

# The Clerk's Handbook

## A Simple Introduction to Clerking

June 28, 2019 Edition

### I. Forward

Chicago Presbytery's *Handbook for Clerks of Session* is based on the following underlying principles:

- the clerk of session maintains the history of the congregation through careful minutes and records;
- the clerk of session is interested in and knowledgeable about Presbyterian polity;
- the clerk of session, along with the moderator, is the liaison between session and presbytery;
- the clerk is always striving to be a servant to the session, in the fullest New Testament sense, and is equipped spiritually to fulfill the servant role.

In the Westminster Confession of Faith in our *Book of Confessions – Constitution of the PCUSA, Part One*, we find this word about the Holy Spirit “qualifying and equipping” church officers, including you are the clerk of session, for this special work:

*6.054 4 By the indwelling of the Holy Spirit all believers being vitally united to Christ, who is the Head, are thus united one to another in the Church, which is his body. He calls and anoints ministers for their holy office, qualifies all other officers in the Church for their special work, and imparts various gifts and graces to its members. He gives efficacy to the Word and to the ordinances of the gospel. By him the Church will be preserved, increased, purified, and at last made perfectly holy in the presence of God.*

A clerk of a council understands that our order is to be derived from Scripture, as it is expressed in the *Confessions* of our church. Through it we try to live our lives together in accordance with our faith, and as a witness to the demands of Scripture. A clerk also respects the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as our covenant with one another and knows that our rules are never an end in themselves, but rather an attempt to be faithful to our covenant.

Our polity commits us to a shared ministry among ruling elders, deacons, members, and teaching elders. It commits us to a representative form of government in which ruling and teaching elders are trusted with the care of the congregation. It commits us to a government in which decisions are always corporate, never singular. The moderator and the clerk of session, together, are the guardians of this polity, all to the goal of furthering the “Great Ends of the Church” (F-1.0304).

*The great ends of the church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.*

## **II. Duties of the Clerk of Session**

The clerk is the primary corresponding and recording secretary for the session and congregation and is the person ultimately responsible for all congregational documents. You are responsible for official correspondence between your session and the presbytery and other congregations. You are also responsible for recording the minutes of session and congregational meetings, and for maintaining the rolls and registers of the congregation.

*Correspondence:* Much of the mail addressed to the congregation will be addressed to you. This includes official correspondence from the presbytery, resources for Presbyterian congregations and notices of upcoming events. It can also include mailings from other congregations and advocacy organizations lobbying your congregation about any current controversies in the PC (USA). It is your task to review this incoming mail, bring appropriate mail to the attention of the session, and/or route correspondence to the appropriate committee. In case of doubt, talk to your moderator.

*Member Status:* As clerk of session, you are also responsible for outgoing correspondence related to members. This includes issuing letters of transfer to other congregations; contacting members before and after they are removed from the active members roll; confirming when a person is transferred to your congregation; and letting another presbytery know when a member has moved into its boundaries.

*Session and Congregational Meetings:* As the clerk, you assist the pastor and other session members in preparing the docket for the session meetings; you determine if there is a quorum; when appropriate, you report official acts that need to be recorded in the minutes, such as baptisms performed, communion served, and changes in member status; you record the minutes of the meeting; and, along with the moderator, you act as parliamentarian.

*Annual Submissions to Presbytery:* As clerk you are responsible for annually submitting the minutes to presbytery for its review and for periodically submitting the congregational registers to presbytery for its review. You are also responsible for informing the Stated Clerk of the names and terms of all ruling elder commissioners to the presbytery assembly. Finally, you are responsible for preparing the online Annual Statistical Report to the General Assembly. You will receive information in late December on how to proceed. You will need the assistance of other officers of the congregation, such as the treasurer, in order to compile the information needed. Contact the Stated Clerk for assistance.

*Other Documents:* Finally, as clerk you are responsible for all significant congregational documents, such as incorporation documents, congregational bylaws, building plans, plats of surveys, and job descriptions. Each congregation should have a Manual of Operations that contains all current policies and job descriptions. It is far too easy to lose track of such documents when they are only found in the minutes.

## **III. Clerking a Session Meeting**

Each session shall keep a full and accurate record of its proceedings (G-3.0107). Minutes and other official records of the session, which include the minutes of the congregational meetings and records of the board of deacons and the board of trustees of the congregation, are the property of the session and the clerk shall be responsible for their preservation. They shall be available to the presbytery upon request and may be stored in the denomination's historical agency.

The session of a congregation consists of the installed pastor or co-pastors, the installed associate pastors, and the ruling elders in active service (G-3.0201). The officers of the session are the moderator and the clerk of session (G-3.0104). The clerk must be a ruling elder, but does not have to be a currently active member of the session. The clerk is elected by the session for such term as it may determine.

As clerk, it is your task to check to make sure there is a quorum. The session shall set its own quorum, either a specific number of ruling elders or a specific percentage of the ruling elders in current service (G-3.0203). Be sure you check your church bylaws. All members of the session may vote, including the installed pastor, co-pastors, and associate pastors. A moderator appointed by the presbytery does not have a vote. In decisions of the session, a majority vote rules.

According to the *Book of Order* and *Robert's Rules*, the minutes for every session meeting should contain the following:

- the name of the congregation and city; the date and time of meeting,
- the names of the moderator and the ruling elders, and whether they are present, absent, or excused,
- the opening and closing of the meeting with prayer,
- the reading and approval of the minutes of previous meeting(s),
- the record of session actions and decisions,
- any changes in member status, since the last regular (stated) session meeting,
- any communion(s) authorized and celebrated, since the last stated meeting,
- any baptisms authorized or performed, since the last stated meeting, (Include the date the baptism was performed, the date and place of birth of the baptized, and the names of the parents, including the mother's maiden name, if known, or other persons presenting a child for baptism.)
- any election, ordination, and/or installation of officers, since the last stated meeting.
- weddings conducted by the congregation's pastor(s), or any weddings conducted by other pastors on congregational property, since the last stated session meeting, (Note: If you rent space to or from another congregation, you do not need to report weddings they hold in the sanctuary.)
- the names and terms of presbytery commissioners and their reports to session, if there have been any presbytery meetings since the last stated session meeting,
- any calling of congregational meetings, since the last stated session meeting.

Once a year, the minutes should also include the following:

- a record of the completion of a period of study and preparation for newly elected ruling elders and deacons,
- the establishment of an annual budget and the recommend the review of adequacy of compensation for all staff, including clergy,
- the annual review of financial records,
- the annual election of the congregation's treasurer by the session
- the election of the clerk of session,
- the record of any joint meeting with the deacons or trustees, [G-3.0204] and
- the annual inclusion of the summary portion of the General Assembly Statistical Report.

While it is no longer required to include a the composition of the session with regard to racial ethnic members, women, men, age groups, and persons with disabilities, and how this corresponds to the composition of the congregation, it is still recommended (F-1.0403).

Note: In order to print out the summary portion of the GA Statistical Report, go to the web site (ogasys2.pcusa.org). Click on "Church Statistical Reporting." Type in the congregation's user name, which should be the congregation's pin #. Type in congregation's password. Click on "Printable Church Report," and select year to print.

The minutes of each session meeting should be signed by the clerk.

The following guidelines should be helpful in deciding what to record:

- Record only that which is vital to the transactions of the meeting, including affirmative votes and significant negative votes.
- Routine, non-controversial matters are often decided by consensus, sometimes without an obvious vote. The minutes should indicate that "it was decided by consensus to ..."
- Details of discussions, or of plans which have not been adopted, or suggestions which have not been followed should generally not be recorded, except by special order of the session. That special order should be noted in the minutes.
- Reference to a previous action should include the page or pages of the official minute book on which that action is recorded. (The official minute book is described in Sec.VII.)
- If your session does business by passing an omnibus motion, include a copy of the motion in your minutes so you have a record of the decisions that were made.
- If your session adopts a policy, a copy of the policy should be included in the minutes. The same holds true if your session adopts the budget or approves a significant contract. Policies should also be included in your Manual of Operations.

Minutes should be typed or printed into the official minute book only after review, correction (if any), and approval. If a later revision becomes necessary, an entry in ink can be made in the margin indicating the entry changed, the type of change, and reference forward to the page of the new entry making the change. Marginal entries should be initialed and dated.

Under rare circumstances, the session may be called upon to meet in executive session or enforce church discipline under the Rules of Discipline.

- Executive Session: When the session meets in executive session, the only persons who may be present are members of the session and invited guests and the subject matter is strictly confidential. Minutes of meetings held in executive session should ordinarily be reviewed and approved in executive session. The approval of executive session minutes can be included in regular minutes. However, if the executive session minutes only report an action which will be made public, such as a decision to hire someone, that action can be included in regular minutes.
- Disciplinary Matters: If the session is called upon to enforce church discipline under the Rules of Discipline, it is recommended that the clerk and/or moderator contact the presbytery's Stated Clerk for assistance.

#### IV. Clerking Congregational Meetings

The clerk of session is the secretary of all congregational meetings. If the clerk cannot be present, the congregation should elect a secretary. Under Illinois law, congregational and corporate business can be conducted in the same meeting. At the meeting, check to be sure that proper notice of the meeting has been given, and that there is a quorum.

- According to the *Book of Order*, adequate public notice must be given before the Sunday of the meeting. Check your bylaws in case they also contain notice requirements.
- The *Book of Order* no longer sets a default quorum for congregational meetings. The default quorum under Robert's Rules is a majority of the entire membership. This number is generally too large for most congregations. Instead, it is recommended that each congregation establish its own quorum in its bylaws (RONR (11<sup>th</sup> ed.), p. 21, ll. 10-24); our recommended quorum is 10 percent of the active membership, on the Active Roll.

In the PCUSA, according to G-1.0503, the business that congregations may conduct is limited to:

- matters relating to the election of ruling elders, deacons, and trustees;
- matters relating to calling a pastor or pastors;
- changes to the pastor's terms of call; (All such changes should be reported to presbytery.) Note: The salary of an installed pastor must be approved by the congregation once a year.
- requesting, consenting, or declining dissolution of a call;
- matters relating to buying, mortgaging, or selling real property; and
- the permissive powers of a congregation, such as such as bylaws changes regarding the number of elders on session. All such bylaws changes should be included in the congregational meeting minutes.

The annual budget is frequently presented at the annual congregational meeting. Be aware that the budget is adopted by the session, not the congregation. However, if the congregation raises serious concerns about the budget, the session would be wise to reconsider.

The clerk should take particular care to alert the moderator if the business is out of order because it is outside the scope of G-1.0503 or, in the case of a special congregational meeting, the business is beyond what was stated in the call for the special meeting.

Only active members of the congregation may vote at the congregational meeting. Only active members and affiliate members have voice. Note the following guidelines:

- Voting for officers is by ballot if there are more candidates nominated than offices to be filled. Be prepared for a ballot vote even if the nominating committee is presenting only one candidate for each office, since there may be nominations from the floor. A majority vote is required for election. [G-2.0401]
- Congregations are no longer required to use a secret ballot when voting on the call of a pastor. However, a secret ballot is still recommended by the Commission on Ministry.
- Voting by proxy is not permitted. [F-3.0204-0205] Under state law, those voting on corporate matters must be 18 years of age or older.
- In the case of a tie vote, a second vote can be taken; if the vote is still tied, then the motion fails, for lack of a majority.
- Teaching elders of the congregation have no vote in congregational meetings, as they are members of the presbytery, not of the congregation.

The minutes for congregational meetings should follow the same basic form as session minutes, including noting the time and place of the meeting; the presence of a quorum, and the opening and closing of the meeting with prayer. They should be signed by the person who acted as secretary. Minutes of congregational meetings are stored in the official minute book, in the appropriate chronological order.

The session may approve the minutes of congregational meetings at its next scheduled meeting. Approval of the minutes of congregational meetings by the congregation is not required.

## **V. Keeping the Congregation's Rolls and Registers**

The congregation's rolls and registers are a record of session action with regard to members. Each addition to the rolls and registers and change of status of members, ruling elders, and deacons involves an official action by the session and should be recorded in the minutes at the time it occurs. The rolls and registers may be kept on a computer. However, it is recommended that a current copy be printed out each year on acid free paper, and kept in a permanent book. The rolls and registers can be examined by the presbytery from time to time.

There are three types of rolls, one for each type of member: active members, affiliate members, and baptized members. There are three types of registers: baptisms, ruling elders and deacons, and installed pastors. Sessions may choose to keep additional registers (G-3.0204).

The *Active Members' Roll* is a list of members determined by the session to be in active relationship to your congregation. Active members have made a profession of faith in Christ, have been baptized, have been received by the session into membership, have voluntarily submitted to the government of the congregation, and participate in the congregation's work and worship (G-1.0402).

Members are placed on this roll when received by the session into active membership through profession of faith, reaffirmation of faith, or certificate of transfer from another congregation. Members are removed from this roll by session action to transfer the member to another congregation; delete or remove the person from membership (e.g. at member's request, or if a member intentionally fails to participate in the work and worship of the congregation for a period of two years (G-3.0204a), or if a member joins another congregation without requesting a transfer; or if the member dies or the session is unable to determine the person's residence. Written notice must be provided before deleting names from the roll due to member inactivity.

Note the following:

- Record name changes and changes of marital status.
- When members are transferred to other congregations, record the date of transfer and the name of the congregation.
- Former members who were transferred or removed and then received again should be entered as a new entry.
- When members are removed from the roll, indicate the date of removal by the session.

When an active member is transferred to another congregation, as the clerk you would issue and letter of transfer to the new congregation. Such letters are not sent to individual members. Certificates of transfer should include information on the member's ordination as elder or deacon and information on the baptism of any of the member's children.

*Affiliate membership* allows a person who is away from his or her home congregation to temporarily join another congregation while remaining on the active roll of the home congregation. It is a very helpful roll for college students and “snowbirds.” This roll lists those received into affiliate membership by the session. Affiliate membership must be renewed every two years.

*Baptized members* are persons who, though not active members, are currently under the care of your congregation.

Baptized members include any baptized person in your congregation (regardless of age) who has not yet become an active member; baptized children of active members even if the children were not baptized in your congregation; and the baptized children of teaching elders related to your congregation, even if the children were not baptized in your congregation. As a practical matter, the roll of baptized members will be very close to your Sunday School roster. It might also include non-Presbyterian spouses of active members when those spouses are actively involved in the congregation.

Names are removed from this roll by session action when baptized members are confirmed and placed on the active membership roll, the parents of the baptized members are removed from membership in the congregation, or the persons no longer participate in the congregation.

**Registers** are permanent historical records and names are never removed from the registers. These registers are sometimes needed as alternatives to more formal legal records such as birth certificates, and therefore should be carefully kept.

The *Register of Baptisms* is a record of all baptisms performed in your congregation or by the pastoral staff in any location. Separate registers can be maintained for infant and adult baptisms or a single register can be used, indicating whether an infant or adult was baptized. Either way, record the following information:

- the full name of the person baptized for both infant and adult baptisms,
- the parents’ full names for both adult and infant baptisms (including the maiden name of the mother, if known); or the names of those presenting a child for baptism,
- the date and place of the baptism and birth,
- the date and place of baptism,
- the name of the presiding teaching elder or other minister.

The *Register of Ruling Elders and Deacons* should each list the place (congregation) of ordination for all ruling elders and deacons, regardless of where the person was ordained; the terms of each ruling elder or deacon’s active service; and, if a ruling elder or deacon is removed from ordained office, the record of that removal.

The *Register of Pastors* includes the names and years of service of all installed pastors, co-pastors and associate pastors who have served your congregation. It may also include any interim or supply pastors in a temporary pastoral relationship with your congregation.

It is also recommended to keep a *Register of Marriages*, which includes the marriages of all members of the congregation (no matter where the marriage was performed); all marriages conducted by the pastoral staff of the congregation (no matter where the marriage was performed); and all marriages performed on congregation property. Please note who conducted

the marriage ceremony. [Note: If you rent space to or from another congregation, you do not need to report weddings they hold in the sanctuary.]

## **VI. Maintaining and Storing Minutes, Rolls, and Registers**

While it is convenient to prepare and store minutes and other records on the computer, computer media cannot be used for the official, permanent storage of the minutes, rolls, and registers. Computer development is so rapid that software and hardware are quickly rendered obsolete. Moreover, magnetic storage media are subject to decay over time, especially if there is any exposure to a magnetic field. Instead, store all records as follows:

- Use paper, which is the best recommended manner of storing such session records. The paper should be acid-free paper and of uniform size and style. Minutes should be numbered consecutively and uniformly. (In other words, if you start a new book, do not begin that book on a new page 1; you could also use the current year and then the page number – for example: 2019-1, 2019-2, 2019-3. . .
- All session minutes and reports should be typewritten or printed, not handwritten.
- Do not leave blank pages or blank space of more than two inches on any page of the minutes. If space is left, cross it out with pen and ink or electronically.
- Do not insert into the records any written or printed matter on separate sheets of paper. Records may be photocopied onto numbered minute pages.

Arrangements can be made to store church records through the Presbyterian Historical Society; the National Archives of the PCUSA, which is the nationally recognized archive for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Their address is:

Presbyterian Historical Society (215) 627-1852  
425 Lombard Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19147

## **VII. Presbytery Review of Minutes, Rolls, and Registers**

Minutes to be approved should be typed. The clerk should proofread the minutes and correct any errors before signing. Also obtain the signature of the person who acted as the secretary of any congregational meetings or who acted as clerk for any session meeting.

Session minutes and church registers are submitted to presbytery for review every other year. The review typically takes place at one of the four yearly scheduled Session Records Review Meetings, scheduled at various times and places in the presbytery year (usually a Saturday morning). Contact the Presbytery Office for more information.

In preparation for a Session Records Review Meeting, please prepare a Session Records Review Sheet, which is available on the Chicago Presbytery website: <http://www.chicagopresbytery.org/for-clerks/> Scroll down to Templates and click on the Review Sheet, which is available in both Word and PDF formats. You can download the PDF and complete the review sheet by hand, or download the Word format and use Word to fill out the review sheet. Please bring this completed sheet with you, along with your session minute book and church register to the review meeting.

## VIII. Important Resources for the Clerk

A successful clerk is not made overnight. Knowledge of your resources and diligence in using them will help you become more proficient in your task of clerking. You will need to have access to the following official documents:

- The session minute book and congregation rolls and registers are the primary documents for which you are responsible. Locate all previous record books.
- A current *Book of Order* is important as a basic reference. (Changes are made every other year.) Chapter 3 of *The Form of Government* in the *Book of Order* tells about the duties of the session. You will find most of the information you need in this chapter.
- Secure for yourself a copy of your congregation's bylaws and locate the congregational charter. Where the *Book of Order* is silent, the congregation's bylaws and *Robert's Rules of Order* will often tell you what needs to be done.

Locate resources relating to the clerk's responsibilities. Some useful resources are:

- *Companion to the Constitution - Polity for the Local Church*, F. A. Beattie, Geneva Press, Louisville, KY.
- *Presbyterian Polity for Church Officers*, Joan S. Gray and Joyce C. Tucker, Geneva Press, Louisville, KY.

In addition you will need to keep your minutes on acid free paper. If you wish to keep your minutes in a formal minute book, the appropriate supplies can be obtained from:

- Cokesbury Bookstore, [www.cokesbury.com](http://www.cokesbury.com).
  - (in the Cokesbury site, search for "Session Minute Book" or "Church Register")

Formal minute paper is now available that is 8½ by 11 in size. Since this paper will fit through a standard printer or copying machine, it is highly recommended. You may also keep your minutes on acid free paper in a three ring binder. Most standard office paper is now acid free. Your local office supply store can help you secure acid free paper.

Training for clerks is available at workshops held at various times throughout the year by the Constitutional Procedures Work Group.

Keep the presbytery address and telephone number close at hand. The Stated Clerk of Chicago Presbytery is the person with whom you will directly relate. And thank you for your service as Clerk of Session of your congregation.

Stated Clerk – Chicago Presbytery  
Rev. Kenneth J. Hockenberry ("Ken")  
815 W Van Buren St – Suite 415 Chicago, IL 60607

[khockenberry@chicagopresbytery.org](mailto:khockenberry@chicagopresbytery.org) or [khockenberry@chipres.org](mailto:khockenberry@chipres.org)

Cell Phone: 847-910-4517  
Church Office Phone, at Carter-Westminster (Monday – Thursday) : 847-673-4441  
Presbytery Office Phone, at Presbytery Office (Friday only): 312-488-3018