

Eldership Consultation 2013 – Proposals Report

Introduction

The General Assembly of 2011 raised the issue of how Elders might support and develop the ministry of the whole Church in the future. The Mission and Discipleship Council responded by forming a group, the Eldership Working Group (EWG), 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.

In developing its proposals, the EWG has looked at the history and development of the Eldership from earliest times, as well as earlier reports on the topic. It has also consulted the Church through a series of face to face regional consultations¹ and by inviting every Kirk Session to contribute via a discussion questionnaire². From this it has gathered findings about the experience of Elders, current patterns of the Eldership and its service to the mission of the Church of Scotland. While the past experience of the Church is important in shaping our understanding of the distinctive nature of the Eldership in the Church of Scotland, the group believes that the outcomes of the national consultation with Kirk Sessions should shape the way in which the Eldership serves the Church in the 21st Century.

The EWG greatly appreciate the impressive response to the two phases of the consultation. Notably there were 564 returned questionnaires (at the closing date) from the Kirk Session discussions, with very detailed and thoughtful contributions being provided. This is a real testament to the high level of enthusiasm and commitment of our Elders who serve the Church of Scotland, as well as their desire to enhance the effectiveness of the office.

Proposals Arising

The consultation process has enabled the EWG to identify a number of proposals for enhancing the Eldership. Whilst it believes that its proposals apply across the whole Church, it recognizes the need to heed the clear message that came through the consultation process: namely, the need for any provision, resources etc. to be developed in such a way as to allow for the rich and varied parish contexts across Scotland. The EWG cautions against a “one size fits all” approach which does not take account of the reality of life in the different parts of the country.

The Assembly Council Report on Eldership (2003) described an Elder as someone with ‘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.’

However it is concerning that the findings from the consultation process reveal that a significant number of Elders do not see the Eldership as a call in the same way that those serving as Ministers have responded to a call from God.

Whilst there is recognition that the responsibilities of the Elder have changed it was evident that any guidance should specifically cover the trusteeship responsibilities involved as well as the spiritual ones.

Furthermore there were many requests for some sort of pre-ordination training so that individuals could be appropriately prepared to take up the role.

¹ the summary of findings from this first phase is contained in the document ‘Report of findings from Consultations held in April 2013’ which can be found on the Resourcing Mission website at <https://www.resourcingmission.org.uk/resources/eldership-consultation>

² the summary of findings from this second phase are contained in the document ‘EWG – Eldership Consultation 2013 – Phase 2 Summary of Findings’ which can also be found via the above link

Proposal 1 (Preparing to serve)

Provide guidance explaining what is meant by a “call” and why Eldership is an ordained office, and clarify the role of the Kirk Session and the individual Elder in the call to Eldership. This might be presented under the titles of ‘So, you have just been asked to be an Elder’ and ‘So, you are looking for a new Elder’.

Proposal 2 (Preparing to serve)

Develop proposals for a process, including developmental opportunities, in which prospective Elders would be expected to engage, that enabled them to discern their call and be prepared for the role. This would involve considering both the spiritual and the trustee dimensions of the office, including its roles and responsibilities.

The Church Without Walls report (2001) expressed the role of Elder as a broad leadership one, with a variety of strands to it:

‘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.’

The consultation gave a positive response to the idea of helping Kirk Sessions to gain a better understanding of the gifts and skills required for the different Eldership roles and in turn to discern which individuals have the appropriate ones. The focus, it was suggested, should be on a process of prayerful reflection rather than purely the application of professional or business-based appraisal type models.

Feedback also included many comments about people accepting the invitation to become an Elder with insufficient knowledge of the responsibilities and significance of the role. The overwhelming majority of respondents agreed that prospective Elders should be able to access clear guidance about the responsibilities of the role, so that they understand the nature of the Kirk Session. However, surprisingly few respondents cited existing guidance materials, which in any case would need to be updated.

Proposal 3 (The Role of Elder)

Suggest ways by which Kirk Sessions can identify the gifts of potential Elders, providing examples of good practice and signposting resources that will enable them to do so.

Proposal 4 (The Role of Elder)

Provide updated guidance about the role of Elder (including expectations, attributes, skills, gifts and abilities required) that could be used to identify what is required and what individuals can bring to the Kirk Session. This should include guidance for the Kirk Session about the process of approaching prospective Elders and enabling them to come to a considered decision.

The practice of ongoing development, to be undertaken on a fixed and recurring basis, was first introduced by the Presbyterian Church in the USA and subsequently taken up by secular organisations and professions around the world. The responses to the consultation suggested that this is not a significant feature of the life of most Kirk Sessions. It was, however, evident that there is a clear appetite for ongoing development in order to enable Elders to continue to carry out their commitment and calling, but this should respect the voluntary nature of the role.

The EWG accepts the need to give careful consideration to how to motivate Elders to engage in such ongoing development, which should be understood as a part of our Christian discipleship.

Proposal 5 (Ongoing Support and Development)

Develop provision that engages Elders in the richness of ongoing development as a part of the discipleship process in Christ, focussing on the knowledge and attributes needed for the spiritual and other responsibilities of the office and respecting the diversity of needs and backgrounds of Elders.

The EWG also acknowledges that many of the changes confronting the Church are those which have affected society as a whole:

- Changing patterns of work and leisure.
- Less commitment to institutions and voluntary organisations.
- A decline in the nuclear family structure and an increasing rise in single parent families and people living on their own.
- Concerns regarding financial futures, pensions and the impact of extended longevity.
- A post-modern world view in which no “one size fits all”.

In addition, the Church of Scotland like many other denominations is facing particular challenges in this century:

- An ageing congregational profile.
- A decline in the number of young people involved in the life of the Church.
- A change in attitudes towards participation in an institution (believing without belonging).
- A much more mobile society where denominational loyalty and memory are unusual in some areas.
- An increasing need for the Church to respond to expectations of convenience, time and commitment of people who have many other possible avenues of service and involvement.

In light of the above, the consultations also touched on how existing models and structures of the Eldership, functioning as the leadership team of a congregation through the Kirk Session, will need to adapt in the years ahead.

Proposal 6 (Leadership)

Provide guidance and examples of how some of the traditional roles of an Elder can be shared with other members of the congregation with appropriate gifts and commitment. This might include case studies from congregations operating under the Unitary Constitution.

Concluding comments

What the EWG hopes will be the outcome of this process of consultation is an understanding of the factors which will support, encourage, enhance and sustain the Eldership as a competent and confident group of local leaders.

While we acknowledge the importance of respecting the traditions of the past, the Church is called to the future that God has set before us. We trust that our conversations with Elders and Kirk Sessions across Scotland will result in an enhanced understanding of the role of the Eldership and in more effective support for both prospective and serving Elders as well as for the Kirk Sessions and congregations they seek to serve and lead.

“When anyone is united in Christ, there is a new world; the old order has gone, and a new order has already gone. From first to last, this has been the work of God.” II Corinthians 5, v 17.