



Identify your church's groups

TN127 Training Notes series: Leadership

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Any gathering of people is made up of many kinds of sub-groups. Churches are no exception. Everyone will be part of several different groups and their behaviour and attitudes may well reflect any one of those groups at any one time.

It is therefore important for leaders to consider what sub-groups may exist, who might belong to each one and, therefore, why people may behave in certain ways at some times but not at others.

Here is one way of analysing a typical church congregation. The following categories all overlap as will become clear from the examples I provide.

1 **Natural groups**

Everyone will belong to certain groups that exist beyond the church itself. None of these will be listed as such on the church website but the group bonding can be strong.

Families and extended families

Some people will be on their own, others will identify as parents with their children, but there may be larger clans within the church with grandparents or adult children with their own families.

Geography

It may be that there are groups within the congregation formed by where people live: whether locally or further away, whether on the estate or off it, whether in the city centre or the suburbs. Or there may be several people from one street who bond together.

Ethnicity

Most UK churches will have a dominant ethnicity with minorities who may therefore group together for encouragement or even protection. There may be issues too of language spoken, dress style and thought forms.

Age

The age profile of church members may show up a healthy mix across the entire spectrum but often particular sectors will be missing (such as teens or adults under 40) or the congregation may be broadly of one age (such as young adults, or over 70s).

Stage of life

This is not quite the same as age. Mothers with young children may group together, teenagers from the same school will bond with their peer group, those who have survived cancer may group together on the basis of shared experience. What about the housebound, or those in care homes?

Gender

There is a natural grouping by gender. The church may run particular activities for men or women only or there may be issues of complementarian doctrine affecting teaching or leadership, or stereotyping ideas when it comes to activities such as maintenance or flower arranging.

Employment

The congregation may have some groups of people by employment type such as those who are unemployed, those in education or all who work in a particular factory.

Friendship

There may be unofficial groupings by those who are natural friends from outside the church. Some of these may consist of only two or three people but be powerful.

Ownership

Consider the groups of those without their own transport, or with no internet connection. The latter group came into sharp focus during the Covid pandemic as church services moved online.

2 Influencer groups

But there is another set of groups, church-based but not listed, that can also have a significant impact on church life. These are groups that influence attitudes.

Respect

Some people will be held in high regard for their godliness and who use this power for good in the church. Some might be those who have been members of the church for many years and are looked up to as unofficial 'elders'. But some may use their position to block change or to criticise the leadership.

Long-term hurt

Some churches have long-term memories simmering under the surface, especially if over issues that were never properly addressed. There may then be 'them and us' groups causing resentment or tensions.

Fan club

There may be those who align themselves behind different leaders, rather as happened to Paul and Apollos in 1 Corinthians 1:12. The groups listed here are hardly new phenomena.

Single-issue

Some groups form over a specific issue: such as a contentious matter being considered by the leadership or a doctrinal stance. These will usually be 'for' and 'against' groups. There will be passion for the stance taken and the issue may become emotional.

Enthusiasts

There will be a group of enthusiasts in most churches, those wanting the leaders to move ahead fast and backing every development that matches their own wishes. This is a vital group for any leadership to have, but it can be dangerous if a small number of people's enthusiasm upsets a larger group of rational thinkers who then oppose change.

Moaners

This will be a group in many churches, even if it only consists of one or two people. They have a glass half-empty attitude to everything and reject any change at all. They can influence others who then join them.

3 Short-term groups

These are visibly obvious groups but which last for a limited time, perhaps on one occasion only. It can be seen that most of these divide the church into two groups: those in and those not.

Short course

An enquirers' group may meet weekly for ten weeks and build a real identity in this time. Disbanding the group or spreading its members to other groups can be damaging to the links that have been developed.

One-off activity

A Saturday work-party may be a one-off but if the group is small it may develop a positive sense of achievement or a feeling of annoyance that others did not show up. This could have a knock-on effect for some time afterwards.

One service – announcements

Each congregation on one Sunday forms a short-term group lasting an hour or two. That may not seem important but does have implications for communication. For

example, only those in the group of 10.30 am. service attenders last week heard the notice about the special weekend coming up.

One service – teaching

Another reason for considering one particular service and the group that was present, is that they heard the teaching with its suggested application and others did not. This may have important implications for church life. Or it may be that something unusual happened in that service and the group experienced it but others did not.

Special events

Similarly, there will be a group who were present at the church weekend away, or who came to the one-off worship event, or who were at last Wednesday's prayer gathering. They have all experienced something that those who missed the event have not.

4 Official church groups

Finally, the obvious ones. These are the groups that appear on your website or in your literature. Here they are analysed under five distinct headings.

The membership

The top-level group for any church is the 'membership'. For some denominations this is straightforward to define, but for others less so. Its boundaries may be clear or they may be fuzzy. For an Anglican church it might be the formal electoral roll, a less formal membership listing, or the diocesan measure of Worshipping Community.

Leadership groups

These include any staff or ministry team, trustees, eldership, diaconate, PCC, leadership team, etc. that take a church-wide view of issues. Also groups for leadership in particular ministries: home group leaders, children's group leaders, 'heads of department'.

Management groups

You may think of these as 'committees', bodies that have responsibility for specific areas of church life. These would include a Standing Committee, Finance Group, Plant and Grounds Group and any special activity planning group.

Activity groups

Every church will have people who work together and thereby form a group, whether in name or not. The choir or music group, bereavement visitors, welcome team, flower arrangers, maintenance group, prayer ministry team, Messy Church team, and so on. Some will be teams, some merely members of a rota.

Growth groups

The church may have a network of small groups for building discipleship, groups for children and teens, a monthly seniors' group, single gender Bible study groups, and other long-term groups that meet regularly.

Applications

I have listed 25 types of overlapping group under four main headings and you may want to add others. What might be the practical use of such analysis?

One application is that an understanding of sub-groups is necessary to explain what is going on in a leadership meeting, in a church's spiritual development, or in a programme. It helps to understand why people behave in the way they do, why some ideas never seem to gain any traction, why people may drift away from church.

A second application is to consider how to model unity in a diverse group structure. If some groups hear a notice but others do not, how can the church be as one?

Here are some specific ideas within these two broad areas.

Natural groups

- 1 Some small churches have one or more extended family group within their membership that can have a remarkably powerful impact on church life for good or ill.
- 2 Tensions may exist in the church around a particular age group that seem to have the leader's ear when another natural grouping is ignored.
- 3 Gender or ethnic groups may approach church life in different ways, one natural grouping may dominate in leadership, or professionally employed members may get their way over those who are in so-called unskilled jobs. See Acts 6:1.

Influencer groups

- 4 Any leader would be well advised to discover who holds power within the congregation, whether through the respect they are held in or through leading a pressure group of some kind.
- 5 It is important for a church leader to understand the church's (and local community's) history and, in particular, events or issues from the past which still have a group impact today.
- 6 Current and past issues are best addressed rather than put to one side. Churches are not good at facing conflict through disagreement or misunderstanding.

Short-term groups

- 7 This kind of analysis can help you realise who knows what and who does not. Therefore what communication actions should be considered so that everyone has the information they need.
- 8 Are there groups that exist only for a short time and which can now be broken up or might this cause pastoral damage and hurt?
- 9 In an age when people's attendance on Sunday is more sporadic than in the past, what can be done to keep a church together in a Sunday by Sunday teaching programme?

Official church groups

- 10 Christians in churches are to display both unity and diversity (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4). The danger is to over-balance to either the membership or to the small groups. Both are needed.
- 11 Formal church groups are often unclear about their precise role and become ineffective as a result. Growth groups in particular tend to lose their impact over time and need constant challenge and development.
- 12 Is our leadership and management group structure effective or are we wasting time and effort in a structure that needs simplification and revision?

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN127. See also Article A48, *Organising your small groups*, plus Training Notes TN30, *How to give and receive criticism*, and TN49, *What's going on under the water*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN127 under Leadership (with a link to Management).

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