

The Office of Church Secretary.

A SECRETARY is a mere servant : his position is that he is to do what he is told, and no person can assume that he has any authority to make representations binding on the Company; nor can anyone assume that statements made by him are necessarily to be accepted as trustworthy without further enquiry" . . . Such was the dictum of a learned judge of the High Court some years ago when giving judgment in a case* in which the secretary of a public company was concerned. It is safe to say that no Baptist Church Secretary who rightly interprets his office, considers either that he is a mere servant or that his position necessarily casts on him the obligation to do what he is told. True, he is a servant, if the words are given the New Testament meaning, which is much fuller and deeper than is implied in the legal extract, and certainly on occasions he does do what he is told.

The office of Church Secretary is peculiar to churches of the Congregational system of Church Government. It is one of considerable importance, which, while making exacting demands on time and thought, offers to the holder wide reaching facilities for service. The happiness of the minister in his pastorate, the smooth running of the ordinary machinery of a congregation, the seizing by a church of opportunities which require business vision and probably financial responsibility are largely influenced by the tact and statesmanship with which the secretary applies himself to his duties.

In the *Baptist Handbook* for 1925 are the names of 1,963 church secretaries in England alone. Of these, 1,776 are laymen, 102 women, 61 ministers, and 24 are not specified. The laymen comprise men whose business callings are as varied as their ages, which range from the early twenties to the mature years of those who have given service for thirty, forty, and in a few cases even more years. Such is the genius of the denomination that there are no recognised rules governing election to the office, and no standard list of duties. There are duties common to all church secretaries, but in the main each secretary is left to make of his

* *Barnet v. South London Tramways Co.* (1886), 18 Q.B.D. 815.

office what he wills. The result is a widely varying standard: secretaries with a circumscribed view do little more than the clerical work entailed in preparing agendas, recording minutes, and conducting correspondence; others hold that the office is a much more comprehensive one, and therefore they not only attend to such clerical duties but are organisers and statesmen in their churches.

Lay offices somewhat analogous are found in all the important churches of this country, excluding the Roman Catholic. A brief review of such offices and the systems of church government out of which they arise will show, however, that in no case does the office confer powers and opportunities comparable with those possessed by a Baptist or Congregational Church Secretary.

Prior to the recent legislation,* popularly known as the "Enabling Act," the *Anglican* Church officer most resembling the church secretary was the CHURCHWARDEN, but by such legislation his duties have been considerably curtailed.

The office of churchwarden is a venerable one, and traces of it exist prior to the XIIIth century, when it emerged into legal recognition. The laws and regulations governing the office are numerous and complicated, the sixteenth edition of Prideaux' *Churchwardens' Guide* numbering 635 pages. Formerly the churchwarden or two churchwardens, as was usually the case, were elected by the incumbent and parishioners at the Vestry held in Easter week, and the duties consisted of, *inter alia*, guarding the movable goods and ornaments, and providing the necessaries for the conduct of divine service; keeping the buildings in repair; maintaining order in the church and churchyard; allocating seats; dealing in a limited way with funds; and, usually, when a vacancy occurred in the benefice, receiving from the bishop the appointment of *sequestrator*. Now, the churchwardens are elected by the Vestry and the Parochial Church Meeting sitting together for the purpose. By the legislation mentioned, all powers, duties, and liabilities relating to (a) the financial affairs of the church . . . (b) the care, maintenance, preservation, and insurance of the fabric of the church, and the goods and ornaments thereof (c) the care and maintenance of the churchyard . . . have been transferred from them and vested in the Parochial Church Council. Among other powers conferred on this body is that of acquiring, managing, and administering ecclesiastical property, but this power is so curtailed by certain provisos that no sale, exchange, purchase, or letting for more

*The Church of England Assembly (Powers) Act, 1919; Addresses of the Convocations of Canterbury and York with the Appendix containing the Constitution of the National Assembly of the Church of England and the Schedule containing the Rules for the Representation of the Laity; the Parochial Church Councils (Powers) Measure, 1921.

than one year, of any ecclesiastical property can take place without the consent of the Diocesan Authority.

The newly created office of SECRETARY OF THE PAROCHIAL CHURCH COUNCIL is more akin to the office of church secretary than is the attenuated office of churchwarden. He has charge of the electoral roll and of all documents relating to current business of the Council. He issues notices of its meetings, which must be held at least once a quarter, records the minutes, keeps the secretary of the Diocesan Conference informed of his address, and generally carries out the resolutions of the Council. Neither the Council nor the churchwardens have any status as such in the appointment of an incumbent or in the selection of preachers during a vacancy, all matters pertaining to the pulpit, apart from exceptional circumstances, being vested in the bishop.

No church has a greater regard for the dignity of all that appertains to church life than the Presbyterian Church. Its *Book of Order*,* an elaborately compiled volume of over 200 pages, contains no less than 570 by-laws, and a complete Appendix of formulas, certificates, declarations, forms of minutes, and the like. The church has two officers whose duties are not dissimilar from those of a church secretary, namely the CLERK OF THE SESSION and the CLERK OF THE DIACONATE (or managers). The spiritual and general oversight of the congregation is vested in its elders (Presbyters is a synonymous term, and both include the minister), who constitute the governing body known as "The Session." Elders are elected by the members of the congregation in full fellowship, and the election must be sustained by the Session. In due course they are solemnly ordained or inducted to their office in the presence of the congregation, usually during one of the Sunday services, and in ordinary circumstances they retain their position until they cease to be members of the congregation in full fellowship. The clerk of the Session is appointed by the Session, and his office is held in high repute. On him rests the general responsibility for all matters which are under the control of the Session, and he issues the various notices and completes the forms required by the regulations of the Church. Specific duties assigned to him are: to keep the roll of members; to take minutes of the proceedings of the Session; to preserve its books, documents, and papers; jointly with the minister to keep in touch with members moving.

The clerk of the Diaconate is appointed by the Diaconate or Deacons' Court (terms used to describe the same body), which consists of the members of Session and the Deacons sitting together. This office also is held in high repute, although it is

* *The Book of Order or Rules and Forms of Procedure of the Presbyterian Church of England. 1922.*

not of the same importance as that of the clerk of the Session. The Diaconate is charged with the administration of temporal affairs, and is responsible for the upkeep of the property, the allocation of sittings, and the raising and due application of all funds. Deacons elected for a limited time are set apart to their duties with prayer in the presence of the congregation, usually during one of the Sunday services; those elected for life are ordained or inducted to their office in the same manner as elders. The clerk of the Diaconate has general responsibility for all matters assigned to the Diaconate, and in particular he keeps the minutes of its proceedings and preserves its books, papers, and documents, except those entrusted by the Diaconate to the treasurer. Some congregations, instead of setting apart or ordaining deacons, appoint a Board of Managers to look after their temporal affairs. The powers and duties of the Board are practically identical with those of the Diaconate, but its constitution presents a somewhat different system. The office of Clerk of the Board is similar to that of Clerk of the Diaconate.

The power to grant the use of Presbyterian church buildings for meetings of a strictly religious, charitable, or ecclesiastical character is vested in the minister alone, but for other meetings the express sanction of the Diaconate or the Board of Managers as well as of the minister is necessary. The erection of buildings and the purchase and sale of property must receive the sanction of the Presbytery, which also has control of public worship, and at least once a year inspects the Communion Roll of the local church. On a vacancy arising in the pastorate, the Presbytery appoints a neighbouring minister to act as interim moderator of the Session, and when the congregation is ready to proceed to the election of another minister, the Session intimates this to the Presbytery, and requests the Presbytery to take the various steps which are usual.

The stewards of the *Wesleyan Methodist Church* are four in number: circuit, society, poor, and chapel, and their duties are concisely stated in a valuable booklet* issued by the Methodist Publishing House. The office dates from 1739, and did not originate in any pre-arranged plan of church government, but was created to meet a necessity. The circuit steward, the society steward, and the chapel steward all attend to matters which fall within the purview of a church secretary, but the one whose duties approximate most closely is the SOCIETY STEWARD. He is appointed annually at the first Leaders' Meeting after the December Quarterly Meeting, being nominated by the circuit superintendent, or a colleague acting under his direction, and the Leaders' Meeting has the power to approve

* *The Duties of Wesleyan Stewards*, by Edward Workman.

or disapprove of the nomination.* Except in extraordinary cases, no steward, whether circuit, society, poor, or chapel, is allowed to remain in office for more than three years in succession (though there is a tendency for many cases to be deemed extraordinary!), and he must not hold "opinions contrary to the total depravity of human nature, the divinity and atonement of Christ, the influence and witness of the Holy Spirit, and Christian holiness, as believed by the Methodists."† The duties of the society steward are set out under twelve headings, which can be summarised as follows: To co-operate with the ministers and leaders in everything for the furtherance of both the spiritual and temporal interests of those societies to which they belong; to supply announcements in writing to the preacher before he enters the pulpit, arrange hospitality, and see that some service is properly conducted if a preacher fails to keep his appointment; to arrange for baptisms and assist at the communion service; to superintend admission to privileged occasions; to keep the minutes of the Leaders' Meeting and attend the Quarterly Meetings; and to supervise certain collections.

The responsibility for nominating to the Circuit Quarterly Meeting a minister to labour in the circuit with charge of the particular church, for giving the invitation to him after the sanction of the Quarterly Meeting has been obtained, for providing a convenient house for his occupation and the regular payment of his stipend, rests with the circuit steward. All questions connected with the maintenance and repair of the buildings and furniture and the general interests of the Trustees are the concern of the chapel steward; but property can only be bought or sold with the approval of the denominational Chapel Committee.

From this review it is clear that in respect of the ministry and trust property, the officers and members of the local Anglican, Presbyterian, and Wesleyan Methodist Churches are placed in a very different position from that of the officers and members of the local Baptist Church. Subject only to the provisions of the Trust Deed under which the property is held, and in the case of aided churches, subject also to the measure of control given to the Area Committee and the Executive Committee by the provisions of the Ministerial Settlement and Sustentation Scheme, the members of a Baptist Church assembled in a duly convened Church Meeting have absolute autonomy. They are free to invite to the pastorate whomsoever they will, and to purchase, sell, or otherwise deal with the property of the church, without the

* *Minutes*, vol. xvii., p. 624.

† *Minutes*, vol. ii., p. 405.

sanction of any bishop, presbytery, circuit, union, or association. This absolute freedom and authority of the Church Meeting imposes a responsibility on those who are privileged to serve the church in positions of leadership, graver than the responsibility vested in those who are unable to act in such matters without the sanction and approval of others.

The absence of standard rules having authority in the church or a modern treatise issued for the guidance of church officers* makes it needful to refer to *customs* that receive general adherence in Baptist Churches and to *methods* which, having proved their value, are slowly permeating the denomination.

With few exceptions, Baptist Churches elect Deacons to serve as their church officers, but, in the term and method of their election, there is much variety. In some churches, deacons are elected for life; in others for a term of from one to five years. The various methods of election usually include *some form of nomination*, either by the minister and existing deacons, the members at a church meeting, or the completion of an official nomination paper, and *some form of voting by the members*, either by show of hands or ballot at a church meeting or the issue of voting papers to all members in full communion, to be returned to a box at the church on a stated occasion. A practice much to be commended which is receiving more widespread support is that of publicly setting apart and welcoming the re-elected and newly-elected deacons at the first Communion Service following the election, prayer by the minister being offered on their behalf. The deacons form a very important part of the church organisation. They are called to co-operation in spiritual duties with the minister, who is chairman of the Deacons' Meeting. They are further called to give supervision to all the activities of the church, and the Congregational system of Church Government, which leaves each local church free to "frame its own government, exercise its own discipline and work out its own ideals of worship and service, in the freedom and power of the Spirit," † requires vision and leadership of no mean order.

From their number, the deacons nominate or appoint two officers, the CHURCH TREASURER, whose duties are financial, and the CHURCH SECRETARY. The nominations or appointments are

* *The Principles and Practices of the Baptists*, by Charles Williams, and *The Order and Administration of a Church*, by J. R. Wood and Samuel Chick are valuable, but both are out of date, having been published prior to the twentieth century legislation of the Baptist Union dealing with Ministerial Settlement and Sustentation, Ministerial Recognition, and other important issues. A new work is needed along the lines of the latter, but including other questions, and treating all somewhat more fully.

† Quoted in *Congregationalism and the Church Meeting*, by F. Wrigley.

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followed by election or confirmation of the appointment, and the circumstances require at the next church meeting. Nothing in the secretary's appointment gives him a position of autocracy. He is the servant of the church, called to the highest office in the gift of the church, next to that of the minister, but his service is rendered in counsel with and approval by the minister and his brother deacons. Certain clerical duties automatically fall to him; he has general responsibility for all that comes before the Deacons' Meeting or Church Meeting, and the details of organisation and the business methods adopted are largely the result of his initiative.

The first and primary duty of a church secretary is to have a worthy conception of the church and of the vocation of the ministry; to realise that the "character of the church is essentially and supremely spiritual,"* and that the minister is called of God to "an office which no one elects to take for himself."† With such a conception he will elevate his own office far above that of a mere clerk, or recorder. Frank and cordial relationships between the minister and church secretary are needful for the harmony of the church, and must mark all their intercourse; a fissiparous tendency will speedily manifest itself if there is secrecy and suspicion. By earnest and cheerful co-operation, the church secretary can do much to save the minister from spending his time in the serving of tables. In some churches, it is unfortunately necessary for the minister to take an active part in the financial and other business arrangements, but these cases should be the exception. In normal circumstances, the minister should not be a member of the Finance Committee of the diocese, he should not be expected to take a prominent part in the organisation of a bazaar, and he should not be expected to attend and preside at the committees and sub-committees of all and sundry organisations. The intellectual demands on ministers are heavy and with the diffusion of knowledge becoming wider every year, they will tend to become more strenuous. Adequate study hours are therefore essential, and the wise church secretary will strive to secure for his minister freedom from a welter of business details.

Very important are the duties which fall to a church secretary during an interregnum in the pastorate. Advice, wise and otherwise, will reach him from many quarters, and for a time the postman's visits will be more frequent than usual. The custom of appointing an outside moderator is slowly spreading, but among the larger churches it is the exception. The counsel of the

* *The Proper Character and Function of the Church of Christ*, by Charles Brown.

† Heb. v. 4, Moffatt's Version.

General Superintendent is of the greatest value, and his co-operation is often sought; to fail to consult him is decidedly not a sign of the possession of omniscient qualities. The first object of the secretary will be to arrange among the deacons, and others if necessary, for the discharge of duties which have been undertaken by the minister, and he will also secure a rota of those willing to provide hospitality for visiting ministers. Usually, a committee consisting of the deacons, or of a number of them, and possibly a few church members, will be appointed to arrange for the supply of the pulpit, and in due course to recommend a minister. Their task is an exceedingly delicate and complex one, and the Committee while being representative enough to secure confidence should not be large. In carrying out the wishes of this committee, it is the secretary's duty so to arrange the visits of supplies that the possibility of any "preaching competition" shall be eliminated. Under no circumstances should the names of two or more possible ministers be before the church at the same time. Such a course is a sure indication of incompetent leadership, and can speedily divide a church. An interregnum, particularly if it be at all prolonged, is a severe test of the capacity of the secretary and the character of the diaconate.

Matters connected with the general organisation of the church form an important part of the secretary's duties. They include the care of the buildings and furniture; the preservation of all books, papers, and documents; the oversight of the caretakers; the efficient stewarding of the aisles; the allocation of rooms for meetings; the effective advertising of the church services; arrangements for baptismal services; and the like. It has been said that the really successful business man is not the one who consistently believes in "Do it yourself," but the one who has the capacity to inspire others to work. A similar principle applies in church organisation, and the wise secretary will secure that the duties are shared with others. Happy is he who does not find public speaking an absolutely irksome task, for the occasions when the secretary must stand up and give utterance are frequent. In many churches it is the custom for him to make the announcements at the Sunday services, and in most churches a carefully prepared Annual Report is delivered in connection with either the Church or Minister's Anniversary.

Only the faithful secretary is aware of the magnitude of the clerical work attaching to the office in a vigorous church. In connection with members it includes the keeping of the Roll, the application for and the sending of transfers, the notification of their appointment to visitors appointed to report on candidates for baptism or membership, and a cordial letter to newly elected members giving them a welcome and inviting them to be present

at the next Communion Service to receive the right hand of fellowship from the minister. Correspondence deals with a wonderful variety of matters, and may afford unexpected opportunities of service. Not long ago the writer was introduced to a Baptist church member who related an experience that had befallen him about three years earlier. For business reasons he had desired to move to a district some two hundred miles from his home. Not knowing anyone in the new neighbourhood, he wrote to the secretaries of two Baptist churches in neighbouring towns explaining his difficulty, and asking their advice and assistance. The one replied in a perfunctory way; the other wrote a letter of greeting, spoke cheerfully of the life of his church, and arranged for a local estate agent to send particulars of properties. The result was that the member and his family settled in the town of the latter secretary, joined the church, has already rendered excellent service, and in addition for two years in succession he gave a donation of fifty pounds to its funds. A business expression is that "little fish are sweet": casual letters may have great importance. The keeping of the minutes is not the least important of the secretary's clerical duties, for they are the history of the church and enshrine spiritual experiences. The historian of a church at the jubilee or centenary celebrations feels a debt of gratitude for carefully kept minutes, and added interest is given to the minute book when reports of important church functions which appear in the local newspaper are pasted in. Old minute books occasionally afford delightful pictures of church life. What, for example, could more vividly describe the conditions in a poor village church in the early years of the last century than the minute of the Moulton Church secretary, who recorded of the "Meeting": "They ran a risque each time of being buried in its ruins," and yet "whe met in peas and parted in younity."*

Although, as already shown, the local church is self-contained and self-governing, it is part of a much wider fellowship. It therefore has obligations to support denominational activities, and it falls to the secretary to see that these receive due consideration. He should make himself well acquainted with denominational societies, and the service they can render to local churches. The debt to the past and duty to the future require that church buildings be safeguarded and kept well up to date. The need for adequate insurance and consideration of matters connected with the trust will come before him from time to time. An opportunity to purchase adjoining property should always be brought before the diaconate, and the opportunity should only be passed over after the most serious consideration. With the

* *William Carey, D.D.*, by S. Pearse Carey, M.A., p. 47.

income to be received from the investment and the help afforded by such an Institution as the Baptist Building Fund, the financial question will not present an insuperable barrier to an energetic diaconate. A far-seeing secretary will take care to place the name of his church on the waiting list of funds like the one named, so that when the need arises, the application for assistance will not be delayed.

The secretary's office is one that brings with it many trials and difficulties, but the joys and privileges of service far outweigh them. The conscientious secretary will be well aware of the danger that, amid all the details of organisation, his own inner life and spirit may not be preserved, but he will seek never to lose the vision of the One who inspires all his service, and who said, "He that would be great among you, let him be the servant of all."

SEYMOUR J. PRICE.