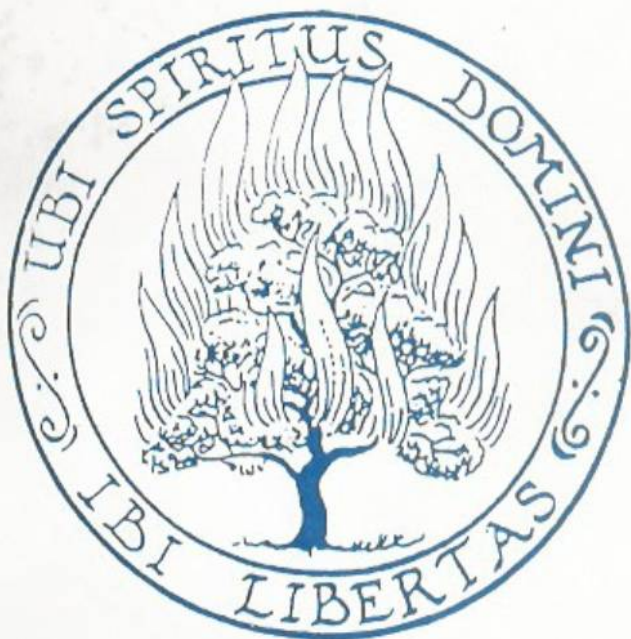


# A Handbook for Elders



*in the Non-Subscribing  
Presbyterian Church of Ireland*

*A Handbook for Elders*

*in the*

*Non-Subscribing*  
*Presbyterian Church of Ireland*

*Edited by*  
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## Preface

In 1991 the Academic Training Board of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland organised a series of special talks for elders. Intended as an introduction to the work of the eldership and an exploration of some of the pitfalls and problems experienced by those who undertake this important work in our churches all eight papers that were given were very well received. The meetings also attracted one of the largest attendances the ATB has ever gathered and a decision was taken to publish those addresses which were of a more general interest. These are now offered to the denomination in the hope that this booklet might provide a useful brief guide to some aspects of an elder's work and to the Biblical and historical background to the eldership. It should be stressed, however, that this is just an introduction, it is not intended as an exhaustive treatment of the eldership.

Those anxious to enquire of the exact requirements of an elder in his or her work should, of course, consult the Code of Discipline where the duties and responsibilities of elders in their church sessions are laid out. There are also a number of other publications which are generally available which discuss different aspects of the work of the eldership and a wide variety of books which deal with the whole question of pastoral care. One book which some churches have found particularly useful is *The Eldership: A Training Manual*, published by The Board of Evangelism and Christian Training of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. This is a very thorough examination of the office and function of an elder and is intended to provide the basis for a course of training for those preparing for ordination as elders. It has much to commend it although some aspects would be queried by a Non-Subscriber, particularly the emphasis placed on subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith. But this apart it is a very useful booklet and contains a bibliography of further material for those who wish to read more widely around the topic.

The Academic Training Board hopes that elders and those preparing to serve as elders will, however, be able to make use of this publication and find its contents helpful. Thanks should go to all those contributors, especially the Rev. Lena Cockroft who substantially revised her article for publication. Special thanks should also go to the ATB member Miss Mary Stewart who kindly took on the considerable task of preparing the material for publication.

Rev. David Steers  
Chairman  
Academic Training Board.

# Chapter 1

## Eldership and the Bible.

Lena Cockroft

It is a point of honour with all Christian denominations, that they should demonstrate that their particular form of church government is the one most closely reflecting that of the original New Testament churches. So long as this is born of a genuine desire to be as faithful as possible to the teaching of Christ and not simply an excuse to score points off the "opposition" like spoilt children, it is a wholly admirable objective. But it will always be fraught with difficulties. Firstly, it's doubtful if the New Testament church ever existed as a single, homogeneous unit, except in the idealised, spiritual understanding of unity which Christians have always spoken of, but never, in practice attained. From earliest times there were several centres of the new Christian faith, including Galilee, Jerusalem and Antioch and it's probable that there were different types of government and organisations, according to the various social, cultural and religious milieux in which the churches worshipped and witnessed. Also, although several church officers are mentioned in the New Testament, eg. elder, deacon, bishop, which are in common use today, it is almost impossible to prove that they correspond exactly with the terms which we understand. Realistically, it is about a hundred years after the New Testament, c. 200 A.D., that we begin to find evidence of church offices emerging which seem to resemble modern understanding of hierarchy and structure in church government.

The Presbyterian, however, may take heart that the name elder, the office most characteristic of his form of government, appears quite frequently in the Bible, though not, surprisingly, in the letters of Paul. The term originally applied to the heads of tribes and families in the Middle East communities c. 1100 B.C. Israelite society was organised in a patriarchal system, with the oldest man in the household being head of the family, and the oldest man in the tribe being head of all the families which constituted it. These are all called 'elders' eg. Genesis 50:7. Hence the identification of age with respect and authority, which can lead to some confusion as to whether the term relates to a district, appointed officer or was simply a general term of respect for senior, influential men in the community. The first suggestion that it became a distinct office is found in Exodus 18 when Moses is exhorted by his father-in-law to set apart assistant leaders, who will help share the burden of governing the wandering community. (NB. these were chosen from the elders, not to be elders.) The responsibility of these assistant leaders was to give judgment in cases of legal dispute. They would appear to have

played little part in the religious, spiritual observances, except for an occasional reference such as Leviticus 4:15, which depicts them taking part with the priests in ritualistic sacrifice. An alternative account of Moses' appointment of these elders occurs in Numbers 11, when it is recorded that they received a portion of the Spirit of God, as did Moses himself. This would suggest that the elder was seen as a spiritual leader, as well as an administrator of secular affairs. But it was as an interpreter of the law and its practical application that the elder really developed in Judaism. By Jesus' time the Pharisees could accuse him and his disciples of 'transgressing the tradition of the Elders' (Matthew 15:2), referring to a vast collection of rulings relating to all types of conduct and observances. (This would be consistent with the traditional role of the elder in Presbyterianism, as the judge and enforcer of moral conduct among the believers, administering punishment when appropriate. This aspect of the elder's role has tended to diminish in modern society, except in extreme circumstances; at least in N.S. Presbyterianism.) The term also applied to the ruling councils of the synagogues, from which, it is supposed, that the apostles transferred it and re-applied it to the context of Christian leadership.

Although the term is not used specifically in this instance, an important passage for the office of elder is found in Acts 6: 1-6, when the apostles, possibly in a Christian parallel to the Moses story, appoint assistants to help them with the practical running of the church. Instead of 70, there are now seven, the most famous of whom is Stephen, the first martyr. The exact role of these appointees is difficult to determine. On the one hand the reading suggests that they are there to help out with the distribution of charity, but it is obvious from subsequent verses that Stephen had a more significant role and was a highly influential spiritual leader. The seven are chosen by the people, but initiated into the office by the apostles, with prayer and the laying on of hands, which seems very similar to the selection of elders today. Of all the New Testament writers, it is Luke in the Acts of the Apostles who refers to them most frequently. Paul does not mention elders at all, except in 1 Timothy - and his authorship of that is disputed. From the references in Acts we conclude that elders were appointed by the apostles to lead and administer the local churches, after the apostles founded them. As they were missionaries and could not settle in one place, the elders were to develop, supervise, and extend the work the apostles had begun. As it still is today, the elder was appointed to serve in one particular church - although his office would win him respect throughout the Christian family. R. Alistair Campbell, in his book, "The Elders" suggests that the first elders were simply the heads of the households in which the original churches met. As Christian worship was held in private houses, the head of the house would obviously have discretion as to how it was regulated. So it was not until the second

generation of Christians that the office became more formalised.

That the role of the elder included teaching and preaching we know from 1 Timothy 5:7 the passage by which John Calvin justified his inclusion of the office in his church structure in Geneva. In another passage, Titus 1: 5-7, the office seems synonymous with that of bishop, requiring a very high standard of personal morality. From 200 A.D. on the two offices became distinct with the bishop as superior to the elder.

We can say with certainty that the office of elder was of vital significance in the early church; that elders were appointed with prayer and the laying on of hands by the apostles; and that they supervised the life of the local church, both in secular and spiritual matters. But were they themselves the highest authority, ie. rulers of the church, or were they appointed as assistants to the real spiritual leaders? What exactly was the relationship of the elders to the apostles? : did they refer to them regularly or were they left to rule themselves? How much of their work was administrative and how much concerned with the spiritual life and worship of the church? Did they themselves have authority to appoint successors? So while the New Testament testifies to the existence of the office and its importance, it doesn't give us a complete picture. We can still see some ambiguity in the office today. Elders are ordained with prayer and the laying on of hands, as are ministers, but they do not have the same status as the latter -eg. the highest appointments of the church are not open to them and they rarely play a significant part in the conduct of worship. Also the relatively small numbers in some of our churches has reduced the work load of the elder, for example in pastoral care and visiting. Also, in some churches, the distinction between elders and committee members has become hazy or almost disappeared, and, while this may reflect a rather slack approach to Presbyterian order, which is unfortunate, it is consistent with some of the ambiguities concerning the office as we read it in the Bible. Whatever the case it is certain that in the Bible, the very highest moral standards and spiritual commitment were required of anyone who became an elder and that should still be so of anyone holding the office today.

## Chapter 2

### Historical Development of the Eldership

John Nelson

#### 1) The Reformation Background.

The concept of the eldership as we know it dates from the period of the Reformation.

The reformers Martin Bucer and John Calvin building on the newly rediscovered truth that the church is 'the people of God' sought to establish the proper role of the laity. In this they built on the earlier foundations of the churches of the Waldensians and the Bohemian Brethren.

In this work Bucer and Calvin were led by one pressing factor, the need for discipline - i.e. the problem of how to govern and rule the churches as opposed to just administering it.

Their concept of the eldership was based on two foundations:- firstly that it was a Spiritual Office - based on Scripture and the will of God; and secondly that it was a representative role - by which the laity were represented in the church.

A form of eldership very similar to what we recognise had appeared in the French Reformed Church by 1559 where "elders were nominated ..... and if the people offered no objection were ordained with solemn prayers standing before the pulpit."

#### 2) Scotland.

In Scotland the eldership was introduced at a very early stage of the Reformation there, in or around the year 1560. It was established by the reformers John Knox and Andrew Melville on much the same pattern as had been seen in Switzerland and France.

The issue of the Second Book of Discipline in 1581 points to the eldership coming to be established as a life office.

At the Westminster Assembly there was a marked difference of opinion concerning the eldership. The Scots representatives wanted elders to be described as 'Presbyters' who did not preach but applied themselves



especially to ruling the church. The English majority at the Assembly did not agree and would only admit that the ruling eldership was 'warranted' i.e. permitted by Scripture, but not 'prescribed' i.e. required. This marked the beginning of a decisive difference between the Scots Presbyterians and their English brethren on this point.

### 3) Ireland.

There is evidence for the introduction of the eldership into Ireland as early as 1625 when Rev. Robert Blair set up a session in Bangor. However it was only in the years following 1642 that sessions were established across the country on a permanent basis. The form and practise of the eldership was almost identical with that being followed at the time in Scotland.

The main part of the work of the session was Discipline - that is ensuring that Christian morality was observed in the community and that the church established its standards and adhered to them. For much of the first one hundred years of Irish Presbyterianism this was a very necessary task as the result of warfare and large scale immigration was the virtual collapse of the normal social order. The common conception is that the sessions dealt only with cases of adultery and fornication but in fact their concerns were much wider and embraced the suppression of domestic violence, drunkenness, theft, lying, Sabbath breaking, and general dishonesty. "Sessions scrutinised the whole life of the people and strove to keep a high moral standard in the community". It is also worthy of note that in doing this the sessions strove not to punish the guilty but to bring them to a sense of repentance and to point them towards a better life. It remains true that the work of maintaining Christian standards in the community is an important part of the work of any session.

The most public part of the work of the session was assisting the minister at Communion. In the earliest years this was very important because of the high numbers which attended celebrations of Communion. However this method of proceeding also makes an important theological point - at the Communion Table situated forward of the pulpit the minister celebrates the sacrament surrounded by elders who then convey the elements to the congregation either in their seats or at tables in the aisles. This is visible proof that the minister is not a 'priest' and that it is proper for lay people to approach the Lord's Table.

From the earliest times one of the most important duties of the elders was District Visiting. Each elder was assigned a district in which he was expected to visit the members of the congregation either at times of sickness or simply

as a matter of routine. In earlier times visitation by elders was expected to involve detailed questions concerning the spiritual welfare of those in the household and to conclude with prayer. Over the years the requirements for spiritual interrogation has been removed but the underlying value of district visitation is as important as ever.

Finally but by no means least the session were expected to lead their churches by the example of their own lives. Elders were chosen because they were known to be upright and devout and were highly respected in the community in which they lived. It was expected that by leading upright Christian lives they would not only bring honour upon the church but would also induce others to follow their example.

#### **4) Procedure.**

Following the custom of the Church of Scotland elders were elected and ordained. However the details about this procedure might vary widely. Elders might be chosen by the existing session with only the opportunity of the congregation to raise objection, or the congregation might nominate new elders with the right of objection or veto remaining with the session. The form of ordination might vary according to the local custom or the liberalism or conservatism of the minister or the branch of Presbyterianism concerned. Nevertheless in earlier days the ordination was invariably performed by the local minister. In the 1825 Code of the General Synod of Ulster specific provision began to be made for the Ordination of Elders and this was followed by the 1857 Code of the Remonstrant Synod of Ulster. While the names of the new elders had long been reported to Presbytery it was only in 1841 that the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Ireland made provision for Ordination by Presbytery and it took most of the next 50 years before the practice became universal and is provided for in detail in the General Synod's Code of Discipline.

Elders might give notice of 'retirement' from active service within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, although this would in no way invalidate their ordination. No such provision exists within the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland. An elder moving from one congregation to another retains this status as an elder but may only join the session of that congregation when invited to do so and provided there are no objections by the congregation.

Two main factors have influenced the development of the eldership within the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland. The first is shared in common with all branches of Presbyterianism, namely the development of church committees. While it was common in the first century of Irish

Presbyterianism for 'Deacons' to be chosen to care for the poor and to look to some of the more secular aspects of church life they tended to act together with the session and established no separate identity of their own. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries it became increasingly common for church committees to be elected annually by the congregation to deal with the 'secular' work of the church. Over the years the role of committees tended to increase and that of the sessions tended to decline. While the elders sat as 'ex-officio' members of committee it was they who seemed to be supporting the committee rather than the other way round. The centre of gravity in church life had moved. Moreover there was often doubt about the precise sphere of activity of each body. The result tended to be a further diminution of the role of the elders.

The second factor is peculiar to the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland. From 1868 an increasing number of ministers came from England, Scotland or Wales to serve in our churches in Ireland. These men, while very often being fine ministers had nevertheless been brought up in congregations, or had ministered to congregations, across the water which were Congregational in church government, not Presbyterian. Thus it happened in some case that they neither understood the practice of Presbyterianism nor could they appreciate the doctrinal and historical background to the eldership. Thus as elders grew old and died they were not replaced and in many of our congregations the session lapsed. Moreover there was often an inadequate understanding of the need for ordination and it was felt mistakenly that election alone was in keeping with Presbyterian law and doctrine. This position has been significantly reversed over the past thirty years.

## **5) Conclusion.**

It is plain that the work of the eldership has changed greatly over the years, and indeed must change to meet the needs of each new generation. Nevertheless the underlying doctrine and the importance of the work in principle remain as true and as important as ever they were.

The points made above are not intended to be a comprehensive description of the historical development of the doctrine and role of the Eldership but are merely notes to reinforce the short address given by myself. Anyone wishing further information could not do better than to consult John Barkley's excellent book : [The Eldership in Irish Presbyterianism](#).

## Chapter 3

### Visiting

David Steers

The purpose of the paper is really to give a general overview of some of the practicalities and necessary considerations of the task of visiting as carried out by elders. As a minister I find that visiting, while certainly one of the most time-consuming aspects of my work, is also, without doubt, one of the most rewarding and worthwhile things that I do. I believe too that visiting is as valuable and potentially rewarding for elders.

Nothing I have to say in this paper could be claimed to be particularly original and nor would I suggest that it is an exhaustive study. I should also add that it is basically just a personal view and that anything I say is open to challenge and I would welcome comments and criticisms.

For convenience the paper is divided into four sections: Why do we visit? Who do we visit? When do we visit? What do we do when we visit?

#### Why do we visit?

Originally, insofar as I understand it, in the dim and distant Presbyterian past, elders' visiting was an arm of ecclesiastical discipline. This perhaps sounds harsher than it really was and what really lay behind visiting then and is certainly what we would want to emphasise today is the concept of pastoral care. The church is above all a caring community and visiting is an essential part of the life of the church.

If we look in the Code of Discipline of our church, in Section 1 of Chapter 2, we see that "It is highly desirable that ..... there should be an Elder resident in each district" where he or she "shall exercise a special superintendence". And in the form of Ordination of Elders they are instructed that "they should both by their word and by their example, set forth in a manner of life according to the precepts of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that by their labour and their prayer they should build up and edify the Church which is the Body of Christ". We can think here especially of Matthew's Gospel Chapter 25 (v. 35, 36): ".... for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me".

The actual purpose and result of each individual visit will vary as much as individuals vary. On the simplest and plainest level it is something that

brightens the day of a lonely person. On another level it is a visible reminder of the corporate care of the church, a pointer to the extended nature of the church community. At other times the visiting elder may be helping a person deal with a complex and painful problem. This list can obviously be added to.

What I would also like to stress at this point is that visiting by the eldership should never be seen as a replacement to visiting by the minister. On the contrary it is a supplement to that visiting carried out by the minister. At the same time elders' visiting should not discourage or prevent other members of the congregation from doing their own visiting. It is instead a more systematic and organised form of this.

#### Who do we visit?

The answer to this is quite straightforward since I would say that everyone who is a member or adherent of the church should be visited at some time or other. If the congregation is divided up into districts under the oversight of different elders then this should be quite feasible.

Obviously it is the case, however, that some people will merit special attention. The housebound, the infirm, those in hospital are clearly a top priority when it comes to visiting. But visiting shouldn't just concentrate on the obvious. The faithful member who comes to church regularly and who is a familiar and regular part of the congregation will also appreciate an expression of the church's care and interest. Likewise those who are new to the church could be visited and anyone who is usually a regular attender but suddenly perhaps misses Sunday worship should not be overlooked.

#### When do we visit?

We consider here the general pattern of visiting - the occasions on which an elder should call on a member of the congregation, the times he or she should actually make a call, and the time an elder should allocate to a visit.

But we will look first at hospital visiting because that will always be important.

Anyone who has ever been in hospital will know how pleasing it is to see a friendly face come to spend some time with you. There are, however, a number of factors that need to be borne in mind when hospital visiting.

First of all the time of a visit. You can, of course, always go at the stated visiting times. However, as an elder on the official business of the church it would be permissible for you to go at other times. Hospitals tend to be more liberal about visiting now than in the past but obviously it is good manners and good sense not to go at a time when you know dinner is being served

or when the doctors are making their rounds.

If you do visit a hospital ward outside the stated visiting hours you should always make yourself known to the ward sister first and ask permission to visit the patient. You should do this even if there are other visitors already in the wards. If permission is granted you should be prepared to leave as soon as you are asked or if a doctor or other member of the staff needs to see the patient while you are there.

When visiting in hospital you need to be aware that there is no need to stay too long. In fact quite the opposite is true, on many occasions five minutes is an ample period to spend in a sick room, spend too long and you will unnecessarily tire the patient. On other occasions a longer period might be in order but if the person does show signs of restlessness or is obviously tired then you have already stayed too long. Whenever you do visit a person in hospital you should always try and speak hopefully to them and encourage their confidence in the treatment and care they are receiving.

So on what other occasion would we set out to visit people? In the Presbyterian Church in Ireland I understand it is often the practice that the elders would visit all the people in their districts once a quarter with their communion cards which serve as their invitations to communion. Because we enjoy open communion in our denomination we would not wish to follow this particular practice but there is no reason why church members should not be visited to remind them of communion and encourage them to come along. The same would also apply to any special services that might be arranged for instance at Christmas or Easter or Harvest. Why not have special cards printed for these occasions and have the elders circulate them amongst the membership?

But home visiting shouldn't just take place at special occasions. Other times when a visit is needed are during sickness or after a bereavement. On such occasions a visit is often particularly welcomed. In any case visiting is not something that needs a specific reason other than it is part of the normal life of the church.

So when you visit someone at home, when should you call and how long should you stay? Clearly to a great extent this depends on your own circumstances. However, I would suggest that when visiting elderly people, especially those who live alone, you should avoid visiting in the evening after dark. When visiting the elderly, if they are not already known to you, always take some form of identification with you. In addition be prepared not to be let in the house as this does sometimes happen. Obviously people who work

can usually only be visited in the evenings. But once again avoid calling at meal times or other times that are likely to be inconvenient. It's wise not to call too early in the morning.

How long should you stay when visiting? Well really that is again up to you as your circumstances permit and whatever seems appropriate in the situation. I would suggest though as a general rule there is no point in calling just for five minutes. If you can't afford a bit more time than that then wait until a time when you have more time available. By the same token don't give more time than you yourself can afford and sometimes that is not too easy. Twenty minutes or half an hour might be sufficient time for a visit from an elder and, in any case, normally no longer than an hour, but there are no hard and fast rules.

#### What do we do when we visit?

This is perhaps the most important question of all. You need to remember that you are representing your church, acting as part of its witness and helping to share the Spirit that it represents.

As an elder calling at a church member's home you are bringing the church to them. You need to come to them as a friend and as someone who, above all, is a sympathetic listener. And listening is not a passive thing but a very active thing. A good listener soon discovers an individual's anxieties and concerns and a good listener is often confided in. At all times you should respect whatever confidences you receive.

People may well bring their problems to you and one should endeavour neither to moralise nor to force your opinions down their throats but help them to talk through whatever is at issue and help them strive for a clearer understanding of what it is that bothers them. On other occasions people - particularly the elderly - may have more practical problems that you can do something about that could involve their house or the Council or the Health Service for instance. Nevertheless, you shouldn't assume that you are being invited to assume responsibility for such things and shouldn't take any action unless it is clear that there are no relatives or friends who are dealing with the problem.

On some occasions you are very likely to hear criticism of other people whether it be of ministers, other church officers or members of the congregation. You should try not to encourage such talk and certainly never add to it. As an elder you yourself should always be guarded in what you say in such situations.

Most people, however, will be pleased to see you and will genuinely

appreciate the time you have taken out to see them. When visiting, especially at times of sickness or bereavement, you might consider it appropriate to offer a short extempore prayer. You should not attempt to do this, however, unless you yourself are completely happy about doing so.

The important thing is listening though. This is especially true in the case of visiting the bereaved. At such a time you need to make your visiting an expression of sympathy and loving concern and listen to the person. You may well hear the same thing a number of times and feel fairly helpless in the face of such overflowing grief but can be certain that the fact that you have called bringing the prayerful support of the church will be appreciated and will be some help to them to come to terms with what has happened. What you should not do is assume you have to change the subject or talk about your own problems. Indeed when visiting the bereaved one should not feel afraid of silence. At certain times words are not necessary and there is greater companionship in the silence.

Finally there are three other points I would wish to stress about visiting. The first is not to make half-promises to call, since people may well wait in for you and to suggest that you will call and in the end you don't can be quite hurtful. Another thing is to remember to pass on any matters of concern or importance to your minister who does need to be kept informed about such things. Finally if you do call on someone and they are not at home always remember to leave a card or a written note to let them know that you were there.



## Chapter 4

### Elders & Session Today

Tom Banham

The Rev Lena Cockroft has shown us the biblical foundation of the eldership in ancient Israel and how it was adopted into the early Christian church as a means of providing for its work, witness and worship. She was honest in admitting that churches with bishops, presbyteries and congregational systems all claim to find their origins in the New Testament; but she argued, the system of elders was the best attested. I think she was right. Dr. Nelson has continued the story into later times showing how vital the elders and session were to the life of their own parish in the years before police forces existed, and before education and welfare were taken over as responsibilities of local and national government.

It would be interesting to explore this historical development further but pointless for our purpose for so much has changed; it is useful to stand back from the picture that we have been given to get a broader view, and so that we can appreciate that the greatest strengths of the system of elders in every age has been its ability to adapt to the needs of each age, and its ability to adapt to the needs of each local situation.

All these needs are, of course, needs under God, for a church is much more than a welfare club or a local pressure group for change. It is a congregation of people who hope in the promise of the Kingdom of God, live in its shade and work for it - looking for Jesus, the bearer and surety of the promise, and seeking, as the first step, the calmness of soul which comes of knowing the love of God within their own hearts. Real faith begins there with each of us. But if it stops there and never broadens out to become 'Faith in Action' and 'Faith in Co-operation' and 'Faith as Encouragement' then it is not faith but a form of selfishness camouflaged in pious language.

I believe that every session should think together from time to time on this danger of being so inward looking as to be self-centred. The Presbyterian system is a gloriously flexible instrument ever open to the promptings of conscience of each and every member. But it does carry with it the possibility of a situation in which 'everybody's job' becomes 'nobody's job'; and where the vision fails that church becomes a humdrum, plodding 'habit' at best rather than a power-house of divine life.

In a good week I reckon on about ten visits to the household - and at least

the same number of no answers to my knocking - with a lot of petrol used. And when one takes into account that it is necessary that some visits be repeated weekly, or even at times daily, it doesn't leave much time to get round the rest of the congregation once a year.

But, I have to ask, is visiting the sole reason for the eldership? Concern for our widows, housebound and orphans is most certainly a biblical directive; but in bible times the leaders of the churches did far more, as did the leaders of later centuries. So without deprecating the major importance of active concern for our own I believe there is a need to rediscover the equal importance of other traditional and God-given responsibilities in the circumstances of the present day.

In passing, in Church Law, church committees look after only the bricks and mortar, and the pounds and the pence; but where there is no separately meeting session the responsibilities of the congregation still exist. Since there is probably no other representative assembly of the congregation except the committee those responsibilities should sensibly rest with it.

What are they? Well, it is session business first to care for the needs, under God, of their own congregation. Needs, both spiritual and material.

### **1. The Congregation.**

- a) The session should consider the type, efficacy and suitability of worship - usually, beauty, dignity and thoughtfulness for adults - but what about young people? And is one hour a week satisfying the sense of worship of everyone in the congregation?
- b) Great advances have been made this century in our knowledge of the Bible and other sacred literature. So much so that many non-scholars feel lost and unhappy. One major church here in Ireland has decided that its greatest tasks for the next twenty years is Adult Religious Education. As a church which claims to encourage thought and personal responsibility surely our church should be pioneering the way in the modern understanding of religion. Is your congregation doing anything about this?
- c) Young people and old people, busy people and retired people - all exist in our congregations - so what spiritual and material needs do they have which might somehow be supplied by your church and its facilities?
- d) Leadership in most of these questions is usually left to rest with the minister. But he is a human being and may have a family to nurture,

perhaps a young wife still getting used to how much is expected of her, perhaps not so young, perhaps finding it hard to manage, perhaps committed to tasks outside the church and pressed for time, perhaps new to Northern Ireland. He needs someone to talk things over with - and he too often needs encouragement to give of his best. Does he get it?

Secondly, it is session business to turn outwards to the needs, under God, of their parish or locality.

## **2. Parish and Local Needs.**

- a) Our church is a founder member of the Irish Council of Churches and of the Irish Inter-Church Meetings (Ballymascanlons). It also has a history of trying to be the thoughtful middle ground in times of religious disputes which can make it an acceptable meeting place for others. (It helps that we are a small church so no one is afraid of us.) So in looking at both local spiritual and local material needs our churches have a special role and responsibility under God to work for local reconciliation and co-operation with all that we have in our favour. And since you are the leaders under God of your congregation in your parish or locality you should ask yourselves what your congregation is doing to forward His Work.
  
- b) In most cases there are irritants and local needs which are suffered in silence because no one does anything about them. Perhaps the need for a zebra crossing on a dangerous corner or a children's playground or a resting seat half way up a hill or somewhere for older people to get together for a bit of 'crack'. Only some of these are jobs which can be urged on local councillors - others can be done quicker with local initiative. But any of them can become a way of encouraging people to know one another better. Most of our churches have decent halls - are they used for people, or to work for a better community?

Then thirdly, it is session business to look outwards towards the needs of all the congregations in the Presbytery.

## **3. The Presbytery.**

- a) Each presbytery has weak congregations and stronger ones. Your Representative Elder should come back to report on what is going on, and what is giving concern to your presbytery. Is he invited to do so when your session or committee meets? There may well be chances of giving help to weaker congregations and supplying expertise they do not readily have. It could be spiritual or material skills. There may be

opportunities of borrowing help - expertise - you do not have. But neither can happen if your Representative Elder does not attend, or if your congregational leadership does not look regularly at its wider responsibilities under God.

- b) I made reference earlier to the need for Adult Religious Education - spreading the word in today's knowledge of the world. No minister, and no elder, can be an expert in every subject and skill. Are there not opportunities here not only for sharing what your congregation possesses, but for strengthening confidence in our own churches and getting to know their like-minded people?

And fourthly, it is session business to look outward towards the needs of our whole Non Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland.

#### **4. The Denomination.**

- a) To be a church in Ireland, recognised and accepted by the 'big four', means that we are expected to be business-like in organisation, to pull our weight in supplying people to 'fight our corner' on various standing and temporary investigating committees here in Ireland, and deal responsibly with much bigger organisations such as the new Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland (CCBI), The International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) and - incidentally - make sure that we are not taken too much for granted by the General Assembly in England. In the first instance all this business lands on Dr. Nelson's desk as The Clerk of Synod. Then he brings it to the General Purposes' Committee - made up of ministers and elders elected at our Annual Synod. It is 'paper' - but the paper represents the work of God in our generation as we have to deal with it bearing in mind that it has such momentous weight. Synod tries to make sure that every congregation of any size has an elder or minister elected to the General Purposes Committee. And the GPC tries to make sure everything momentous is reported in the "Non Subscriber" because, no matter where in the world, it is God's business and therefore sessions should be aware, and if so moved make suggestions or representations to the GPC or Presbytery or Synod.
- b) Going back half-way through the last point, let me draw your attention to the God-bestowed need for us "to pull our weight in supplying people to 'fight our corner' on various committees" here in Ireland. In the other churches about half the people they appoint as representatives on these various joint committees are lay people - their equivalents of our senior, informed or enthusiastic young members. Too often with us our GPC appoints ministers to these posts when the task could be better done by

informed lay men and women. May I suggest that it is session business to be concerned why this should be necessary?

- c) Then there are our own organisations -the Orphan Fund, The Students & Ministers Fund, The Advisory Committee on Property, The Advisory Committee on Finance, The Academic Training Board, to name a few - you will find them listed in the Aide-Memoire (and, if you are not sure what the 'Aide-Memoire' is do ask your minister or church secretary). Well over half the people on those committees which keep our own church going are lay people, leaders in their own congregations, but ready to look wider and accept responsibility for God's work outside their own immediate vicinity. And frankly, in recent years, Synod has become too fond of simply re-appointing members en-bloc who themselves point out that they are not getting any younger. I suggest this too is session business, to be concerned why this should be?

It is tempting for me to go on to point out that our responsibility to God requires that we should look even wider - at a whole world in which everything from Human Rights to Religious Toleration are flouted worse than they were 200 years ago. This too, I believe, to be session business - what to do about the spiritual vacuum which the people of God have failed to fill, and this world is the poorer and more dangerous for it.

I admit we are a small church concentrated mainly in just two of Ulster's counties and with few reserves. Yet what we can all do is put our hands to the plough, and plough our own acre, so that we may (in William Pitt's words on another occasion) 'save ourselves by our exertions, and others by our example'.

Finally, I believe implicitly that our church has a special message of reconciliation of golden value at every level of church and social life in every age - and especially here and now. And I believe we have a special responsibility to declare this message in both word and deed. And that declaration in word and deed is the most fundamental of session business which in loyalty we must never neglect.