

Secretary or Clerk of the Church

The church secretary or clerk records the activities of the church for the official record, telling who, what, when, where and, if possible, why. He or she then sees that these records are stored for future reference.

History and Background

We have the Bible today in part because clerks (scribes, chroniclers, secretaries) wrote down the story of God's mighty acts. One of those was Baruch, Jeremiah's secretary. Baruch, we are told in Jeremiah 36, wrote the words of the Lord, which Jeremiah dictated, onto a scroll. When the king didn't like the message Jeremiah brought from God, he calmly cut the scroll into little pieces and cast them into a flame. Not to be outdone, Jeremiah gave another scroll to Baruch and dictated not only all the words that had been on the scroll the king had burned, but more.

Luke, the author of Acts, could be called the first "church" clerk, for he wrote about the traditions and interests of the church in Jerusalem and in Antioch.

More recently, the church clerk in early New England Congregational churches was sometimes also the town clerk. The role there was an important one recognized by the civil authority. In all parts of this country, church records were vital when civil records were incomplete and baptismal records often took the place of birth certificates.

Common Practices

Generally the church secretary or clerk is a member of the church, elected according to the church's bylaws for a specific period of time, usually a year, although in some places the clerk has a long-term position. Occasionally it is necessary for the secretary or clerk to be sworn in by the civil authority.

The duties depend on the church's structure. Most often, the secretary is expected to keep records of congregational meetings, baptisms, confirmations, membership, and maybe marriages and funerals as well. The clerk may also be the person who calls official meetings, establishes quorums at meetings, knows the bylaws and sees that things are done legally. By default or intent, the clerk is sometimes the historian. Then the recordkeeping increases, and it becomes appropriate to interpret, as well as keep, the records. (See the information on "Historian" in this resource.)

Responsibilities

Much of what you have to do is official and important. The records you keep are important to the church as a whole and to individual members. Here accuracy matters. There's no way, for instance, to transfer membership for someone whose name never made it onto the official roll. Learn a lesson from Baruch and beware of fire. (You might also be careful about who

borrowes the records.) Store records in a fireproof, waterproof place or make duplicates. Microfilming of major records might be considered if it is available.

You need to establish a good working relationship with the pastor, secretary of the church office and presiding officer of the church. Your specific responsibilities depend on the structure of your church and the expectations of the congregation. Some or all of the following responsibilities are yours:

- Receiving, recording and issuing letters of transfer of church membership.
- Recording changes in names on membership rolls.
- Adding and deleting names of members from the official roll and in a card file for easy access.
- Recording baptisms, funerals and marriages held in the church.
- Making the official call for church meetings.
- Taking minutes of congregational meetings.
- Taking minutes of governing board meetings.
- Serving on the governing board.
- Incorporating annual reports, and other reports as required, of committees into the official records.
- Incorporating financial reports and church school reports into the official records.
- Receiving, sending and filing official correspondence.
- Signing official church documents.

- Preserving documents: successive constitutions and bylaws of the church and subsidiary organizations, articles of incorporation, copies of deeds to and descriptions of the church's physical properties, contracts and blueprints for church buildings, mortgages and a list of charter members.
- Adding current records to the past records in an organized manner.
- Keeping all records in such a manner that anyone else may continue without confusion or difficulty.
- Organizing poorly kept past records and seeking missing information.
- Providing information to the newsletter editor.
- Completing annual reports for the conference and the **Year Book** of the United Church of Christ.

Skills and Attributes Needed

- Ability to write clearly.
- Ability to sort out what's important.
- Ability to pay attention to details.
- A sense of orderliness and organization.
- Familiarity with the congregation.
- Ability to take notes quickly and accurately.
- Ability to keep neat, legible records.
- Willingness to record facts without interpretation.

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Ways to Increase Skills, Knowledge and Effectiveness

- Ask for a position description outlining responsibilities, expectations and accountability.
- Study the church's constitution and bylaws.
- Learn typing or shorthand to help in keeping records.
- Get past records in order before adding to the collection.

Questions

- What are your responsibilities?
- Is there any part of your work you need to improve? How might you do that?