



Restructure your committees

TN136 Training Notes series: Structures

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So your church wants to review your committee structure? Excellent! Most church committees continue year by year without further thought. Much time and energy can be wasted in committees.

The notes form a companion to Training Notes TN58, *Beware committees*, and the two really need to be read together. The other notes list a number of dangers in running committees and include several important principles linked to structure.

But what are committees? They are simply specialist groups of a church governance body such as the Trustees (PCC in a Church of England church). By the way, they are usually 'committees' not 'sub-committees'. A Council or Trustee Board sets up 'committees'. If one of those then needs a specialist sub-group within its remit, that is a 'sub-committee'.

Committees allow a Council or set of Trustees to focus on big picture while fulfilling their governance responsibilities to oversee every area of a church's ministry. Committees should really focus on oversight rather than daily detail, but often cover both.

Here are some of the key points that matter more than any structure.

- 1 Avoid the word 'committee'! Committees sit and talk – but what you need are groups that lead to action. So call them 'Action groups', 'Working groups', 'Task forces' or anything that points to action more than discussion. From now on these notes will refer to 'Action Groups'.
- 2 Give each group a clear purpose and powers, keep the number as small as you can and aim for three or four people on most of them, rather than seven or eight.
- 3 Clarify their accountability and keep decision-making close to the action. If someone is on an 'Action Group' they need to be in on the action, not just the talk.

- 4 Review each committee on a regular basis. Do you still need it? Is it proving its value? And review the whole structure from time to time too, perhaps using these notes.

Read Training Notes TN58, *Beware committees* for further points and more detail. The plan should be to have a simple structure and clear definitions.

Two special groups

Most Councils have, and may be mandated to have, a sub-group that can meet more easily than the full body and take decisions between main meetings. This is often called a Standing Committee (try 'Executive Action Group'). This is seen as an additional group in the structures that follow.

Some churches have what may loosely, and perhaps not very helpfully, be called a Leadership Team for prayer and strategic thinking plus support for the Minister. This is a little different from the groups these notes are concerned with. It may be known as the 'Vision Team' or 'Strategy Group'. For more on this see Training Notes TN18, *A leadership team checklist*.

Possible structures for a set of 'Action Groups'

Here are seven possible ways to design a church committee structure. This does not take account of large churches with a significant number of paid staff, where things need a slightly different approach. It does assume that there will be at least one Trustee on each group.

1 No Action Groups at all

The first option is not to have such groups at all, other than any special groups as mentioned above. This is a valid option and can work for a smaller church whose Trustees are prepared to meet reasonably frequently. They then tackle all the business that might otherwise be delegated to another group.

Examples

Trustees alone (possibly with a Standing Committee and/or Vision Team)

Advantages

- enables Trustees to be on top of all their business and prevents wasting time with different people in a range of meetings;
- helpful if the number of people prepared to serve on any Council or group is limited.

Disadvantages

- gives a high level of work for Trustees in anything other than a small church;
- does not share out involvement beyond the Trustees themselves.

2 Short-term groups only

A second option is to have no permanent Action Groups (as in 1 above) but to set up limited life (or *ad hoc*) groups when required, each with a fixed end-date (usually within one year). This idea is normally used for groups planning an event or overseeing a fixed-term project. But it can also be used for groups that can be justified on a more permanent basis. The norm may be to close them down at the end of the year so you

need to justify re-establishing them, which can be helpful. This also allows for some change-over in membership.

Examples

Missions weekend planning group

Building project group

Finance group (renewed each year)

Pastoral care group (renewed with amended purpose and people each year)

Advantages

- avoids the risk of proliferation of groups which then become stale;
- only allows groups to exist when a real need can be shown.

Disadvantages

- may be somewhat forced for groups that do require continuity;
- takes time for Trustees to review year by year.

3 Structure by need

This allows Action Groups to be set up whenever a need can be demonstrated. This means you launch the structure with nothing and let it grow as needs arise. Some groups will be permanent and some will be limited life. You give the whole structure a fixed life-span (say, four years) and then start again. So this is one step on from the previous short-term only category.

Examples

Your church employs staff so you can show a need for an HR group.

Your outreach seems to be in need of revitalisation so you establish an appropriate group.

You may have various short-term groups within this structure for events and one-off needs.

Advantages

- each group should have a clearly needed purpose;
- it avoids the danger of ongoing groups whose purpose is no longer vital.

Disadvantages

- more permanent groups may still continue to exist after a need has passed;
- you might always justify a need so this idea then fails to work effectively.

4 Structure by church activities

This is what most churches assume by default will be the basic structure. So a trustee body or PCC might set up working groups as shown below.

Examples

Worship and teaching

covering: Sunday services, liturgical content, teaching plans, music, home groups

Pastoral care and prayer

Bereavement, care for elderly and those in need, home visits, prayer ministry

Outreach and service

Courses, events, personal evangelism, compassionate ministries

Global mission links

Contact with mission partners, financial allocation

Youth and children's work

Sunday and mid-week groups for children and young people, syllabi, leadership

Buildings and grounds

Regular maintenance, major projects

Finance and administration

Budgets, management accounts, financial strategy, audit

+ limited life groups for special events or needs not covered within the above.

Advantages

- it is what most people expect and can include all church activity;
- it covers the areas the Trustees need to be aware of in their oversight role.

Disadvantages

- it fails to question whether activities and their groups are necessary or right;
- it can proliferate ineffective groups and meetings rather than activity,

5 Structure by church purpose

Another way of doing this is to see church life in five dimensions along the line of the Church Health Review (see Article A35, *Mapping your church*, for a simplified version) and instead have groups for areas of church purpose which cross over areas of activity. This is a completely different, and more healthy, way of thinking 'church'.

You are not focusing on individual activities but on how the church is achieving the kind of purposes any church should have. Individual activities can run themselves through those who lead them. Here the structure is enabling the Trustees to focus on what really matters.

Examples

Growing in relationship with God

Discipleship for all ages through worship, teaching, prayer, groups, lifestyle

Growing in relationship with each other

Belonging for all ages through community, care, welcome groups, comms

Growing in relationship with the world

Outreach through local presence, practical service, evangelism, global mission

Leadership*

Through vision, planning, facing difficulties, outcomes

Support

Through church office, co-ordination, staffing, plant, finance, records

Or you might use another set of purposes (such as Rick Warren's five Ms).

* This would be your Vision Team.

Advantages

- provides a clear focus on what it means to be a church and keeps it all purpose-based;
- avoids the danger of trying to keep a programme running.

Disadvantages

- not so clear cut in that more than one group will be concerned with particular activities;
- you will still need a Finance Group within the Support function, and perhaps a Children and Families Group which straddles different purposes.

6 Structure by teams of workers

Another way is to have everyone in the church active in a team and then to give the teams responsibility for their own area. You might want to ensure there is one independent Trustee on each team. This is activity based again (as 4 above). Some activities will have a large team (home group leaders in any reasonably sized church for example) so it will be necessary for an inner core of a handful of people to form the Action Group that reports back to the Trustees.

Examples

Worship leaders and preachers
Musicians
Home group leaders
Children and young people's group leaders
Catering and hospitality team
Bereavement visitors
Pastoral care workers
Prayer ministry team
Outreach organisers
Treasurers team
Buildings and grounds group
Office administration and operations staff and volunteers
Mission partners champions
Tech and infrastructure techies
Welcomers
Playgroup organisers

Advantages

- encourages everyone to be involved;
- keeps decision making very close to activity.

Disadvantages

- there can be a lot of teams which makes the whole structure cumbersome;
- Action Groups should have an oversight role which a group of workers alone cannot really provide.

7 A hybrid arrangement

It may be possible to have a hybrid arrangement that straddles several of these structures. This would ensure that the Trustees are considering not just existing activities but needs, purposes and worker teams.

Examples

A set consisting of:

Finance Group
young peoples' leaders group
group for thinking that is mission-based
group for pastoral care
planning group for an event

Advantages

- takes the best of all the structures to match requirements;
- thinking through the options is a healthy exercise.

Disadvantages

- this gets untidy and not so straightforward;
- it may end up as a structural mess.

So there are seven possibilities with some examples and a few of the points for and against each one. The hope is that by listing all these in this way, everyone can consider options rather than just assuming that there is only one way to set up or rethink the structure for Action Groups.

So, what about your church? Might it be a good idea to schedule a review of your Action Groups now, using these ideas for some fresh thinking?

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN136. See also Article A24, *Mission-shaped church councils*, plus Training Notes TN18, *A leadership team checklist*, TN58, *Beware committees*, TN88, *Advice to a new committee member*, TN118, *Why, exactly, are we meeting?* and TN147, *The role of the PCC*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN136 under Structures.

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