

The Role of Lay People in Church Governance - The Church of Scotland

Sheilagh M Kesting

1. As with the Roman Catholic Church and the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Church of Scotland is organized on a parish church basis, where the parish is a geographical area. In its Constitution (Article III) claims for itself the responsibility to offer the ordinance of religion to any everyone residing in the parish who wishes them, irrespective of whether they are a member of the Church of Scotland or not. As a Reformed Church, a Church that has come out of the Genevan Reformation that was shaped by John Calvin, the Church of Scotland does not, technically distinguish clergy and lay people! In practice we do, of course – partly to have a sensible conversation with our ecumenical partners, who do make a clear distinction, and because it is an easy shorthand.

2. Our theological position is that ministry, the priesthood, is Christ's and the body of Christ is the church. So priesthood belongs to the whole church. We speak about the priesthood of all believers – all who are baptized share in Christ's ministry to the world. And in that there would be no disagreement between our churches. The flip side of that argument is that all the baptized are 'the people of God', *laos*, the Greek word from which we get our word laity. So in a sense we are all lay. And again, there would be no disagreement between our churches on that, I think. It is what happens after that that brings the differences.

3. Let me begin with the congregation. The congregation has two key functions that affect the governance of the Church. The congregation sets up a Nominating Committee to find a new minister when a charge is vacant and it votes on the person who is nominated by the Committee to be the next minister. Our history is ridden with strife about patronage – whether the 'imposition' of a minister was by the landlord in country areas or by the burghers in towns and cities. The right of a congregation to call a minister of its choice is paramount and today, when things are changing, people have a wary eye on whether and to what extent that right is in danger of being eroded. Secondly, the congregation is responsible for the election of some from its number as elders. In some congregations this is done in completely open fashion where the congregation nominates people it feels would make good elders. In others names are discussed among the Elders in the Kirk session. Whichever way is used, the names have to be read out to the congregation on two successive occasions prior to the service of ordination of elders, with the invitation that if anyone knows any reasons why someone should not be an elder – something to do with their life-style or doctrine, they must inform the Kirk Session of it. (A third responsibility of the congregation is to formally receive the audited accounts of the congregation at a Stated Annual Meeting.)

4. Let's look at the Elders. If we use the language of clergy and lay people, this is a lay ministry but it is also an ordained ministry. From early times during the reformation period, leaders from within the congregation were chosen to look after the spiritual needs of the congregation alongside the minister. They were ordained for the purpose by the minister of

the congregation. Together with the Minister, the Elders form the Kirk Session. The role of the Elder evolved precisely to curb the power of clergy! With the development of education from the Reformation to the Enlightenment, the clergy lost their mystique as one of the three educated people in the parish alongside the doctor and the dominie. People could now read their own bibles and take their own decisions about the life of the church. Much later, we went through a period when we separated the spiritual matters of a congregation and the so-called material ones (finance and property). Responsibility for the former lay solely with the Elders, the Kirk Session. Responsibility for the latter lay with what became known as the Congregational Board – 50% of whom were Elders and the other 50% were suitably qualified people from the congregation. Mercifully we have returned to a unitary constitution which makes clear that our relationship with money and what we do with it are as much a spiritual matter as Christian education. And what we do with our buildings and how well-taken care of they are say something about our mission to the community in which we are placed. So you will now find that Kirk Sessions have sub-committees for various aspects of the life of the congregation which are populated by elders and members alike.

5. The Elders, nowadays, are the trustees of the congregation, each congregation being a separate charity. Marjory Maclean, in her book *Speaking from the Heart, Essays on Being the Church of Scotland*, has this to say about Elders.

Rightly our Church finds men and women of great talent and many kinds of holiness, and excitedly marks them as preachers, teachers, categories of minister, deacon and especially elder; it seems to be the obvious way to acknowledge and honour them, to place them in the community as givers of a certain service. The problem is that many of these charismata belong in the Church but not in the governing of the Church, enliven the worshipping community but not – thank God- through its administration. Imprisoning those gifted spirits in the Church's courts is unkind to them, and anyway it is wrong for the Church. Those whose gift is discerning the gifts of others, and those who authority equips them to ordain others, need the moral courage to confer ordination only on those whose charism is one of leadership and governance. Ordination is not a prize for service given or permission for future contribution, but it is a sign of bearing one particular burden and one only, the steering of the Church and structuring of her means.

Ordination is for leaders. Appoint, then, those who may visit the old and frail; appoint those who help to ensure the Church is a welcoming and hospitable place; appoint those who handle property and money and complicated things more people would rather were not their duty. Do not ordain these though, except those who are policy-makers, judges, discerners and defenders of the way that all should follow.

6. So Marjory is arguing for a freeing up of the way in which members of the church have been used in the structures, leaving only those who are particularly gifted in judging 'what demands should be made of other faithful people in living out the calling of the whole Church. Ordain only these', she says. The point, I think, is well made.

7. The reach of elders goes beyond the congregation. The Church of Scotland has a hierarchy of Courts, the Kirk Session being the most local. At regional (diocesan) level there is the Presbytery. The Presbytery comprises all the ministers living in the region plus an elder for each one. So each congregation is represented by its minister and one elder and any other ministers who may be retired or working in chaplaincy have what are called 'balancing elders' so that there are always equal numbers. You see what I mean about ensuring that clergy never get too powerful! The Presbytery is responsible for the oversight of the congregations, including the discipline of the ministers, a kind of corporate 'bishop'! It is also responsible for ensuring that decisions of the General Assembly are implemented. Within the last ten years or so, elders can be elected Moderators of Presbytery, recognition that the role of moderating is strictly one of chairing – a gift that may not be given to a minister but may well be given to an elder. The position is held for one year. Where ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament is required e.g. in celebrating the Sacrament of Holy Communion which generally happens once a year in Presbyteries, or in the ordination of Ministers and Deacons, a minister in the Presbytery is invited to do the celebrating and ordaining. The Moderator will conduct the rest of the service.

8. The same applies to the General Assembly, the highest decision-making body in the Church. There are an equal number of ministers and elders. And again an Elder can be Moderator of the General Assembly – something that has only happened once in modern times and that broke two taboos because she was a woman Elder! We still await the first male elder to become Moderator of the General Assembly. The General Assembly receives reports from the its Councils and Committees – the bodies that set the overall policy of the Church of Scotland in relation to its theology, mission, ministries, social care, public affairs, ecumenical relations and so on. And in all the Councils and Committees of the church you will find a mixture of ordained ministers, elders, members, male and female, young, middle aged and old. We are not yet good at having conveners of Councils and Committees who are not ordained ministers with the exception of specialized areas like finance and HR which are sometimes convened by someone who is not a minister of Word and Sacrament. Of course, with ministers often coming now out of secular employment to the ministry, there are ministers who are qualified in finance, property, law etc. Few of the conveners of our major Council have been women – clergy or lay.

9. So what of women in the Church of Scotland? We have had women elders since 1966 and women ministers since 1968. This is still controversial in a small number of congregations who refuse to have women Elders. It has been clarified on several occasions in the General Assembly that the legislation on women elders is not merely permissive – i.e. you can have them if you wish. It is the position of the Church of Scotland that women are eligible for the Eldership full stop. This means that any congregation taking a policy decision not to ordain women as elders are, in fact, breaking the law of the Church. Some will say there are no women willing to serve as Elders and it can be difficult for some women who move from one congregation where they have been ordained as an elder and find themselves in a congregation

that does not ordain women. Usually a person joining a congregation who is an elder will be invited at an appropriate time to join the Kirk Session in their new congregation. They are not ordained again – ordination is for life – but they are formally admitted to the Kirk Session.

10. The reasons for opening up all our ministries to men and women were not done on the basis of women's rights, though that has been an argument used in some churches and by some people in the Church of Scotland. It was a decision taken on theological grounds, drawing on the doctrine of creation – that we are made in the image of God, male and female. Add to that the description of the community of Christ as being one in which divisions of gender, race and status no longer apply – there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free – but all are one in Christ. Also there are the women who surrounded Jesus and whose stories are only partially suppressed in the tradition. The picture is one of using the gifts that are particular to people as individuals and not some other defining feature. When Mary Lusk petitioned the General Assembly to become a minister, she did so on the basis that she felt she was being called by God to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament and she asked the Church to test the call. It was not for the Church or anyone else to say she couldn't have such a calling on the grounds that she was a woman. She felt she had a strong calling and she did what any male person with such a calling would do: she asked that it be tested. And so the decision was taken on the grounds that God is free to call whom God wills to be ministers in the Church.

11. Lastly, but by no means least, there is in the Church of Scotland a Diaconate. It began in 1887, the year the Woman's Guild, as it was called then, was started. To be a deaconess was to be able to serve the church full time in a supportive role to the minister. Deaconesses were commissioned and not ordained and had no part to play in the governance of the Church. Today it is different. The Diaconate is open to men and women. Deacons are ordained. But their calling is still to make themselves available to serve the Church wherever and in whatever capacity they are needed. As an ordained ministry they are now members of the Kirk Session and they are also members of Presbytery and a quarter of the Diaconate are commissioned to the General Assembly every year. So they now do have a part to play in the governance of the church. It is not a transitional ministry to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, so the form of ordination is different. If the distinction is between ordained and lay – they are ordained. If the distinction is between clergy and lay – they are lay! The Diaconate functions as an Order – no-one is employed to a post of deacon. Deacons are employed as chaplains, social workers, community workers, parish assistants etc. The Church of Scotland struggles over the Diaconate. It is currently being reviewed for the third or fourth time in my time as a minister! But this is how it is described in the ordination service:

"We, your brothers and sisters of the Presbytery of ... rejoice with you that through the mercy and love of God your ministry has been recognised and embraced as central to the very being of the Church. You are called by the Church to lead and enable the service that is an integral part of its ministry in the world. Work and pray therefore not only for the increase of your own gifts but for the release also of the gifts of compassion and love amongst all Christ's

disciples. In your ministry as a deacon, as well as exercising pastoral care both within and beyond the church, be ready to be a pioneer, revealing needs not fully acknowledged, bringing to light injustices easy to overlook, pointing to tasks most avoid. May your work encourage and enable the church to discover new patterns of service, and challenge it to raise a prophetic voice against those things that destroy community and deaden the spirit. Build bridges between church and world, that gifts may be shared to the benefit of each, and that people in all situations may know that the Gospel speaks to them. Seek not only to serve but to celebrate, enabling the voice of thanksgiving to rise wherever people gather.

Church of Scotland's Ordinal and Service Book

12. In conclusion, I hope I have given you a picture of a Church that at least in theory, though not always in practice, gives a significant role to those who are not clergy, both men and women, in the administration and governance of the Church. More and more the emphasis is on identifying the gifts people have to offer and using them appropriately within the life of the church so that only those particularly gifted in giving leadership and discerning the gifts of others are involved in the governance of the Church at all levels.

Are we less clerical? I'm not sure!

With an ever decreasing number of parish ministers set reach a critical point in 10-15 years' time, the role of elders and deacons in the governance of the Church is going to become increasingly significant for the health and well-being of the Church of Scotland, as indeed will their contribution within the overall ministry of the Church, including its worship and its mission.

Very Reverend Sheilagh Kesting is the ecumenical officer of the Church of Scotland and a former Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.