

## Eldership Consultation 2013 – Phase 2 Summary of Findings

### Background

The General Assembly of 2011 set up the Eldership Working Group (EWG), to review the Eldership in the Church of Scotland. The main purpose of the group 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. The group has reflected on such aspects as the historical basis for the Eldership, societal changes, geographical needs for different patterns and models required as a result of the varying constitutions in use in congregations. Consideration has also been given to how Elders, individually and as members of a Kirk Session, might be best supported in the wide ranging tasks they are expected to fulfil in the modern church. This document reports on the fact finding process that was undergone, the findings gathered and proposals arising.

Some documents have been developed providing background information, study and reflection on the Eldership, namely 'Summaries of Panel on Doctrine and other statements', 'Notes on Constitutions of the Church' and 'Eldership Reflection Paper' which can be found on the Resourcing Mission website at <https://www.resourcingmission.org.uk/resources/eldership-consultation> .

### The Consultation Process

It was the view of the EWG that it was of prime importance to hear directly from Elders. Hence in April 2013 the Mission & Discipleship Council facilitated discussions between Elders throughout the country (Inverness, Aberdeen, Perth, Cumnock, Glasgow and Edinburgh). Those facilitated discussions were effectively the first phase in a consultative process that the Council committed itself to and the EWG is most grateful to all who participated in them. Representatives from Kirk Sessions in 36 presbyteries were invited. One hundred and sixty-six congregations from 30 presbyteries took part, with some ministers also participating. 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> .

A second phase to the consultation was carried out with a discussion document being sent out to all Kirk Sessions. The content of this document was shaped by the findings from the first phase. Each Kirk Session was invited to create an opportunity for a 'conference-type session' in order to contribute to this consultation either at an extended regular meeting, as an additional special meeting or at a joint meeting with neighbouring Kirk Sessions. By the closing date (30 November 2013) there were 564 completed questionnaires submitted from 43 Presbyteries, which represents a very positive response and evidence base from which the working group was able to derive its proposals. The summary of findings from this second phase is contained in this document which can be found on the Resourcing Mission website.

## The Consultation Findings

### What distinguishes an Elder from others in a congregation?

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.'  
Two questions were asked in connection with this and below is the summary of responses:

*Q1a. Being in an ordained position in the Church is it essential that individuals have a clear sense of call and commitment to the role of Elder?*

- Nearly all of the responses were in the affirmative to this question.
- A significant number of responses separated out the commitment aspect from the call aspect.
- There was unanimous agreement that there had to be a sense of commitment to the role of Elder with the commitment being evidenced by an individual's involvement in church life and their willingness to carry out Eldership duties.
- The responses to the requirement of a sense of call can be categorized as follows:
  - Yes, it is essential to have a clear sense of call as it is impossible to serve God in this role on our own strength.
  - No matter what an individual's sense of call might be if they are not approached by the Kirk Session then they will not be able to take up the role. The call is seen to be one sided in this sense.
  - It was felt that call is too strong a term for an Elder, a Minister is called whereas an Elder is invited by the session.
  - An initial sense of call is not essential as many who never considered Eldership make excellent Elders if approached.
  - Yes, but call can develop over time or it follows the acceptance of the request.
  - Many Elders will not feel a sense of call but they definitely feel committed.
  - There is uncertainty about what constitutes a sense of call. This requires explanation and definition.
- Concerns were raised that there was a lack of information offered to prospective Elders about the content and significance of the role.

*Q1b. For those who answered yes to the above question how should that sense of call and commitment be tested and confirmed?*

- A large number of responses expressed that attendance at worship and other church meetings etc. was an important confirmation of call and commitment. Connected to this is the process of asking prospective Elders to take on tasks (e.g. serving on the Congregational Board) and reflect on how they step into these more significant duties.
- There were a lot of suggestions about how to assess commitment. Whilst a lot focused on attendance at various church activities other indicators were suggested, such as the individual:
  - needs to prove over a minimum of three years that they are a devoted member of the church;
  - must demonstrate commitment through example (e.g. regular church attendance, attendance at church run social events and an ability to get on with everyone; be welcoming; show reverence; contributes to the atmosphere of worship during services);
  - needs to be a willing supporter and contributor to the local community, whilst also being respected within it; and
  - should have a "pastoral" heart and be willing to involve him/herself in pastoral matters. Must be sympathetic and helpful as and when required.

- A good number of responses focused on ways to confirm commitment once the individual had been ordained to be an Elder, i.e. appraisal of the way duties were being carried out. With the suggestion that on the job experience was where the testing would occur.
- The sense of call and commitment should be tested by the Kirk Session and Minister, prayerfully discussing the person's general suitability in terms of spiritual development, reliability, ability to communicate, organisational skills, availability in terms of time etc. Decisions would be made on the basis of a consensus of opinion in the Kirk Session and endorsement by the Kirk Session. It was suggested that a process of assessment be utilised.
- There was also the recognition that the individual should go through their own process of discerning the call. For example, through prayer, the person might have a sense within themselves that the role will enable them better to reflect Christ in their life; they might receive confirmation through scripture or others speaking with them.
- Some Elders expressed discomfort about testing anyone's call or commitment.
- Pre-ordination training and discussion to allow people to consider the call prayerfully and from a place of knowledge, for example understanding the Biblical basis and being able to affirm the Eldership vows.
- Some characteristics and qualities were identified such as: leadership, dedication, reliability, joy and love in what they do, Biblical study, genuine interest in people, participation, willingness, witness and spiritual knowledge.
- Some had a problem with the term 'tested', with suggestions that it be replaced by challenged. Connected to this some of the responses suggested a particular interpretation of the word 'test' that was used in the question that was more aligned with a written assessment. Furthermore it was stated that if testing is the criteria it will be harder to obtain the full number of elders.
- It was expressed that all considered themselves committed to the role of Elder but some had questions with regard call. It was felt that this was not something they had been given the opportunity to explore but should have been.
- It was also stated that the Session should never ordain an Elder simply to make up the numbers.

Additional ideas:

- There is a need to recognise that call and commitment at one stage in the Elder's life does change and the criteria for assessing commitment will change with age, experience and abilities. There should be 'continuous testing'.

*Q1c. For those who answered no to question 1a how might a sense of call and commitment be fostered?*

- Through support, nurture, teamwork and, perhaps, by identifying personal attributes that may be channelled into particular areas of service which the person would feel comfortable contributing to.
- Gradual involvement may develop and help grow a call and commitment.
- It was also noted that for some people being asked to become an Elder may actually have a negative effect and that within our congregations some have left the church through fear of the commitment and responsibility that, especially a lifelong commitment to the Eldership, may require.
- Calling cannot be fostered, the 'spark' has to come from the person themselves.
- Commitment can be fostered by encouragement, training opportunities, involvement in smaller groups such as worship or communication with opportunities to join other groups if the Spirit leads, particularly if the gift or skill of the person is better utilised in that area.

## The roles carried out by an Elder

The Church Without Walls report (2001) expressed the need to see 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.'

Two questions were asked in connection with this and below is the summary of responses:

*Q2a. In renewing the Kirk Session and developing its leadership role should there be a process in place for appraising the gifts of Elders to ensure that all the roles are covered by those suited to them?*

- A large number were in agreement with this concept, e.g. 'Yes, of course! This process is the same as for any group of leaders – you want to use the talents of individuals. The actual process will differ for different types and sizes of congregation. For a large Kirk Session, the process might be a formal one, whereas for a very small Kirk Session where everyone knows each other the process might be obvious. A review of where Elders feel their strengths lie rather than just allocating a district would be good.'
- There were further responses connecting with the aspect of how varying sizes of Kirk Sessions could well define what occurs, e.g. 'We all bring different skills and talents to the team. However with a small Session we may not have the skill base of the larger city church Sessions. In a small Kirk Session and congregation all have to be generalists.'
- It was suggested that the word 'appraising' be replaced by 'identifying' or 'discovering', in order to shift the emphasis and reduce the inference of paid employment rather than volunteering as is the case for Elders.
- The use of the word 'appraising' was taken by some to be very much connected with performance appraisal in the business world (although that was not the intended emphasis). Whilst, as mentioned above, there was an aversion to this connotation or possible emphasis, some expressed the value in the Kirk Session more generally appraising its effectiveness, which might include 'how to deal with poorly performing Elders'.
- It is also important to recognise the reality of the situation that many congregations find themselves in, e.g. 'In an ideal world this would certainly be the case but the reality in many churches is a serious shortage of members willing or able to take on Eldership and consequently duties are carried out by those who are willing rather than those best suited to the role. It can be unfortunate as it is not always obvious that a square peg has been trying to fit in a round hole.'
- Some expressed that there was not a need for a formal process but that this would occur naturally. It is suggested that most people know their own abilities and gifts. Therefore a prayerful attitude will lead people into the right leadership role. It should be up to the leadership (Kirk Session) to identify, nurture and develop the gifts of each other and in recognising the gifts and talents of the Elders then roles should be allocated.
- Some "gifts" are not immediately known to either the Minister or the candidate but through time the new Elder will grow in their understanding of what is required of them. Gifts and talents need to be reviewed on a regular basis.

*Q2b. If that process does exist or were to exist in your context how would you describe it?*

A summary of typical responses is as follows:

- We need a different process for different sizes of Kirk Sessions. It would not be appropriate to have a national process that could seem like a one size fits all approach.
- It can be achieved by giving Elders a basic list of duties expected and by delegating other tasks best suited to each Elder's talents and capabilities.
- Enabling Elders to have a choice in how they serve. Creating various ways in which to serve e.g. pastoral, outreach, worship and so on and not expecting every Elder to have the same interest or the same gifts.

- Need to identify the gifts of Elders and also identify the gaps in Sessions where other gifts may be sought. Need to keep renewing the commitment of existing long serving Elders.
- All Elders to meet individually with the Minister once a year (or on a longer cycle) to honestly discuss their ability to meet the duties of Eldership in general and the duties of any particular role given to them by the Kirk Session.
- The process is evident in Scripture and the Church should continue to follow this example. In following God's way, the Body will then function in completeness using the many gifts that God has imparted to each person. Therefore an Elder's gifts and talents will complement other's when recognised, encouraged and enabled to fulfil their calling from God and not 'pigeon-holed' into a predefined role. So the process could be:
  - Consult Scripture on how Elders were identified, called and anointed for service.
  - Pray as a leadership to seek God's guidance on who God is calling.
  - Approach those who God brings to mind, so that they can pray about it.
  - Lay hands on and pray for those responding to a call in this leadership role within the church.
- Use an Elder's away-day to carry out a form of audit and then match gifts, skills and abilities to identified roles in the church.
- The existing Elder training programme helps you to identify your gifts.
- We have a 'Talents and Staffing' committee with a vibrant sub-committee structure which fits talents to needs.
- Our Future Focus programme enabled us to revisit the way we operate as a Session. For example we have church members now assisting with visiting, a task that was traditionally carried out by Elders only.
- The suggestion was made that all Elders ought to be given an opportunity to try a variety of tasks so that they might discern which areas they 'shine' in and what they themselves feel might be manageable for them at a given time.
- We may observe people's 'giftedness' in everyday life, but being gifted in and of itself is not the main criterion. Potential Elders should not be targeted or pigeon-holed solely according to their professional qualifications or expertise nor should people be pressurised into undertaking a role simply because a vacancy exists. What we look for in the gifts and abilities of an Elder must be determined by the person's spirituality and Christian understanding of life. There are then three layers to a person's gifts: the observed gifts, the emerging gifts as we get to know them better, or as they face new and different challenges, and the latent gifts - those abilities individuals may be unaware of themselves. This should not be undertaken in a 15-minute slot in a Kirk Session agenda, but at a special meeting where the gathered Kirk Session prayerfully looks at the character/skills/talents of possible candidates for Eldership, also bearing in mind particular roles to be filled. For already ordained Elders, recognition and use of gifts would be part of a 3-5 year discussion about their commitment etc. At the same time opportunity should be given for Elders to explore other areas of service and encouraged to discover and develop unrecognised gifts.
- There are differing views over how much flexibility there should be in Elders' core duties, particularly in respect of Elders' Districts. Some consider that a 'one size fits all' requirement that everyone should have a District is too rigid but others suggest that anything less would prove unworkable in practice. However, there is also a need to respond to an individual's circumstances and gifts, because everyone has been given something to contribute by the Lord. The ideal process would include an open appraisal of individuals' gifts, preferences and development wishes, and a similar process for the needs of the various roles to be filled. Ideally people should be appointed by a transparent process to roles for which they are equipped or for which they wish to develop.

## Seeking new Elders

Feedback from phase one of the consultation process included many comments about individuals accepting the request to be an Elder based on insufficient knowledge or preparation about the duties and significance of the role.

Two questions were asked in connection with this and below is the summary of responses:

*Q3a. The Kirk Session is responsible for seeking and selecting members of the congregation to serve as Elders. The way an individual is initially approached about their call to Eldership requires careful consideration. Should clear guidance be provided including things to consider when approaching individuals, details about the roles of an Elder and the responsibilities of being a member of the Kirk Session?*

- A large number were in agreement with this concept, e.g. 'It is imperative that people should realise what they are committing to, they need to have a job description detailing the corporate and diversified tasks within the Session. In the light of these tasks we must explain the gifts we have identified in them which would help in the fulfilment of these tasks. Roles and responsibilities ought to be defined.'
- Again there was the request that the guidance would not be overly prescriptive so as to allow for varying sizes of congregations etc.
- Surprisingly, very few respondents cited existing guidance material (which would need to be updated in the light of the responses).
- There was also strong support for the provision of guidance for Ministers and Kirk Sessions about the process (both spiritual and administrative) of identifying and approaching potential Elders.

*Q3b. If the response to the above question is yes what might the content of such guidance include?*

A lot of in depth feedback was given to this section.

Responses to this question were sometimes descriptive (outlining their own practice) or normative (saying how things should be done) rather than specifying the kinds of topics that the guidance should include; and few clearly distinguished the two intended audiences – prospective Elders, and Ministers and Kirk sessions. Examples of what was included:

- A clear description of the required steps in the process, e.g. prospective Elders initially being discussed by the Kirk Session so as to approve who might be approached.
- The chance to meet Elders and the Minister to discuss the role. A number of suggestions were made about the type of topics to cover, e.g. pastoral care, Church governance.
- The opportunity to discuss with a confidant before making a commitment.
- Guidelines about the length of time that might be given to allow appropriate investigation, thought and prayer, e.g. 6 months.
- There were also ideas about confidentiality and ensuring that prospective Elders were not unnecessarily exposed before and after a decision was made.

Many ideas were provided for specific information to enable the process. The scope of the guidance is perhaps best summed up by the title suggested by one respondent – “So, you’ve been asked to be an Elder?” Many of the responses implied that the guidance should include both what is needed if the prospective Elder is to make an informed and prayerful response to the invitation (“Why me?”) and what is required by way of induction, training, advice and support once they have accepted the call.

Suggested guidance for ministers and kirk sessions mostly focused on the process of identifying, selecting, approaching, preparing and supporting prospective elders. Examples of what was included:

- Some asked that the guidance cover aspects such as:
  - How existing Elders might prayerfully consider possible candidates for ordination.
  - The ‘role of the Elder’ fully defined and explained for candidates.
  - The ongoing Christian & Church Education that should be provided for the Elder.
- A description of roles and responsibilities, including the role of charity trustee.
- Some guidance about expectations of spiritual maturity.
- Gifts and talents etc. sought.
- Information on training and/or mentoring provision available.



- Guidance to include: The history of the CoS; the role of the Elder; gifts and talents required and how these can be a pointer to God's calling; recognizing your gifts and talents; Bible verses about gifts and talents; the importance of prayer to reveal gifts and talents; keeping the unity and peace; how Kirk Sessions and the Church structures in general operate; character required of an Elder; responsibilities within the church and within the community;
- Time commitment required of the role.
- A list of background reading, including Bible references, to enable further study into the Eldership.
- Some guidance on how to discern a call.

## Preparing to serve

Everyone taking up the role of Elder is required to respond in the affirmative to the following:

“Do you believe the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith;  
Do you promise to seek the unity and peace of the church;  
To uphold its doctrine, worship, government and discipline; and  
To take your due part in the administration of its affairs?”

During the first phase of our consultation on the Eldership there were many requests for some sort of pre-ordination training so that individuals could be appropriately prepared to take up the role. Two questions were asked in connection with this and below is the summary of responses:

*Q4a. Should Elders be expected to undertake a period of training before being ordained, preferably alongside prospective Elders from other congregations?*

- A large number were in agreement with this idea and thought it should be expected.
- However, there were also a fair number of negative responses. There was a degree of caution about making it obligatory, rather than it should be offered. A number believed it could put people off, e.g. too many hurdles might put people off. This seemed in part to be a reaction to the word ‘training’ and the formality that can be assumed from it, with suggestions that lighter touch ‘information sessions’ would be better.
- A number of comments focused on the value of having some generic materials or provision, but that there was flexibility to allow them to be adjusted for the local context. Connected to this there was a common thread suggesting that a fair amount, if not all, training should be locally run and ‘possibly’ rather than ‘preferably’ with prospective Elders from other congregations.
- Other comments suggested a different focus, e.g. there should be guidance about calling rather than training, or that an ‘enquiry’ process is undergone with some similarities to the one for candidates to the ‘recognised’ ministries.
- A number of responses thought that any training should only occur once ordained.
- The idea of prospective Elders working alongside a mentor Elder was also suggested. The view being that on the job type training can be the most effective.
- There was some reference to existing materials available for this, e.g. ‘YES, but how saddening that the implication in the question is that there has never been pre-ordination training available. Training has been available in several Presbyteries for many years. Training information and material has similarly been available. The books “Leading God’s People” and “Caring for God’s People” were first published in 1986 and 1989 respectively; the Church of Scotland leaflet “Approaching Ordination to the Eldership” was published in 1981. Many earlier and subsequent examples have been widely available.’

*Q4b. If the response to the above question is yes what might the content of such training include?*

A lot of in depth feedback was given to this section.

A significant amount gave specific content:

- A suggestion was to take the four parts to the vows and unpack those as a form of training.
- Possible content of: the Governance of the church; Spiritual leadership and oversight training; and then Specialist modules, such as pastoral, financial systems, etc.
- Possible content: people skills; pastoral care role; financial aspects; ways of sharing faith, prayer and worship; support for ministers and the interface between Elder and Minister; describing what seasoned Elders say when faced with members; and support systems.
- Possible content: general duties expected; dealing with bereavement; communication; operation of the church; mentoring skills; problems of visiting (incl. expectations); leading prayers and other aspects of worship; dealing with the unexpected; roles and responsibilities; how to deal with difficult situations; who to go to for help.
- Include a resource list for reference.
- It should cover the roles and responsibilities, including the legal responsibilities of the individual and at corporate level.



There was also comment about how and where training might be delivered:

- By Elders using a DVD series.
- Through a buddy mentor so as to learn from an experienced Elder and to enable shadowing of the role.
- If training sessions were at Presbytery level have a good representation of existing Elders from the Sessions concerned.
- A mix of locally led and Presbytery led sessions might be a valuable approach. The opportunity to meet and be prepared with those from other congregations could be valuable in working through a call and broadening out the discussions.
- The Kirk Session agreed that part of the reluctance of folk to commit to training was down to bad experiences with poor trainers. Some described speakers who seemed to lack enthusiasm or experience and whose presentations didn't really connect. As a Minister I would not want to encourage my Elders to attend training unless I first knew that the person delivering the training was of a very high standard and could speak out of genuine experience in the role.
- Proactively encourage finding time to reflect and pray about taking up the role.

Some feedback focused on the aspect of providing flexibility in the training:

- Training tailored so as to account of a prospective Elders existing knowledge, skills and abilities.

## Ongoing support and development of Elders

Many professions now require some form of continuing professional development to be undertaken on a fixed and recurring timescale basis, such as within a 5 yearly cycle. Interestingly enough this practice was first developed in the Presbyterian Church in the USA and subsequently taken up by secular organisations and professions around the world. Once again there were many suggestions during the first phase of the consultation that this practice be applied to the Eldership.

Four questions were asked in connection with this and below is the summary of responses:

*Q5a. Should Elders be expected to engage in recognised post ordination training opportunities, as necessary, for the purpose of ongoing development and equipping for whatever responsibilities they are called to exercise within the local congregation?*

- The majority of responses were in the affirmative.
- Out of those agreeing with this concept there was a fair degree of comment against making it mandatory although it should be expected. Some went further and felt it should not be expected but encouraged, or possibly strongly encouraged.
- It was suggested that a shift of emphasis from 'training' to 'ongoing development' might be useful.
- There was caution about a one size fits all approach again with a call for a flexible, needs-based approach to be applied.
- The voluntary nature of the role was mentioned, cautioning against applying career type expectations, as well as recognizing that Elders are likely to have various other commitments to juggle. There could be unhelpful pressure felt by applying a mandatory professional CPD type approach.
- Some noted with enthusiasm the inspiration of being in a Session that has had a fantastic training environment and the inspiration that can arise from that.
- Some commented on the change that has occurred in society whereby training and development is a more valued and accepted dimension but this is not necessarily something that more mature Elders will be on board with.

*Q5b. If the response to the above question is yes what might the content of such training include?*

A lot of in-depth feedback was given to this section.

A significant amount gave specific content:

- All aspects of Eldership.
- Role and commitment.
- Ideas for how meetings could become more attractive and meaningful.
- How to re-engage Elders who think they have no need of training.
- Encouragement to pray with people.
- Pastoral visiting and associated problem areas.
- How to deal with changes in society and church.
- The church's position on current big issues and general awareness of wider Church initiatives etc.
- Learning from others about dealing with the real practicalities of the role.
- Should include documentation (Bible readings and prayers); sharing skills and experiences (shadowing or discussions with other Elders for advice, tips and training); and actual courses (eg. bereavement counselling and working with other organisations).
- To include aspects of spiritual refreshment and renewal.
- Elder and Minister, an exploration of that relationship.
- Effective team working.
- Bereavement work.
- Updating on new/current legislation, e.g. dealing with vulnerable people.
- Engaging with the young.
- Learning as disciples of Christ.

Some feedback focused on the aspect of providing flexibility in the training:

- Each person should be free to identify their own needs.

- Some experienced folk didn't feel that they needed to receive more or ongoing training in certain areas, e.g. on visiting.
- Building on the strengths of individuals.
- Some areas of development might be for all but others may best operate on an opt-in basis.

There was also comment about how and where training might be delivered:

- Each Kirk Session should have an annual conference to engage in ongoing development.
- Training should occur at a regular Session meeting, taking the place of the usual agenda.
- A refresher course every five years on the role of Elders and re-visiting the content of the vows.
- There isn't necessarily the expertise within the Session to carry out effective development.
- On the job training, sharing and learning from others can be very effective.

*Q5c. How might the Presbytery (or Presbytery grouping, where this is appropriate), assisted by the Congregational Learning Team of the Mission and Discipleship Council and the Congregational Learning Facilitators, support the learning and development of Elders?*

Suggestions about the types of input included:

- By offering resources (e.g. training material, reading material, etc.) and facilitation at training sessions.
- Developing a range of on-line and electronic self-training web based packages. Nowadays distance learning in the home, followed by a half-hour meeting, is more acceptable than several meetings of 3 or 4 hours. This would also encourage more remote situations to be involved.
- By providing learning and development sessions to members of the Kirk Session on request to meet the current needs and situations facing the Session.
- By offering a series of day conferences with workshops.
- We would like to see appropriate and helpful materials available which could be adapted and used in our congregational setting.
- They should ask what training is required before setting their agenda.
- On occasion it might be good to have a cross sector/community discussion between local parishes, which would be beneficial in all sorts of ways. The impact of this could go forward to a wider discussion, perhaps facilitated by the Presbytery.
- Organise training events locally and perhaps train more trainers locally so that there may even be one trainer within a grouping that could continue the developments.
- Reflect the diversity of the Church in any training materials developed. There is no one-size-fits-all and what works in Glasgow or Edinburgh will not work in rural Aberdeenshire.
- By regularly, perhaps every three years, offering a series of appropriate training meetings.
- By being available to answer any questions or queries that may arise.
- Run Open Forums within the Presbytery.
- Encourage ministers to give more support to their Elders, where it is lacking.
- Provide professional or volunteer facilitators.
- By giving encouragement.
- Somewhat nervous of a top-down model but learning packs and leaders for CPD could be provided.
- Only a small number of responses suggested that assistance from these was unnecessary.

Some comments focused more on wider issues about lack of understanding of the role of these groups and the attitudes towards ongoing development:

- Most of our Elders are unaware of these services, departments etc. and what they do!
- It would be helpful to know how to approach and gain access to Presbytery etc. for help.
- Over past years many groups, committees etc. of the Church have produced good, sometimes inspirational, material on almost every aspect of congregational life. Our own Presbytery and Elder/adult trainers have organised courses/workshops on a regular basis as well as responding to requests from individual congregations.
- The main problem is not lack of resources but lies in persuading Ministers, Elders and members of congregations to find out about and use the material and expertise already available, and/or in persuading the relevant people to attend in-house or Presbytery-organised courses

Q5d. *Would it be helpful if mentoring and support were made available, not just for new and inexperienced Elders, but for all members of a Kirk Session?*

- A large number responded in the affirmative to this question.
- Some agreed but thought it was not essential or a requirement for all, again suggesting that if it were mandatory new Elders might be put off.
- It was suggested that this provision might be more necessary for new Elders.
- Whilst agreeing there was uncertainty as to where the mentors would come from.
- Some thought a peer mentor approach could be employed whilst others thought an external mentor was more appropriate, e.g. supplied by Presbytery.
- Some assumed this would come from the Minister and Session Clerk as is the case in some congregations. Similarly, the response 'every Elder has an Elder' suggested provision could come by developing or adjusting existing practice.
- Some responses, e.g. 'Yes, a buddy system,' suggested that the concept, role etc. of a mentor would need to be better defined in order for such provision to be understood and used effectively. Similarly, some of the negative responses seemed to be more around varied understanding of what was meant in the discussion paper by mentoring, e.g. 'No we feel the session as a group should be able to do this for themselves'.
- A number suggested a local approach made the most sense on the whole, e.g. 'What does it mean to be a disciple? Where do disciples go for mentoring – a national course or local church? Same for Elders.'

## Other factors to consider about the deployment of Elders

There were some comments made in phase one of the consultation process that did not fit easily into the above categories.

Three questions were asked in connection with this and below is the summary of responses:

*Q6a. Whilst Elders are ordained for life there are many ways in which they can exercise a leadership role. What are the different leadership roles in which Elders can bring a particular contribution to the life of a church?*

Some wider aspects were identified about Elders as leaders:

- Lots! We concluded that one of the main roles of an Elder was to bring out the leadership and other skills of others in the congregation.
- Decision making skills; co coordinating local faith/activities; providing responses to General Assembly initiatives.
- Elders lead by example (e.g. in living out 1 Corinthians 13); they take an interest in members and their lives.
- We do not agree that Elders should serve on the Session for life. Leadership roles develop and change according to the vision and people should be free to leave and join the Kirk Session. We need to be open to God's prompting through the individuals or circumstances that he brings to the church.
- In an ideal Kirk Session it would be good to be able to free Elders up to be, for example, the chaplain to the church youth organisations or other organisations within your congregation. Or for an Elder to have sole responsibility to oversee the Sunday School. But these specific roles are not able to be carried out when there are not enough Elders.
- Not every Elder is a "leader" – Not all Elders are 'natural leaders' and not all Elders were not chosen and ordained on the basis that they were or would be capable of a leadership role. It is a mistake to confuse leader with Elder. Kirk Sessions need a mix of those who have clear leadership skills and those who are just good at getting things done and don't need to be leading as such. We should not ask "non-leaders" to front things or be in the spotlight. Elders should be "comfortable" with the roles they are asked to do. This does not mean that Elders shouldn't be "stretched". However, we are all "volunteers" and asking too much of an individual can be detrimental.
- There could be a list of a whole lot of roles here, e.g. worship, pastoral care etc. but what is most important is joint vision and how we help one another to move forward.
- By active participation in church duties even when the ability to be active in district duties has passed.
- Continually working to "seek the unity and peace of the church".
- Advising and giving pearls of wisdom based on experience.

There were many ideas about the specific roles that Elders could lead in:

- Leading in worship, taking funerals, representing the congregation at local and area events, leading sub-groups to organise congregational life, visiting organisations within the Church, taking the Kirk Session, greeting...
- The ability to take worship on Sunday is seen as providing a particularly strong leadership role.
- As Session Clerk, Roll Keeper, Stewardship, Prayer Group Leaders, Bible Study Leaders, taking part in worship (e.g. reading the lesson), Concern for the elderly, Care of the buildings, Pastoral contact
- Life skills experience brought to roles such as treasurer (accountant), Sunday School leading (teacher), fabric (architect); leadership opportunities in any and all areas of church life; work with children and young people; leading Bible study and prayers.
- Wondering what we might do about Elders retired from Session. Do they still have a role and what might that be?
- Lots of things if they wanted to: worship, prayer, gardening, outings, visionaries, enthusiasm, DIY, looking out for others, young people etc. Not sure that many do though. No confidence or no desire. Or no time with full-time jobs, families, old parents, no money, etc. Or lacking encouragement, or nobody having the courage to get something going and running with it. But time is a big factor.
- Membership of Church Committees, e.g. Mission & Discipleship Council.

- Allocating an Elder with responsibility for each church organization.
- Religious education and training within the congregation.
- Introducing young folk into the Church.
- Leading holiday clubs.
- Mentoring younger people and identifying potential leaders.
- Working with the older people.
- Leading the Praise Band and choir

Q6b. *Many congregations have adopted the unitary constitution which has enabled the utilisation of those who are not Elders in leadership roles. Background information on the different constitutions can be found at <https://www.resourcingmission.org.uk/resources/eldership-consultation> . Would there be merit in providing a resource that assists with the understanding of the merits of the various constitutions and how they might be adopted?*

- A fair number of responses were in the affirmative, e.g. 'Yes, more information is essential to make informed decisions about what would be a 'better' way to help take the work of the church forward. We need to encourage the attendance and involvement of more young people in the Church and its business.'
- Some cited having recently adopting the unitary constitution and receiving good support in this regard from existing information and Church departments.
- Some could not see the need to investigate other models, e.g. 'If it's not broke don't fix it, we're happy with the status quo.'
- A good number of responses suggested that existing information on this was sufficient, although it would be good to know of congregations that could be approached to discuss the practicalities of working under a particular constitution.

Q6c. *If your congregation is operating under the unitary constitution would you be willing to share your experiences for wider use?*

- A good number of responding congregations were very positive about doing this and some already have done so.

## **Next Steps**

The proposals developed by the EWG from these findings are contained in a separate document 'EWG – Eldership Consultation 2013 – Proposals Report' which is contained in the Mission & Discipleship Council report of the Church of Scotland General Assembly 2014 book (The Blue Book) and is available on the Resourcing Mission website.