



Should the staff lead the church?

TN50 Training Notes series: Structures

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These notes tackle an issue that affects larger churches. It centres on how to define the role of the staff team, those employed by the church to carry out its day-to-day work. In what sense are they the church's leaders?

Large churches usually employ staff. There will often be a Minister*, perhaps one or two Associates/Assistants*, a Youth Pastor, a Families Co-ordinator, a Community Worker or Evangelist, an Administrator or Operations Manager, staff for the church office, interns. They will form a team and, perhaps, sub-teams within it.

The official term 'staff' may also include some key voluntary posts, but often they are people who are able to dedicate a significant amount of time to the church's work in heading one of its ministries.

There will then be the normal decision-making structure for the denomination. This might include an Eldership, Diaconate, Session, PCC or selected leadership team. I will refer to these people as the 'Council'.

The questions then arise: where does and where should corporate leadership lie in this church? With the staff or with the Council? There is often confusion.

The attraction of the staff as the leadership team

A 'corporate Minister' model easily develops. Instead of leadership falling to just one person as Minister, the mantle falls on the staff. And although one person can never be omniscient, a mixed staff team can get pretty close to it. Here are some reasons why this happens.

* Such people are of course not technically 'employed' in some churches' structures.

1 High ability

The staff team is likely to consist of some highly capable people, several of whom will have theological training and experience of church work.

2 Daily involvement

Many of them will be 'full time' on the church's business. They meet regularly to discuss operational issues. So they are closely in touch with the day-to-day detail.

3 Close-knit team

They meet in twos and threes each day, especially if they work together from the church site rather than from homes. They grow into a tight team with the Minister as leader, sharing his or her insights.

Meanwhile many members of the Council, though gifted, are under significant work and family pressure and cannot give the time necessary to get to grips with the issues that the staff are grappling with, which in turn inform the key decisions. At their business meetings the Council find the staff have effectively made the decisions for them. There is also confusion as to whether members of the staff are part of the Council or not, with problems either way.

This is not healthy. There is confusion and, often, irritation. Time is being wasted. There is a lack of clarity as to what is the purpose of both the Council and of the staff as a corporate body (as opposed to the individual roles of each staff member). The staff effectively lead the church – but most of them were chosen to play a leadership role in one department of the church's life, not to have an overview. And many are the employees ... usually of the Council!

So here is one line of thought to consider if you recognise these problems. It is only an outline to pursue; it does not aim to sort everything out as you will see. I welcome feedback by email (see the top of each website page for details).

The charity leadership model

The key point about charity leadership is that there are **two** bodies with **distinct** roles that complement each other (when working properly). One is the 'Trustees' or 'Board', a group of people from outside the charity's staff who meet relatively infrequently (perhaps six times a year) but who oversee the whole work and are led by someone appointed to chair meetings.

The other body is the staff working under the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). They carry out the day-to-day work. They will often work in association with a large number of volunteers.

The key difference between the roles of Trustees and staff in this model is as follows. Trustees take the big picture and long-term overview of the charity, they set the strategy and agree the plan. They also appoint the CEO (and fire him or her if necessary). The staff then take that strategy and work it out in the daily work of the organisation. They provide the Trustees with all the necessary information to take the big decisions and may give advice. One body is close to the detail, the other is somewhat detached.

In short, the staff manage the show. The Trustees define the show and ensure it is managed well.

The CEO and perhaps one or two other senior staff will attend the meetings of the Trustees but will not have a vote.

Of course, it does not always work out smoothly, but it should do if the two bodies follow their distinct roles and do not meddle with the other's responsibilities. The structure depends on the close working and trust between the Chair of Trustees and the CEO. When this relationship is really good, the charity prospers. For further thinking on this see Training Notes TN5, *Responsibilities of mission agency boards*, and TN35, *Causes of friction in mission agencies*.

How might this apply to a large church?

The model will not fit exactly. It is a secular model based on a volunteer-based business and not on the rich biblical concepts of a church under the Lordship of Christ. Many Ministers are licensed not employed. Most Christians will find a close equivalence between a Minister and a CEO to be unhelpful, to say the least. And, it has to be said, the charity model does not always work well (though that is not the fault of the model!).

But my point is that there are *aspects* of the model that are worth exploring.

- The idea of two distinct bodies with differing but complementary roles: one rather more removed from the detail than the other.
- The idea of two distinct people to oversee these two bodies and to work closely with each other.

So, in following these two lines of thought:

- 1 Define the roles of both Council and staff on one side of A4 each, along the lines that might be appropriate for charity Trustees and staff. Emphasise the difference between them – and the need then to work in harmony.
- 2 Let the Minister lead the staff, and appoint someone of ability to lead the Council (even if denominational rules means this has to be delegated by the Minister) so that there are two distinct people in these roles. They must trust each other and work together closely. Many churches do this to some extent already – this pushes the idea a bit further.
- 3 Joint meetings of the two bodies can be helpful – but not as the norm.
- 4 Let the staff inform the Council as necessary for decision-making, but not interfere with that decision-making. Stop the Council from interfering with the work of the staff (and the volunteers they lead). The Minister(s) and perhaps the Director of Operations should attend the Council as a matter of course, and have a major input. But they are not the leaders of the Council.

That is framework enough for any church to work it out in a way that would fit their own ethos, their understanding of biblical models of church, and the requirements of their denomination.

So, the answer to the question of the title of these notes: should the staff lead the church? Yes and no. Yes, in leading the day-to-day outworking of the strategic plan. No, in overseeing that plan and the long-term vision of the church. How might it work for your church?

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes> then TN50. See also TN5, *Responsibilities of mission agency boards*, and TN35, *Causes of friction in mission agencies* for ideas about roles and, for a staff team working together, TN66, *A daily office for church staff*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of consultancy on church staffs and issues that arise.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN50 under Structures (with a link to Leadership).

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