



Advice to a new committee member

TN88 Training Notes series: Structures

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So, you've been elected to some kind of church committee, council or working group. Congratulations! Perhaps you're now a Trustee, a Deacon, a PCC member. Maybe you've been invited on to the General Purposes Committee or some other church body with a nonsense title.

But has anyone told you how to actually *be* a member of this august body? No, I thought not. It's supposed to be obvious – but it certainly isn't. So may I give you a spot of advice because I want the experience you are embarking on to be a good one? I fear it so often fails to be so in church circles.

In fact you might like to copy these notes and give them to every other member too, even if some of them have been on this group since before you were born. They probably need help even more than you do, though they'd never admit it.

I've got five straightforward points. They spell out the first point itself: PLEAD.

1 **Plead – P L E A D**

I could have said 'Pray' but that might, sadly, be too predictable. I'd like a stronger word in any case.

If this is any group of people meeting on church business, make sure you plead with God for effective meetings, quality charring and positive outcomes. That applies just as much if this is the Finance Sub-Committee as it would if it were the Eldership. You go to these meetings not, primarily, as an expert or a representative or whatever you happen to be, but as a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is his glory you seek, it is his will that you long to be done from this gathering.

Don't skip this point, whatever you do. Church meetings are, I say it with deep sadness, too often human get-togethers where Jesus is invited in for a prayer at the start and the Grace at the end but asked to remain in the corridor outside during the business. Ask him to stay with you and everyone throughout the meeting.

Pray for yourself and your contribution, for when to speak and when to stay silent. Pray for other members of the group by name. Pray for the one chairing who ought to be encouraging the whole group to pray anyway. Whether the Chair does their stuff or not, try using a prayer such as Colossians 1:9-13 – but be careful because this might just revolutionise the meeting.

More dangerously, pray that you will be open to God changing your mind if your thinking is off-target (are you seeking his will or yours?). Expect to disagree with people, but can you see Christ in them and hear their views? Will your Christian character shine through as you handle the disagreement? Can you relax when the meeting gets tense?

So do not neglect to plead with God for the health and outcome of this next meeting and of the group as a whole. Pray beforehand and at the meeting itself whether there is a time for prayer on the agenda or not.

2 Listen – P L E A D

You need of course to listen to God as you pray. But here I have in mind your need to listen to the other members of the group. To do this get your attitude right. That means seeing this group as seeking to become a team. That's the responsibility of the leader of the group but they may well not be doing that. Even if others are blatantly not taking this advice, you buck the trend and use your ears – and your eyes.

Good meetings are populated not by solo stars but by team members seeking to work together for the good of the whole, not trying to win points for their own view. Teamwork is not easy but you can do something to help.

First of all, learn to listen. In a discussion avoid following those who put their own view across but fail to understand the views of others if they are different. Be ready to listen more than you speak. Watch the body language of others to get an idea of how they are reacting. That's why I mentioned eyes as well as ears above.

You can help the meeting forward by asking something like, "I sense that several of us didn't quite understand that last point from Josh – would that be so?". Or, "Should we not remember the point Esther made five minutes ago which I found so helpful". Or "Noah's not said anything and I'd love to hear his view on this". This is, properly, the job of the person chairing the meeting but you may need to do it for them. Don't just listen, do speak up too, but you'll say something constructive if you've listened first.

Listen outside the meeting too. Canvass opinions if the topic is in the public domain. Talk to your fellow members between meetings to help you understand their viewpoint. Get to know them; you can't be anything like a team if you don't all know each other well. Work as hard outside the meetings as you do in them. You are on a team that exists 24/7.

3 Enthuse – P L E A D

We've reached the middle point in my PLEAD acronym.

If you see Christian committee work as an exercise in discovering God's will for your church, this makes it exciting stuff! Don't let others dampen such enthusiasm. They will tell you that meetings are boring (that may be true), the chairing is abysmal (that would not be unusual) and that nothing ever gets decided or actioned (ouch!).

If these things are so, stand out from the crowd because you know that God *could* work through this group, that he *wants* to work through it. Don't be put off when things go wrong. You may be the newbie, but set a tone that is upbeat and seek to change the culture.

One enthusiast can make a huge difference in a small group. The root meaning of the word 'enthusiast' is having God in you, so there is nothing wrong with that. Have a big picture and upbeat view of this group and its meetings. If you are pleading with God and listening to others, you should have cause to have some enthusiasm for what might happen.

If you are an enthusiast you'll take preparation seriously and read up the paperwork in good time beforehand, and the minutes as soon as they come out. You will also no doubt find out if there are rules you have to abide by in how the business is conducted. You will also turn up on time to meetings.

Finally, you will keep confidences when you are expected to do so. Great damage can be done in churches when stuff that is pastorally sensitive or decisions that need careful explanation to the congregation are leaked by members – just for prayer of course.

4 **Ask – P L E A D**

One way you can help the meeting along is to ask good questions. The first group of these need to be asked before you agree to serve, so now may be too late for that but still ask them. The first question is simply, "Why does this group exist?". Go no further until you receive a sensible answer but you will help everyone by asking this.

Then ask: "What will be my role?", "How does the group work?", "What commitment is expected of me?".

The second group of questions relate to the next meeting: "What exactly are we trying to do with each agenda item?", "Have we all got the necessary information to make a decision?", "Have we actually made a decision that we are agreed about – and who is going to make sure the action happens?".

Dangerous stuff! You need to be brave to stick your head above the parapet. That may prove to be the right turn of phrase because some people will probably shoot at you. But you will help the group so much by getting them to ask these questions. Just do it with charm.

The third group of questions looks back to the last meeting and can be more personal: "How did I get on?", "Was my contribution helpful – or can I now see I said too much or failed to speak up when I should have done?", "What do I learn for next time?"

People who consider such questions risk getting into trouble, but they are the questions that need to be asked and if you start doing it, others may well follow.

5 **Decide – P L E A D**

My final piece of advice to you in my acronym of PLEAD is to help the meeting decide stuff and then action it. You can help a discussion move towards a decision by saying something like, "I feel we are all agreed on A but there's a choice between B and C which we need to agree on." The opposite is to fail to listen and suddenly introduce a point that gets the meeting nowhere.

What happens too often is that the Chair fails in their duty to sort out a clear decision and moves on to the next item too early. In these cases ask, "I'm sorry if I missed it but what exactly did we decide?" Follow this up by, "And who is putting that into action and by when?".

Some people make up their minds quickly, others need time. But you can help move everyone to clear decisions and actions. The whole point of a meeting, after all, is to make decisions and thereby to introduce change. Some are so fearful of this that they seek to ensure nothing is decided. If they fail in that, they then ensure no action is taken. Don't play their games!

So I wish you well in your new responsibility. Being on any committee can be a great responsibility and a really satisfactory experience. If your group is not at that point yet, newbie though you be, you can do so much to help move it in the right direction.

By the way, try to avoid that C word if you possibly can because it means sitting on your backside and talking when you are now an enthusiast for action. Think of it as an Action Group, a Business Team but not as a Committee.

But don't forget that the key point is to PLEAD – with God for his will to be done.

These notes are available at www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes then TN88. See also Article A5, *How to chair meetings*, and Training Notes TN13, *A purpose statement for those who chair*, TN58, *Beware committees*, TN61, *Mapping out a meeting*, and TN97, *How to minute a meeting*.

These notes owe much to the author's writing on the same subject in Adminisheet 59 published by Administry in 1997 and to Adminisheet 1 in the same series. Contact John if you would like to enquire about advice on issues of meetings: for the Chair, the Secretary or for all members.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN88 under Structures.

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