

*presume upon the liberty of the Church*'. The debate about the length of tenure of the office of the Eldership continues.

In the "Second Book of Discipline" of 1578, the eldership is seen as a spiritual office to be held for life. Its duties included, "*visitation of the sick, of prisoners and the poor, catechising in the homes, assisting at the sacraments and reading the Scriptures and prayers in the absence of the minister*". In what way does this pattern continue today?

If we speed through history, 1966 is a major landmark for the Eldership. The General Assembly agreed to the ordination of women as Elders, on the same terms and conditions as men.

In more recent times, there have been two major reports to the General Assembly that have impacted on the Eldership. The first was the *Church Without Walls* report to the 2001 Assembly. In Section A.4.3 Affirming the Gifts of Leadership: Eldership Refocused, it said,

*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 are all gifted in pastoral care.*

In our Kirk Sessions today, how do we exercise these twin callings of leadership and pastoral care?

The second was a report brought to the

Assembly of 2003 by the Assembly Council charged "*to enable the whole church to rediscover the full significance of the eldership as a spiritual office*". The research clearly indicated an agreement that the Eldership is a spiritual office, but considerable disagreement as to what this means in practice.

One quote best sums up the discussion.

*Through the grace of the Holy Spirit the office of the elder empowers men and women called and committed to this office to help release, realise and enrich the full Christian potential implicit in the spiritual calling of all those in the Church and, indeed, in the wider society they encounter in everyday life.*

There is no doubt that under God, the role of this ancient office will continue to change and develop, so as to play a significant part in the life and worship of the Church of Scotland. The journey and the debate continues.

**Produced by the Eldership Working Party,  
Church of Scotland.**

For further information, please contact:  
Rev Pauline Steenbergen  
Phone: 0131 255 5722  
E-mail: [psteenbergen@cofscotland.org.uk](mailto:psteenbergen@cofscotland.org.uk)

# THE ELDERSHIP, PAST AND PRESENT

## Its biblical history and character

### Church Of Scotland Vows Of Ordination



Do you believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith

Do you promise to seek the unity and peace of this Church

To uphold its doctrine, worship, government and discipline

And to take your due part in the administration of its affairs?

Interesting fact: **Kirk** (Old Norse and old English word for church)  
**Session** (from Latin *sessio* from *sedere* "to sit")



# THE ELDER

The background to this leaflet is to give an understanding of where the office of the Eldership came from. If the Church of Scotland is seeking to understand the role of the Eldership today, then it cannot be created in a vacuum, but must be based on the scriptural and historical basis of the office, as much as on the changing nature of church and culture in 21st century Scotland. This leaflet can only give the barest of outlines, but hopefully will go some way to giving a solid foundation for our expectations and hopes for the role of the Eldership today.

The Eldership has a long tradition and may be rooted in such Old Testament events as when Moses was given good advice from Jethro.

*“Gather together seventy men from among the leaders of Israel, men whom you know to be respected and responsible. Take them to the Tent of Meeting. I’ll meet you there. I’ll come down and speak with you. I’ll take some of the Spirit that is on you and place it on them; they’ll then be able to take some of the load of this people - you won’t have to carry the whole thing alone.”*

Numbers 11 v 16-17 (The Message)

This ancient passage highlights three important principles for today; team formation, a people called and chosen and a role that is a spiritual one.

By Jesus’ time, every synagogue had its elders who were the leaders of the Jewish communities, with some having a national

# IN SCRIPTURE

role as members of the Sanhedrin which met in Jerusalem.

In the early church, Elders, along with the Apostles, appear to play a leadership role. For example, Paul in his farewell to the Ephesian elders says,

*‘Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock which the Holy Spirit has placed in your care. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he made his own through the sacrificial death of his Son.’*

Acts 20 v 17, 28.

From looking at the New Testament, it is actually unclear as to what the exact role of the elder, was, but what we can say, is that Elders were part of a shared ministry within the early church. So what were some of the roles that they played?

## **Elders: Chosen and dedicated:**

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. (Acts 14.23)

## **Elders as Teachers:**

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. (1 Timothy 5.17)

## **Elders as Leaders:**

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ’s sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because

# AND HISTORY

you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. (1. Peter 5.1-3)

## **Elders as Healers:**

Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. (James 5.14-15)

In 2003, the Assembly Council reported to the General Assembly,

*‘What distinguishes the elder is... the call and commitment to undertake, along with the minister, responsibility for the life of the congregation in all its aspects, including worship, mission and service to the wider community.’*

It is interesting to ask, how do these scriptural examples and this statement compare, as we seek the role of the Eldership in Scotland today? Has the role of the Elder fundamentally changed?

The next major historical moment for the Eldership is the Reformation of the 16th Century. It has even been suggested that the office might have been forgotten, if it had not been ‘reintroduced’ by John Calvin, and then brought to Scotland by John Knox. One interesting quote from Knox is that election of elders ‘ought to take place every year, lest by long continuance of such officers men