and Discipleship Council Report to the General Assembly 2014, 5/38.

¹³⁴ Tim Dearborn, 'Beyond Duty: A Passion for Christ, a Heart for Mission', (MARC, 1998), quoted in Church of England, *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context*, (London, Church House Publishing, 2004), 5.

¹³⁵ *Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today* (2000), para 7, within *You are the Light of the World: Statements on Mission by the World Council of Churches 1980-2005* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005).

but does not subsume or denigrate the other expressions such as diaconal service, prayer and worship, the Christian life, the building up of community and reconciliation.

The Anglican Communion express a similar breadth to ‘mission’ in shorter compass. The *Five Marks of Mission* are:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- To respond to human need by loving service
- To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth¹³⁶

Under these broader definitions, in the words of David Bosch, ‘mission’ is ‘more than calling individuals into the Church as a waiting room for the hereafter’,¹³⁷ or an attempt at self-preservation by increasing the numbers in the pews. Its focus instead is the visible demonstration of God’s love for all: living and sharing the Gospel in words and action, and serving people locally in their social, pastoral and cultural context.

When considering a potential ‘missional agenda’ for the eldership, the *missio Dei* demands a more fundamental ethos and mindset to consider beyond the definitions. Rather than being an occasional function which belongs to the Church and us, mission is ‘God’s activity, which embraces both the Church and world’.¹³⁸ That realisation has very important consequences for the Church and particularly those who are commonly called the ‘laity’ rather than the ‘clergy’.¹³⁹

The church learns of its place in the world, as ‘it is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfil in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church’.¹⁴⁰ Therefore, the underlying realisation is that, in Bosch’s words, ‘there is Church because there is mission, not vice versa.’¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ Anglican Consultative Council, *Bonds of Affection* (1984), ACC-6, 49; *Mission in a Broken World*, (1990) ACC-8, 101.

¹³⁷ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (New York: Orbis, 1991), 377.

¹³⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, (New York: Harbour Row, 1977), 64.

¹³⁹ ‘Laity’ is a clumsy term, as strictly speaking it means every Christian, but for convenience it is used here to mean all people who are ‘non-clergy’.

¹⁴⁰ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 65.

¹⁴¹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390.

This, in turn, strikes at the very heart of the ecclesial construct, of the nature of *koinonia*, as ‘to clarify the nature of mission is to answer the question, what is the Church for?’¹⁴² The local, contextual mission of God that is exercised in the parish also defines the purpose of the Church.

If it does so, what might God’s mission in the parish look like? Andrew Kirk writes that: ‘the mission of God flows directly from the nature of who God is....God’s intention for the world is that in every respect it should show forth the way He is - love, community, equality, diversity, mercy, compassion and justice.’¹⁴³

Therefore, the local, contextual mission of God, in which the laity of a Church community are called to engage, pre-supposes that those qualities will be present.

If they are, ideas prevalent under the Christendom model of triumphalism, victory, and winning territory are gone. Secular society can no longer viewed as a hostile enemy to be overcome in battle, with those outside the Church as prospects to be won. The theology of Christ as conqueror of the world becomes Christ in solidarity with the world. *Missio Dei* involves the adoption of domestic and pan-national mission based on faith, love and reconciliation.

Mission is therefore to be carried out by us in a spirit of “bold humility”,¹⁴⁴ through what has been described as “prophetic dialogue”.¹⁴⁵ Mission is exercised in ‘dialogue’ with others: listening not lecturing, being as much as the learner as the teacher, our interaction forcing us also to rethink our own understanding of the Gospel.

Mission on these terms becomes a founding core of the church, and so also of its lay people. The Church exists by the community of those that have been transformed by God’s mission, which has created the Church. It will only survive by mission. It should not be an occasional function imagined by a small group for a series of events, but what defines it: ‘mission is not an agenda item - it is the agenda’.¹⁴⁶

In that light, a re-focus would thus recognise that:

- the church is essentially missional in nature

¹⁴² J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission: Theological Explorations*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 1999), 31.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 28.

¹⁴⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 489.

¹⁴⁵ Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011).

¹⁴⁶ Stuart Murray, *Church after Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2004), 137.

- the local, contextual mission of God, in which the local Church community participates, defines its existence
- the Church has a vital role to play in God's mission to the world as its only self-conscious agent
- the Church of Scotland has declared itself as recently as 2010 to be a national church with a responsibility to engage all people with the Gospel
- the laity of the church hold a key role in discharging that responsibility;
- the elder holds a unique position as a lay person with responsibility, along with the minister, for the spiritual health of those in the congregation and, more importantly, in the parish
- therefore the eldership in the exercise of a 'spiritual office' needs to be at the forefront of mission.

It should thus be affirmed that the elder is not simply a lay, administrative assistant dependant on the needs of the minister, but instead, by re-asserting the 'spiritual' nature of the office, has a dynamic role to play in shaping and flourishing the very future existence of the Church of Scotland through playing a key role in mission in all of the above terms. All duties of the elder might be re-assessed through a missional lens to test their 'fitness for purpose'.

Eldership as a 'spiritual' office would reclaim its main purpose as spiritual 'oversight' of both the congregation and all in the parish as it was in the immediate post-Reformation period¹⁴⁷, but by which would now be meant the encouragement of the growth of faith rather than its assessment, judgment and censure. In other words, whilst not losing its 'spiritual' essence, eldership might be a closer reflection of what T.F. Torrance describes as the elder's 'diaconal/complementary' form of ministry, whose basis and distinction from the pastor is recovered from the *Second Book of Discipline*: 'As the Pastors...should be diligent in teaching and sowing the seed of the word, so the elders should be careful in seeking the fruit of the same in the people'.¹⁴⁸

Therefore, as Torrance wrote:

...their distinctive ministry is not the service of *the Word* but the service of response to *the Word*...Whilst ministers are ordained to dispense the Word and Sacraments to the people, elders are set apart to help the people in their reception of the Word and in their participation in the Sacraments, and to seek the fruit of the Gospel in the faith

¹⁴⁷ *Second Book of Discipline*, VI.5 – 'The eldership is a spiritual function, as is the ministry'.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, VI.12.

and life of the community... Thus their specific calling is to help the faithful from within their midst...¹⁴⁹

A new direction may be called for which re-focuses the meaning and purpose of eldership beyond narrower foci viewed from the ‘inside-out’; which begins the debate with the method of engagement in the office and the precise duties of the post, and then turns outwards. Instead, we might re-orientate so as to look towards wider horizons in the first instance, and adopt that focus as normative in every decision regarding the eldership from an ‘outside-in’ approach.

We might then discern which potential roles and tasks in the eldership should be kept and which discarded within the Presbyterian tradition from the many previously employed and now proposed. We would thus place mission above the internal functioning of the Church, and retain only those duties that are key to the flourishing of the mission of God in the world, whether by streamlining the internal governance of the Church primarily for that purpose, or by enabling and empowering elders to initiate and lead mission in the world as a lay vanguard.

Rev Dr Alexander Forsyth,

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¹⁴⁹ T.F. Torrance, ‘The Eldership in the Reformed Church’, 510.

¹⁵⁰ I am very grateful for the helpful comments of Professor Paul Nimmo, Christ’s College, University of Aberdeen on an initial draft of this paper – all opinions, or indeed any errors, are entirely my own.

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