



Help! I'm a consultant

TN64 Training Notes series: Planning

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So you've been asked to help another church on their journey. Perhaps you've been called a 'mission accompanier' or a 'church mentor'. You may have been given the C title - 'consultant' sounds so grand.

But you are fretting. Why me? Who do they think I am? What on earth am I supposed to do? I'm no expert!

If it helps at all, this writer fell into consultancy without realising it and still finds himself scared silly by some situations he has to address. But perhaps that's exactly how it should be.

I was recently asked to talk to a group of people who had taken on the role of church consultant for a particular cluster of churches. Most felt inadequate. So I tried to encourage them and help them see something of what they were really supposed to be doing.

I came up with five groups of five points. I hope that something here may resonate with you. At the end I list some of the fears that this group told me they had. The list is a fascinating one.

If you are confident as a church consultant, please don't bother to read any further. But if, like me, you wonder if you've come through the wrong door, or feel a fraud, or are genuinely frightened by the people you are dealing with, I hope there is something here to offer strength for the task.

These are only first thoughts. Give me further ideas so that future versions can be improved and help others who are called on to be church consultants.

We're not consultants, we're ...

- 1 **Subversives**
We need a clear idea of our *underlying* agenda. My aim is to move people on one stage in their discipleship of Jesus, whatever the topic I am addressing.
- 2 **Outsiders**
Our greatest strength is to be as innocent as possible of all the underlying issues, minimising our baggage. Even if not total outsiders, we can still be independent.
- 3 **Watchers**
God gave us two eyes so we need to use them. All we need to do is observe: we shall see things that are invisible to insiders until we point them out.
- 4 **Listeners**
God gave us two ears so we need to use them too. Learn the ability to get people relaxing and then talking to you and see what they give away.
- 5 **Interpreters**
We then analyse what we see and hear in the context of what we already know about this church – and, more importantly, about churches or life in general.

Our role is to take a church out of its comfort zone

- 1 **From asking 'How?' to asking 'Why?' and 'Why not?'**
'Why?' questions challenge people to do the right things. 'Why not?' questions challenge them to have faith as they do the right things.
- 2 **From worrying about detail to considering big picture**
Most people can cope with day-to-day detail but are scared of the big spiritual issues. They will always default down the scale so our job is to keep pushing them up.
- 3 **From always looking to the past to having faith for an unknown future**
We need to learn from the past, analyse the present and pray for the future. Most people hanker after the past because it is free of risk, so stress the future.
- 4 **From the ease of stability to the adventure of change**
Following Jesus is all about continuous development – but many of the people we shall deal with do not seem to have spotted this yet. We need to help them.
- 5 **From being members of an institution to being disciples of Jesus Christ**
It makes no sense but some people can cope with the otherness of God more than they can with talk about Jesus, who is rather too personal for comfort.

A spectrum of views to move a church along

Here's a spectrum of understandings of 'church'. Can we move people one stage along this from whatever is their starting point? Most people are stuck somewhere on the line.

- 1 The building is the church.

- 2 The Minister is the church.
- 3 We help the Minister to be the church (*that's the clever one*).
- 4 We are the church.
- 5 We are part of God's church.

(Taken from the brilliant but out-of-print workbook *How to be a local church* by John Cole, Kevin Mayhew 1990)

So who do we think we are?

- 1 **Consultancy isn't the point**
It's only a means to helping people move on. It's no big deal in itself. It's a fancy term for travelling a short distance with people who would value some perceptive company.
- 2 **Our strength is in our weakness**
If we feel inadequate, that can be no bad thing. Read all of 2 Corinthians, but pause when you get to 12:9. This is the Kingdom, not McKinsey's.
- 3 **Pray for wisdom and discernment**
These are the gifts we need, but have you got a small group of people praying for you in this task and, if not, why not?
- 4 **Search for real honesty**
We need to keep confidences well, but if people come to respect us they will start to be honest with us. Sadly, this is unusual in churches.
- 5 **Building relationships is key**
... or the previous point will not apply. We need to get everyone possible to trust us. Provided we are not caught up in the issues and listen well, this should follow.

What about our expectations of ourselves?

- 1 **We are not the experts but we bring experience**
We all have experience to bring whatever our background and whether we are ordained or lay. Unless we have been brought in for a specific expertise, that is not the issue.
- 2 **We don't have all the answers but we can ask the right questions**
It's important that we recognise this. Getting the church to ask good questions is the key. For ideas see the Church Health Review in the Health-checks section of this site.
- 3 **We are not prophets but we may need to challenge**
There are times when our position means that it is right to challenge a church where we consider there is weakness or wrong-doing. We must not shirk this responsibility.
- 4 **We may not be confident but we need to know where we are going**
However nervous we feel we should have some kind of basic direction we are heading in or plan to start from, even if we need to deviate from it as we often will.

5 **We are not responsible to God for the outcome but for our contribution**

I have had to come back to this point so often, when I feel an assignment has got somewhere only to see the church decide to do nothing about it. It may be hurt pride more than anything else. Provided we are faithful to our calling, we have to leave the outcome to God.

Two case studies

For an example of 'unbagged' thinking try Exodus chapter 18 for the story of Jethro and Moses. See how points throughout these notes apply to this.

For an example of New Testament church assessments (a rather different scenario), try Revelation chapters 2 and 3. It can be helpful to ask a church what they think the angel might say to them in praise and then following the words, 'but this I have against you'.

Consultants' fears

Here are some examples of what one group of church consultants wrote down individually in answer to the question: 'What concerns or frightens you about this role?'

- Fear of imposing my prejudices and limited understanding
- Trying to see my good ideas rather than listen and attend to their situation and need
- Not hearing God clearly

- Clumsy observations making things worse
- Misinterpreting – leading to suggesting the church goes in the wrong direction
- The thought of provoking conflict that makes the Minister's life more difficult

- That what I have to offer won't be enough – imposter syndrome
- Not being part of clergy – ignorance of structures, jargon, etc.
- I'll misunderstand and get things wrong
- Having to deal with unknown power (and other) dynamics
- The Minister has more experience of ministry than I have
- That I may fail to hear and see what is really going on

- The expectations of others ... and not meeting them!
- They think I have more to offer than I really have
- What right have I to tell another Minister what to do?
- That they believe I am an expert

- Getting sucked in too deeply
- Dealing with fragile personalities
- They might not like me!
- That I'm not going to make any difference

So, if you feel like any of this, you are in good company. Read 2 Samuel 12:1 (note the story-telling technique too). I wonder how Nathan felt about this assignment – put yourself in his shoes! But note that God sent him. We don't go in our own name.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN64. For some background points see also Article A4, *Twelve questions to help you plan* and Training Notes TN17, *Suggested questions for an annual review*, TN30, *How to give and receive criticism*, TN49, *What's going on under the water*, TN94, *Becoming self-aware*, TN103, *How to encourage creative thinking*, TN124, *What's the point of church?* and TN127, *Identify your church's groups*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN64 under Planning.

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