A daily office for church staff

TN66 Training Notes series: Management

A few years ago the accepted pattern for church Ministers was to work from their home, often a tied house. If there were other 'staff' these were normally Assistant Ministers who also accepted that home and work-base were one.

Then Minister's Secretaries and Church Administrators started to be appointed to help cope with the growing amount of administrative work. Although many early posts of this kind had their base in the Minister's home, this pattern was soon seen to be intrusive and the idea of a Church Office became the norm.

During this time a range of other lay staff appointments appeared: youth workers, pastoral staff, community workers and interns. Some of these worked from home, some from a church base.

Meanwhile, larger churches had discovered the value of a staff team all working out of an extended church office. Now this idea is starting to catch on with other churches which have a number of staff.

These notes investigate this idea as a discussion-starter for churches considering such a move, and promote the concept for those who have not yet considered it. This 2024 update has been prepared in a post-Covid time when home working has become much more a norm. What impact this will have on church staffs remains to be seen.

A central base

Church staff may mean employed staff in a medium or larger church where it is not uncommon to have a Minister, Assistant, Youth Worker, Pastoral Visitor, Administrator and others. But there may be unpaid volunteers who offer significant amounts of time too: people who have taken early retirement or interns for example. So the meaning of 'staff' will depend on local usage. Here is what I have in mind as a central 'office'. It can be quite simple.

- A set of spaces or an open-plan room where such church staff (including Minister) can work. If open-plan, which may well be the ideal, there need to be extra break-out rooms for counselling, confidential telephone calls and preparation/study.

- A time in each day when all staff (other than those in the administrative office – see below) aim to work from this base, recognising that much ministry should not be office-bound and has to be more flexible than most office-based jobs. A typical choice would be mornings as core-time.

- The church's administrative office or reception point, which will normally be a public space, as a separate, front-of-house facility to avoid unnecessary interruption of other staff.

- Somewhere within this for the staff team to meet both informally (such as a coffee point) and formally (for staff meetings). The latter may well double up with the Minister's office or other space, but the former is the vital component if this idea is to work well.

Advantages

Here are five clear points that commend this idea. This approach is, after all, what most people will be used to in their previous jobs outside the Church.

1   **Home life**
    The staff (including the Minister) and their families where applicable have some privacy in their homes without constant interruption from telephone and callers. It also means that when staff are appointed they do not have to own properties large enough to act as a work base. There is a more obvious break between home and 'work'.

2   **Team working**
    There should be a significant improvement in working as a staff team (even if only two or three people). Relationships are formed as people learn to work together instead of working as a group of solo workers. Ideas are shared and improved. Drafts are checked. People are aware of what others are engaged in. One member of staff can cover for another. Short impromptu meetings sort issues out. Creativity blossoms.

3   **Shared facilities**
    Equipment and facilities can be shared and so used more effectively. With networked computers there can be access to a common database. A colour printer can be used by all. One telephone number reaches everyone. Materials can be held centrally and securely rather than being scattered.

4   **Safety**
    Working solo from an isolated church building (as some Administrators have to do) can be dangerous if access is not restricted. Having two or more people on site for much of the time cuts the danger level and makes working life more pleasant.

5   **Accountability**
    There is a more disciplined approach to working and less risk of individual staff struggling with wasting time at home. Line management becomes a reality. Staff who interview and counsel others work in a more acceptable environment.

Possible difficulties

But making a switch to this way of working is not always straightforward. Here are five barriers to overcome or dangers to guard against.

1   **Suitable plant**
     Few churches have buildings designed for a staff team or the money to transform unsuitable property into a purpose-built work-base. Some churches have to make do by using a variety of spaces spread over a halls complex, others adapt a far from suitable vestry area, and some have to rent an office elsewhere, especially if they have no buildings of their own.

2   **Change**
     This approach calls for a significant change in thinking and working. Many Ministers were trained in solo mode and find the transition difficult. Some other staff who are self-starters or used to working alone do not make good team-members overnight. There may be no leader with the motivation and skill to oversee the transition.

3   **Style of ministry**
     Most staff will not work normal office hours and much of their work should not be office-based. Pastors and youth workers need to be out and about, not sitting in front of a computer. This approach could professionalise church ministry in an unhelpful way and may work against the flexibility required in much Christian ministry. Part-time staff may make effective team-working difficult.

4   **Power**
     Under these arrangements, the staff might be such a close-knit body that they become the effective leaders of the church with power sucked into the centre. The church's Council or Eldership then becomes a rubber-stamp for decisions already made by the team. This is an unhealthy position to be in.

5   **Interruption**
     If administrative and staff offices share one space, this can become a hub of church chatter so that work is frustrated. Time can be wasted because staff talk to each other, have endless meetings or interrupt the Administrator. Teachers find it difficult to have private space to prepare sermons and talks. A constant stream of callers may disturb everyone.

The water-cooler concept

One added danger is to settle for a compromise. It is possible for the Minister to continue to work from home while others work from the central base. Or the central office may be no more than a group of isolated spaces where members of the staff work from with their doors tightly shut. Both these approaches prevent team-working and can introduce barriers that separate out key members of the team.

Some may attempt a split approach working from both home and central office, but this raises issues of where files and libraries should be located. It is likely that, for church staff who work evenings as a normal part of their schedule, there will of necessity be some measure of split base, but this can cause problems if members of staff gravitate back to home on a regular basis.

So perhaps what is needed is the courage to try it properly, with a much more open-plan approach for everyone (Minister too) if the church buildings can accommodate this, but with break-out rooms available for preparation and telephone calls where confidentiality is required.

The key to the whole idea comes back to what we might term the 'water cooler concept' (or coffee machine if you prefer). Unless the office is all open-plan, the value of such working depends on the one central location where people bump into each other regularly through the day and so link with each other. This may mean agreeing to break for refreshments at fixed times to force such engagement, especially for a staff team of only three or four.

Do the advantages outweigh the disadvantages? It depends on a number of local factors but I would argue that the concept of a staff team working together from a shared base is the right default pattern for a growing number of churches. Many people from innovative, progressive industries would be amazed at anything other than this.

These notes are available at https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index then TN66. See also Articles A33 and A34, *Roles for a church office.* Also Training Notes TN41, *What makes a group a team?*, TN50, *Should the staff lead the church?,* TN79, *'One another' teams,* and TN128, *Effective staff meetings.*

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN66 under Management with a link to Structures.

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