



The Joys and Challenges of Local Church Secretaries



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Introduction

The responsibility of being church secretary can be significant. This booklet aims to help Congregational Federation churches to fill this vital role as it sets out what is required and breaks the role into sections which can be shared or managed in different ways.

This booklet has been asked for by you and created by you so a big thank you to all the church secretaries who contributed their knowledge and experience.

At the heart of the church secretary role is a love for communicating and being organised.

Thank you for all you do in your church.



Serving God and the Church

Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 12:28 about callings and giftings in the church, one of which is administration, Robert Scott-Biggs affirms that this means that church administration is to be regarded as a spiritual calling. As he writes:

'Paul clearly sees administration not only as an essential part of the early Church but also as a spiritual calling. Administration ... is rooted firmly in New Testament authority and those possessing the necessary skills to undertake the required responsibilities have their "gifting" from God'.¹

¹ Robert Scott-Biggs: *Introductory Guide for New Church Treasurers*. (2017, Association of Church Accountants and Treasurers, p.4).

The church secretary plays a vital role in the life and witness of the local church, and far from being simply an administrative role – an important role in its own right – this is a role for a prayerful person, someone who knows their dependence on God for strength, discernment and humility.

The responsibilities of church secretaries vary from church to church, but this booklet sets out to indicate the typical responsibilities, joys and challenges of the role. It is, however, important to clarify the particular responsibilities in your own church before agreeing to accept the role.

General Overview

a) Congregational church polity as our context for church secretaries

All members have responsibility for the church

Deacons and Trustees have shared responsibility for the church

Relationship of local churches to the Congregational Federation as an organisation

Need to comply in your particular church with that church's constitution and deeds

b) General requirements for happy and effective service

- Having general administrative competence
- Able and willing to cope with the wide range of responsibilities
- Able and willing to address issues when they come out of the blue
- Able and willing to delegate responsibilities to others
- Able and willing to keep on top of your responsibilities, looking at different aspects of your responsibilities every few days.
- Try to create a small team to work with you, perhaps including a specific Minute Secretary for meetings, a Pulpit Secretary and a designated Protection Verifier, for safeguarding responsibilities.
- Build a good working relationship with the church treasurer.

c) Taking care of yourself

- Wrap every day, with whatever responsibilities may be come up that day, in prayer
- Invite a few trusted friends to pray regularly for you in this role
- Be kind to yourself, patient and flexible



Top Tip

Try to set a time every week to keep on top of the responsibilities

Church Meeting and Deacons' Meetings

Church Meeting

The Church Meeting is the most important distinctive in the church polity of Congregational churches, and the role of the church secretary in relation to this is crucial for the effective life and ministry of a church. As the church secretary you will be responsible for arranging the meetings.

These responsibilities include the following:

- Possibly chairing the meetings. In some churches this is done by the Minister / Pastor or one of the Deacons, perhaps on a rota basis.

Whether or not you chair the meetings, your responsibilities will include creating the agenda, in liaison with the Minister / pastor and /or the Deacons and giving notice of the meetings in good time beforehand.

- Possibly taking the Minutes of the meetings. In some churches there is a designated Minute Secretary whose responsibility this is. In these cases, it will probably still fall to you to write these up into their final form and distribute them to members afterwards.

- Following up any action points agreed at the meetings and reporting back on them at the following meeting.
- Preparing reports, as required, for the Church Meeting.

Top Tip

For both the Church Meeting and Deacons' meetings it is a good idea to create or source templates for different types of reports. These can then be used to create a consistency of presentation across the period of your service as church secretary

Deacons' Meetings

You will also be the secretary for Deacons' meetings in your church, with responsibilities in line with those outlined above for the Church Meeting.

In accordance with their church constitutions, church secretaries can either be part of the decision-making process when they attend Deacons' meetings, or they can be ex officio attendees with no say in the decision-making. In some churches, the church secretary is also a Deacon.

In some churches, the Deacons are also the Trustees of the church, whereas in other churches it may simply be the case that some Deacons happen to be Trustees. In some churches, church secretaries are also Trustees, whether or not they are also Deacons.

Whichever of these scenarios is the case in your church, you will be relied on to provide input on the items on the agenda of Deacons' meetings.

Top Tip

Always have a copy of the constitution available for any queries

Open and Consistent Communication

With respect to all the communication responsibilities outlined below, it is good practice to create a separate church email address from your personal email address for church business.

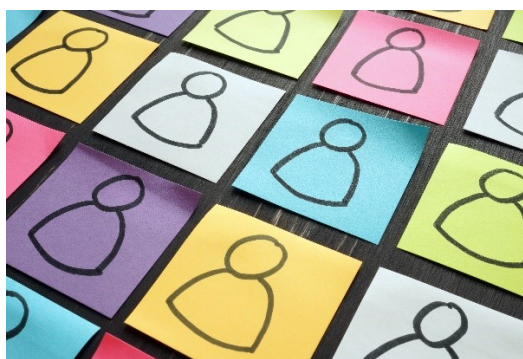
Also, with the help of someone, if required, set up a sharing platform like Dropbox to facilitate the storing and sharing of church documents of different kinds. This will help not only to preserve documents and other material for everyone, especially useful in succession planning for new church secretaries other church officers and Ministers / Pastors, but also to enable ease of access to working documents that the Deacons or others may be working on.

Within the church

It will be part of your role to facilitate good communication and cooperation in tasks and activities among the members and officers of your church. Members will share things with you to be shared with the whole church, relying on you to be a channel of messages and general information.

It is important to build up a good and trusting working relationship, with easy communication, with the church treasurer, as you will work together in a number of contexts.

Typically, your service within the church will involve at least some of the following responsibilities (probably both email and letter).



- Managing the church website and social media platforms
- Managing the church diary
- Managing the church notices as delivered in services and on internal notice boards
- Managing the church's external notice board



Top Tip

Set up a communication pyramid for important church family news that needs to be shared quickly

Minister

If you employ a Minister, you will be their first point of contact, be their line manager along with the deacons, authorise their leave, collate weekly timesheets if used and organise appraisals.

Safeguarding

It is recommended the church secretary has a DBS certificate and also completes recognised safeguarding training.

The church secretary should work closely with the designated safeguarding lead to make sure the safeguarding policy is regularly reviewed and the safeguarding is kept as an item agenda item at each deacons and church meetings.

The advice number for thirty-one eight is 0303 003 1111

Outside the church

As church secretary, you will also be the key person for both sending and receiving, and then dealing with, correspondence relating to the church. As well as looking after general correspondence on behalf of the church, this aspect of the role will involve you in maintaining a number of relationships.



The Congregational Federation



Keeping in touch with the Congregational Federation will enable the church to stay abreast of developments, opportunities for grant applications, resources, events, etc.

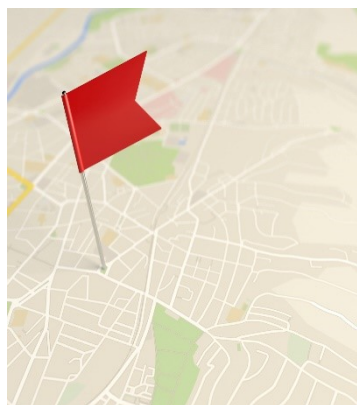
It will also enable the Congregational Federation and other Congregational churches to stay aware of any ways in which they can be praying for or supporting your church, and also enable you to become aware of other churches that would benefit from your church's prayers and support.

Most communication from the Congregational Federation comes via email unless the postal service is preferred. It is advised to share all communication with the deacons and congregations as appropriate.

Twice a year, the Church Support Committee of the Congregational Federation meets in full to consider, among other matters, brief reports from the various Area Pastoral Care Coordinators about the joys and challenges facing the churches in their Areas. The members would love to be hearing from you at every meeting to inform their prayers and to help them to consider ways to support you, as appropriate.

Congregational Federation Areas or National Bodies

Keeping in touch with the Area secretary and/or chair will also bring benefits and opportunities for you to support other churches in your Area. This mutual support is a feature of Christian congregations and Congregational churches are committed to it and need it.



It is important for you to try to arrange representation from your church (not necessarily yourself) at the various area/national meetings, assemblies and other events.

It is also important to send regular updates to your Area Pastoral Care Coordinator for prayer and for inclusion in their reports to the Church Support Committee (see above).

Top Tip

*All National and Area contacts are
listed in the Congregational
Federation Yearbook*

Pastoral Sensitivity

Church secretaries need to have tact, patience and integrity, and known to be trustworthy.

Though the church secretary is not a pastoral worker in a church, the role does involve taking care of people in a variety of ways. Quite apart from the clear responsibility of making sure that everyone is respected and treated as an equal with everyone else, the church secretary will also be in a position to see people relating to one another and to know about conflicting visions and approaches to church life, ministry and mission among members.

Therefore, the church secretary will be expected to be a reconciling presence when there is potential for conflict. You will often be the initial port of call for concerns or complaints from church members. By virtue of the role, church secretaries also typically find that people confide in them about a range of matters, trusting to their discretion and often seeking prayerful support.

It is therefore important to be able to serve in a pastoral way alongside the Minister / Pastor, if the church has one, and alongside the Deacons, in the overall pastoral care of the church.



Because of our commitment to Christian hospitality and building up inclusive, diverse church communities, the pastoral aspect of the responsibility of a church secretary can also include oversight of the duty of care to those with any kind of disability or impairment, permanent or temporary.²

In some cases, your responsibility may include the line management of other church officers and volunteers in the church.

Top Tip

Keep a variety of greeting cards in stock to send in response to church family occasions

Legal and External Responsibilities

As well as working with the Deacons and members in your church, you will have responsibilities that involve other organisations. Some of these may entail legal responsibilities, and it is important that you make sure that you are prepared for this.

For example, there may be, at least from time to time, correspondence and/or accountable activities in relation to the following.

- Relations with different offices of the local Council(s)
- Administrative aspects of contracts with contractors, utility firms and other third parties
- Sourcing quotes for building and other third-party work
- Overseeing certain legal issues (e.g., the employment, pension arrangements, accommodation and Terms & Conditions of the Minister / Pastor or another church employee)
- Oversight of health and safety matters in the church
- Administrative aspects of any church lettings
- Oversight of the safeguarding protection verification for the church
- Creating and maintaining a list of contractors and suppliers to contact when necessary (e.g., electricians, taxis, funeral directors, visiting preachers, caterers).

² For this, see the Congregational Federation pamphlet, Christian Hospitality: An Inclusive Church Welcome.

You will also be responsible for keeping the formal church records, such as:

- The church membership and adherent lists
- Records of baptisms
- Marriage registers
- Duty rotas for the various roles in the church



Interregnum Responsibilities

These responsibilities relate to periods between the departure of a Minister / Pastor and the induction of their successor. The matters addressed here also apply to those churches that are without a Minister / pastor but are not looking to call someone to that role.³

During this period, the church secretary's workload will increase significantly, and it is recommended that you prepare for this by calling in others to form a prayer and support group for you.

You will be responsible for managing the whole process, including the creation of a job description, a church profile, contract details, etc.

You will also be responsible for managing church matters generally, along with the Deacons.

You may also be expected to oversee the overall pastoral care of the church, including those unable to attend and adherents.

Top Tip
**Contact the Congregational Federation
for the "Preparing for a vacancy
booklet"**

³ For a comprehensive coverage of the issues involved in an interregnum and a recommended process for addressing these issues, see the Congregational Federation booklet, *Preparing for a Vacancy*.

Pulpit Secretary

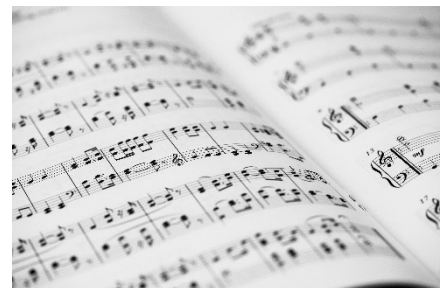
One of the demanding responsibilities during an interregnum, or if a church is living without a Minister / Pastor, is arranging for people to come to lead worship services and/or preach at the services. The task is demanding because it is for every Sunday of the year (or nearly so).

In some churches this is a distinct role, separate from that of church secretary, but it may not be in your church. It is good practice to create and maintain, as far as is possible, a list of people, including contact details, who have served the church in this way.

It would be your responsibility to welcome any visiting speaker to the church and then introduce them at the beginning of the service too.



This role also involves communicating with any booked visiting preachers information about the church, hymn books, a typical order of service or particular traditions. This role would also involve finding out hymns and readings and communicating with them the person responsible for the music and bible reading.



Top Tip

Be part of your Churches Together group to gain more local church contacts for visiting preachers

Finishing well

When you have finished your term or decided you can no longer be the church secretary it is important to finish well. If possible, it would be ideal if there was a handover period from one secretary to another but if this is not possible a list of the all the responsibilities and a folder containing all the information would be helpful. If there has been a generic email set up this transition will be smoother.



Top Tip

Let the Congregational Federation office in Nottingham know any changes to correspondence as soon as possible.

Building Up Your Confidence and Competence

This setting out of typical responsibilities can seem daunting if you are considering becoming a church secretary. However, if you speak to church secretaries, you will hear stories of the joy and satisfaction of the role as well as the challenges and occasional frustrations. It is important to build up our level of confidence in God and in his grace for us as we serve him in this way, and it is also important to build up our confidence that we can indeed serve him in this role.

As is usually the case, our sense of confidence and our sense of competence are closely interconnected. With this in mind, we are able to provide learning sessions (in person and online) for various aspects of this role. If you would like some particular support with any of the responsibilities listed below, then get in touch with us.

- Basic computing
- Basic online competence
- Writing reports and briefing papers
- Identifying grant making bodies and managing the application process

- Taking minutes of meetings
- Managing meetings and teams
- Design skills (print and online)
- Creating and maintaining effective external noticeboards
- Legalities and conventions relating to weddings and funerals / cremation

Top Tip

Consider taking an online minute-taking course to improve your skills. Try

www.newskillsacademy.co.uk

Visit www.theresourcehub.co.uk which contains a page especially for Church Secretaries. This resource is there to help you 24/7 access.



What Church Secretaries told us:

I enjoy the role
as I feel like I
am doing
something
practical for my
church

I also assist
the events
convenor at the
church

A good church
secretary is one by
encouragement
and attention to
detail makes the
work of others a
pleasure

I love having
rotas for
everything from
Bible readings,
food bank and
communion

Summary of skills that would be beneficial

- Good communication and organisational skills
- IT skills
- Meeting skills
- Patience and Pastoral Care
- Trustworthy
- Positive and prayerful attitude

For further information contact the General Secretary,
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www.congregational.org.uk

