



How to take major decisions

TN125 Training Notes series: Structures

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These notes are designed to help churches where important decisions need to be made in a group context. The group in question may be a council, eldership, working party, PCC, leadership team or any other such setting.

Decision-making is all about change and so can heighten emotions. A church setting is one of the most difficult forums for change as there are issues of passionate spirituality, group ownership and personal identity. Some people, feeling anxious about change in their work or life, look to their church to be a haven of changeless peace.

Major decision-making in churches is therefore a challenge. How can we ensure the process of coming to an agreed mind minimises frustration and anger? Here are ten suggestions.

1 Learn from biblical patterns

The little we have to fall back on in the New Testament Church would seem to offer the following principles.

- **Wide Involvement**
The meetings described in Acts 6:1-6 (see verses 2, 5) and hints in the description of sessions in the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 (see verses 12, 22) point to churchwide involvement.
- **No rush**
I love the expression 'after much discussion' in Acts 15:7.
- **Respected leaders**
There is a smaller leadership group that take the initiative (Acts 6:2; 15:6) in the decision process, perhaps impacted by the clear speaking of one leader.

- **Essential listening**
Instruction from James to do just this in James 1:19.
- **Quality communication**
Acts 6:5 and 15:22 point to a sharing of the outcome with everyone.
- **Mutual care**
Paul's picture of the body applies (eg. 1 Corinthians 12:7) and there are over 50 NT references to how we are to serve and honour 'one another'.
- **Self-knowledge**
In a heated discussion, we tend to defend our argument at any cost. But Jesus warned about specks of sawdust and planks of wood (Matthew 7:3-5).

Values for the process might include: justice, transparency, mutual respect, prayer at every point and seeking God's wisdom.

2 **Discover the real issues**

Decisions are taken by comparing options, but you should not assume you know what these options are in the initial stages. It is important to identify what is the real issue which is often not the same as the presenting problem, and then to see if it has different strands which can helpfully be separated out from each other.

So the presenting problem may be how to stop people drifting away from the church. But the real issue might be the lack of pastoral care, the quality of children's work, one particular group of people, or all of these. See also point 7.

3 **Select the decision-makers**

Many church decisions are taken by the wrong body. A PCC or group of trustees find themselves taking a low-level decision on a matter of detail. This ought to be a decision for a group of two or three people, whether within the structure or an *ad hoc* group.

On the other hand a strategic decision may end up being taken by the Minister when a wider group might have been involved to create ownership.

It is not just the group. Some bodies do not have a membership with the expertise required for a technical decision and need to be advised by others.

In the process of decision-making there may need to be a stage involving a wider body, perhaps the whole congregation (see point 1), even if responsibility for the decision rests with a small leadership.

So choose which groups and, if necessary, who else is right for this decision. Let everyone know. But also ...

4 **Decide on the process**

Make it clear how the issue is going to be researched, whose views will be canvassed, who will take the decision and how this will be actioned over what timescale. Ignorance breeds fear and this then turns to opposition.

Part of this may involve brainstorming ideas and then short-listing options down to a manageable number. This part of the process may best be done by a specially selected small group. Let everyone know who is on this group and how they will work.

The person chairing the decision-making group needs to suggest and get agreement on which options have potential so the list can be further shortened and discussion then focused on just these (see point 7 below). Ask those against each of these what changes it might take to bring them on board.

5 **Choose facilitators, venues and times**

Choose the person who chairs each forum with care. It needs to be someone with necessary skills but best if not the Minister because they should hold passionate views which need to be heard. You cannot chair a discussion to come to a decision if your own views are all too clear to everyone. In some cases you may need a skilled facilitator from outside the church.

One of the roles of the chair is to bring everyone into the discussion and decision without embarrassing anyone in the process. There is often more wisdom in a shy member of the group than in those who are confident in the sound of their own voice. So break into buzz groups and report back, or use post-it notes for anonymous views.

Another role is to get everyone to see where there is agreement so that points of difference are clarified. That means summarising where the meeting has got to and clarifying progress made.

Meeting on church premises at 8.00 pm after a busy work day for most may be necessary for some meetings but is not conducive to creative decision making on major concerns. Getting right away to a neutral venue can help, as can a different day or time, such as a Saturday morning.

6 **Undertake research**

In order to select your options, and certainly when it comes to selecting between them, you need all the necessary information for an informed decision – and in a format so that the implications of each option can be compared with the others.

So if you have different building options you need the costs for each one. But not just the construction costs. What about the future maintenance or staffing costs of each option? Perhaps there are time 'costs' to take into account if one option is going to need more volunteer time to run it than another.

Another area of research may be into people's views on options or ideas for new ones. For a major decision, have the issues been explained clearly to everyone and has there been a system of informed discussion with outputs in each of the church's small groups? This might involve a church-wide questionnaire or focus groups.

If your decision impacts children's work, have the young people's leaders all been asked for their viewpoints? Have the children and teens been given a chance to put their ideas forward? If the decision impacts music in some way (high emotion!), have you asked everyone involved in such ministry to give their views – and have you listened?

7 List the options

If you start with the idea that the presenting issue is an old, cold building the initial plan might be seen as whether to invest in it with a major project to modernise it or not.

But there are other options. There are different levels of work that could be done on the building from a quick makeover to a rebuild. The decision also needs to be set in time: do you do it now, in two years' time or later?

But underneath lie other possibilities. Who said that refurbishing the building was the only way to sort the problem? Might you move out to a new site, hire a hall or school, or transplant into another congregation?

So the first need is to widen the options to all you can think of, but then to bring them back to a reasonable number, a process of short-listing. A group discussion for decision without clear options will not usually be effective.

8 Minimise hurtful conflict

Most decisions are going to involve conflict – no surprises there. But while good conflict can energise the process, bad conflict can be destructive. The more contentious the issue, the more important this section is.

Here are some obvious ways of minimising destructive conflict.

- **Follow the rules**
If there are well set out processes to adhere to, such as over calling meetings and handling debate, make sure you know what they are and stick to them, or someone will seek to overthrow any decision taken on a point of order.
- **Be fair to all**
If you are putting out a background paper, ensure everyone has it a week (or whatever) in advance. Rushing things late creates suspicion and resentment.
- **Avoid secrets**
There may be occasional issues which you cannot promote in advance for pastoral or time-sensitive reasons. But avoid springing the need for a decision on a group that is not ready for it (such as under AOB). Keep the congregation in the picture if you can.
- **Don't play the spiritual card**
Christians can be adept at doing this – by suggesting prayer when what is needed is open debate, or by the leader seeking to control the outcome by indicating that one option has arisen under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- **Welcome diversity**
The group needs a variety of personalities and viewpoints. Do not try to silence those who disagree with the leadership, but teach respect for all.
- **Listen carefully**
One of the key reasons for destructive conflict in a church is people who feel their views have not been heard and so do not matter.

9 Select how to decide

There are a number of ways to take a decision. None of them necessarily gives you the 'right' answer. For example, a majority vote simply tells you that more people favour Option A than Option B.

- **Simple majority**
What we are used to: more people agree than disagree, but a blunt instrument which can result in an almost 50% minority.
- **Percentage majority**
As above but requiring 65% or 75%, say, for any outcome to be binding.
- **Unanimity**
Percentage majority at 100%. This sounds so spiritual but in practice puts people under great pressure – and allows any one member to hold the whole group to ransom.
- **Consensus**
No vote as such but a general agreement by the group over the option to pursue – though it fails to give each person a voice.
- **Delay decision**
Discuss now, but vote at the next meeting. Some need time to reflect on a discussion – but there is a danger that the second meeting repeats the discussion or starts all over again.
- **Spectrum voting**
Not a formal means of deciding but a useful straw poll. It is described in full in Training Notes TN8, *Major decisions – a new approach*, on this website.
- **Mutual consent**
This allows a decision over three meetings, requesting permission to proceed from eventual dissenters, and employing a listening group between meetings to meet dissenters and understand their views.

In all these what matters is respect for everyone's opinions and understanding for those whose views are not chosen. There must be no sense of winners and losers. The issue is one of finding God's will.

10 Clarify the next steps

Once the decision is taken you then need to agree any timescale involved and those responsible for taking the decision forward. Too often these are glossed over in relief at a decision, but without them nothing may happen.

It may also be wise to review the decision at a later date, to be chosen.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN125. See also Articles A24, *Mission-shaped Church Councils*, and A40/41, *Going deeper into meetings*, plus Training Notes TN8, *Major decisions – a new approach*, TN13, *A purpose statement for those who chair*, TN61, *Mapping out a meeting*, TN79, *'One another' teams*, and TN136, *Restructure your committees*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN125 under Structures (with a link to Planning).

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