



The
United
Reformed
Church



They've asked me to be a

**church
secretary**

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Introduction

This booklet has been written for those who are considering taking up the role of church secretary in their local United Reformed Church. It focuses on the core responsibilities and necessary skills and abilities of post holders.

What's involved in the role?

Many, if not most, people considering the role of church secretary, will focus on the 'secretary' with its implications of office-based skills and overlook the 'church' aspect. This is the wrong way around – post holders do not need to take shorthand, be fast typists or computer experts, although those with such skills are welcome!

The emphasis of the role is definitely on church ... and consequently there are as many ways of being church secretary as there are of being Church. The scope of this important role is wide-ranging and it's unlikely that two church secretaries will see their responsibilities in exactly the same way.

In some churches the church secretary is the local lay leader who oversees most of the church's administration and organisation and is responsible to the Elders' meeting and Church meeting.

Elsewhere, the church secretary may have fewer, more clearly defined duties, for example, working within a leadership team perhaps including the Minister, elders, church administrator, pulpit supply officer, worship leaders and pastoral secretary.

The responsibilities that you have been asked to take on will be unique to your own church, yet there are some aspects of the church secretary role, as well as some desirable personal skills and characteristics, that are universal, and it is these that this booklet seeks to highlight.

We hope it helps as you consider whether this role – this calling – is for you.

Essential elements of the church secretary's role

The church secretary plays a key role in all churches and often has a place at the heart of the life of the local church. The role is not standard, but below is a list of tasks that will be standard for most church secretaries.

Ensuring the smooth running of meetings

The church secretary needs to make sure that the meetings of the councils of the Church (Church meeting, Elders' meetings, and other task groups) run properly. Over time they will need to develop an understanding of which meeting to take which items of business to.

Typical issues to be addressed are:

- the frequency and dates of meetings
- giving notice of meetings
- the arrangement of agendas
- the chairing of meetings
- minute taking and the distribution of minutes
- church rules, where appropriate, including voting practices and quorums
- Special meetings e.g. AGMs, elections, vacancy, etc.

'Church secretary is the role that makes church life tick ... from a minister's point of view a good church secretary is like gold!'

The Revd Peter Jordan

The various councils of the URC have specific and set decision making processes, and the areas of work for which Elders' meetings and Church meetings are responsible are clearly set out; part of the church secretary's job is to support the work of the church councils, neither approving or rejecting their decisions – but rather to facilitate the decision-making process.

Correspondence

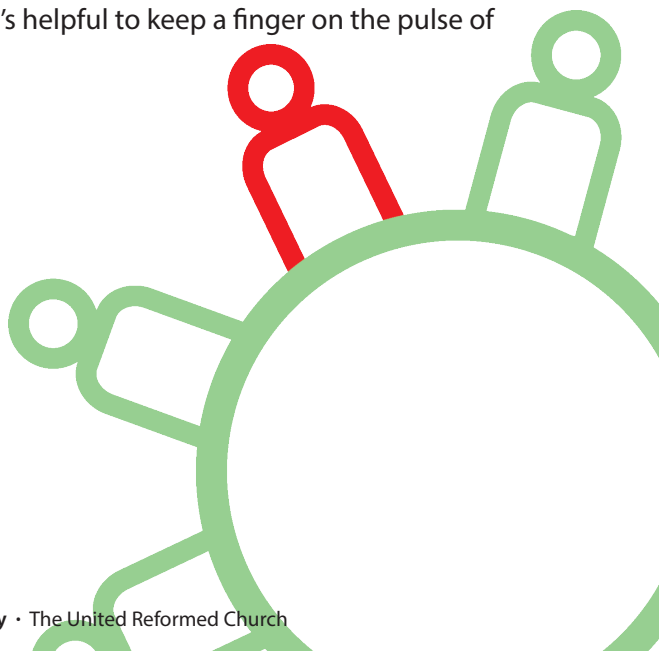
Along with the Minister, the church secretary is usually seen as the church's key contact person and the secretary will often be responsible for both dealing with and passing on correspondence.

Typical types of correspondence will be from:

- members, or potential members, of the congregation or other church organisations
- the wider URC, local pastorates/group of URCs, Synod or General Assembly/national level. This might be general correspondence and information or specific forms e.g. annual statistical returns and General Assembly resolutions for church discussion.
- Due Diligence Checking Ltd (DDC); the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) and Protecting Vulnerable Groups (PVG).
- ecumenical partners
- secular bodies.

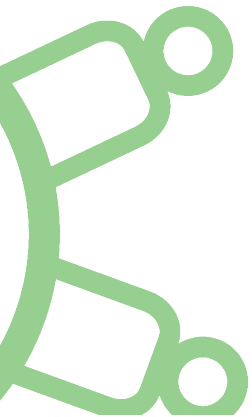
Working with the Minister

Church secretaries are essential to the smooth administration of local church life so a good working relationship between the Minister and secretary can only be beneficial. Obviously, the exact relationship will be dependent on the local ministry arrangements and the personalities of the postholders but honesty, trust and encouragement all help! As one church secretary put it: '... a church secretary must be a support to the Minister, to encourage, to listen and, if necessary, to act as a sounding board.' Another church secretary said: 'I found that I was sometimes able to pick up undercurrents which the Minister could not be aware of. It's helpful to keep a finger on the pulse of the congregation.'



Skills and characteristics of a church secretary

- Love for the church. Seeing the role as both service and calling will really help when the demands of the role frustrate and challenge! As one church secretary commented: 'It's essential to know that your work is part of God's work in the Church and in the locality.'
- Tenacity and patience. Many issues that come across the church secretary's desk take time to be satisfactorily resolved. Persistence and perseverance will help!
- Good communication skills. The church secretary has a place at the centre of the church, and needs to communicate frequently and effectively with the Minister, the members, the elders, the congregation and the Synod. In joint pastorates it is also helpful to be in contact with the other secretaries of the other churches in the pastorate.
- Pastoral. Good church secretaries have pastoral hearts and a loving concern for others. Tact, diplomacy and integrity all play a part in the work of a pastorally minded church secretary.
- Efficient administrator. Basic office skills are helpful and access to email and the internet are all but essential in the modern world.
- Trustworthy. There is a need for confidentiality and trust in many areas of church life including the areas of church development, conflict and individual pastoral needs.
- A positive and prayerful attitude. In many churches the church secretary is given power by the church and without a positive prayerful attitude could soon become a barrier to growth. The church secretary, like all leaders, will need to develop a healthy amnesia for past problems, failures and conflicts.



Oversight of other matters

The following are also the formal responsibility of the Elders' meeting, of which the church secretary takes day-to-day responsibility; although not necessarily undertaken by the church secretary, the secretary will need to ensure that they are dealt with properly by a competent member of the congregation.

- Church records: maintaining the registry of baptisms, church membership lists, minute books and other archive material
- Safeguarding matters, including safer recruitment and the arrangements for/administration of criminal record checks.
- Proper storage of marriage registers
- Elders' duty rotas, notices, etc
- Other worship duties, communion, pulpit supply
- Working with other church officers e.g. treasurer, property officer, lettings manager, etc.
- Publicity, notice boards etc.

Vacancies

During ministerial vacancies the church secretary can expect an increased workload. Not only will the amount of general correspondence and other paperwork increase but there are also specific matters relating to the vacancy, including involvement in drawing up the pastorate profile and meetings with prospective ministers, that the church secretary, together with the interim moderator, deals with.

Safer Recruitment

The church secretary has a role in any recruitment undertaken by the local church – they will be part of the team that ensures suitable people recruited into any roles involving work with children, young people and vulnerable adults. It should be noted that, in all United Reformed churches the church secretary is automatically registered as a verifier for criminal record (DBS/PVG) checks.

The appointment

If, having thought and prayed about the role, you decide to say yes, the appointment will be made by the Church meeting, upon the recommendation of the Elders' meeting. The process of making the appointment varies from church to church but, however it is done, a key outcome is ensuring that the church secretary has the support of the congregation as a whole.

Ideally, the appointment should not be seen as open ended – although it often is. There are many advantages in making fixed term appointments, perhaps for three or five years, with the option of a second term of a further period. You may like to clarify the expectations around length of service before you formally agree to take on this role.

A church secretary will always be a member of the Elders' meeting, and so you will need to be ordained as an elder of the United Reformed Church if you have not been an elder before.

Once in role

When you are in role you may often find that you are asked for information that you don't have and/or are expected to know things that you don't yet know. Don't panic – help is available! Ask for a mentor, perhaps a church secretary at a nearby United Reformed church, the outgoing church secretary at your church if that feels appropriate, or even a retired minister – to consult with on issues as they arise. The URC website www.urc.org.uk also has lots of useful information and it is worth becoming familiar with it.

And finally ...

Please don't be overwhelmed by the list of requirements! Don't forget you've been approached about the role because someone has seen in you the necessary combination of experience and characteristics needed for your local church. Speak to the outgoing church secretary and/or ask the person/people who approached you for more info on the realities of the role in your local church.

And remember, it's meant to be a calling not a burden!

This is one in a series of booklets designed to give information to those who have been asked to consider taking on a role in the United Reformed Church.

The booklets can be read and downloaded at www.urc.org.uk/ask



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