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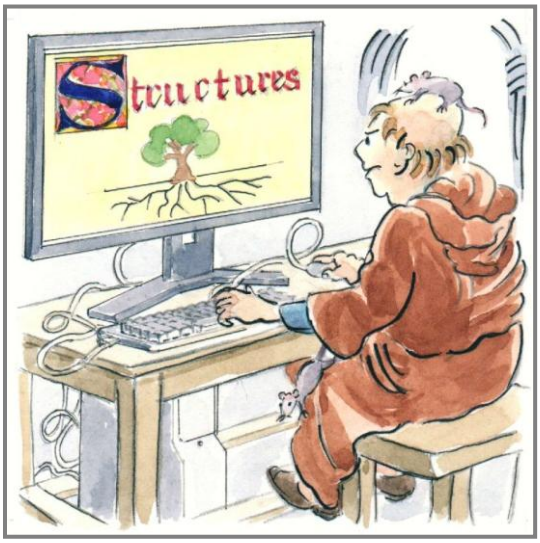

Mission-shaped Church Councils

Three ways forward

A24 Articles series: Structures

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The 2004 *Mission-shaped church* report has had a major impact on church thinking not only in the Church of England but across a wide range of denominations and streams in the years since then. But a mission-shaped church requires mission-shaped administration! This article shows how such thinking might impact on a church's main decision-making body.

The term 'Church Council' is used as a generic title. Church of England readers can relate this to the PCC, Methodists to the Stewards or to their Church Council, Baptists to an Eldership or a Diaconate, Presbyterians to a Kirk Session, and everyone to any kind of leadership team. The choice should be the body that makes the strategic decisions for the life of the church community.

Local church structures in the various denominations are not themselves questioned on this occasion. The idea is to take the existing structures and rethink how they might be operated in a mission-shaped context.

There are three parts which all overlap

1 The need for a clear purpose – definition rather than assumption
2 The need for a big agenda – substance rather than trivia
3 The need for an effective team – people rather than meetings

This article also acts as the foundation for a one-day training event designed for Church Council leaders and members – see the box at the end.

1: The need for a clear purpose

The members of many Church Councils are unable to articulate a clear role for the body concerned. It exists … well, because for this denomination, this is the body that we have. Where a role is given in some kind of text-book for the church in question, it is often too vague to make any difference.

A mission-shaped Council needs a mission-shaped focus: a clearly articulated and owned role, rather than a fudge of any kind. This and each subsequent section presents three principles to adopt and ten practical applications of these. But, first, a biblical anchor.

Biblical background

In Mark 3:13-19 Jesus calls together the body of disciples that he will forge into his inner team. He will spend three years training them but, at the outset, he gives them two clear purposes.

The one people remember is the second: to be sent out. However this can only be possible if it exists alongside the often overlooked first: to be with him. Might this passage give us a hint of what a church leadership body needs to have embedded into its purpose statement?

Three principles to follow

First, the Council serves the church, so its agenda should be **driven by the church's mission-centred purpose** – which of course the Council may define in the first place. There can be no scope for divergence on this point. One serves the other and this needs stating over and over again until the message gets through. Is the *real* purpose of Council members to enable mission or to block any movement towards it?

Secondly and consequently, Council members need to **sign up to a clear role for the whole group** so that activity has a focus, business can be checked to see if this is the right body for it, and achievement can be assessed. If the Council cannot articulate a simple statement that starts something like "We are here so that….", and then rigorously assess each agenda and debate against this, it will fall back into comfortable default mode. This fills an agenda but makes little impact.

Thirdly, and most uncomfortably of these three, this role should be concerned with **leadership more than representation**, with **risk more than with safety**, and with **modelling discipleship and decision-making** for others. Make no mistake, that is a very different way of looking at things compared with most Councils that I come across. The cushion of Christendom has lulled us into a dangerous place. We now live in times that demand a different approach.

Ten practical applications

That is all stirring stuff, but what does it mean in practice? Here are ten bite-sized actions any church could take to move in this direction.

1: **Define and follow a church purpose**

Nothing original here … apart from the word 'follow'. Too many churches just play at the 'mission statement' game. But the exercise only has value if a clear articulation of purpose bites deep into the church's life.

The idea of Mission Action Plans (MAPs) that some are following builds on this, but again can too easily consist of noble plans but few actions. Is your church passionately seeking what it believes are God's priorities and directions for it?

2: **Define and communicate a Council role**

Only now can the Council give itself a purpose that has both meaning and context. But ensure that it is crystal clear (as opposed to a list of high-sounding ideals), challenging, even scary.

Some people tell me they are nervous to do this: getting people to stand for Council is hard enough as it is, but this would put many off. My observation is the opposite: give this body a defined and worthwhile role and the people you need on it can see it could be a good use of their limited time and a challenge to their Christian faith. It is a mistake to make things easy. I don't notice Jesus following that approach.

3: **Think servant-leadership to enable change**

A mission-shaped Council has to part company with the deeply-held view that this is all about representation, that each group within the church needs its champion on the Council to fight its corner and promote its beliefs.

Of course any Council needs to represent the church as a whole but, once this translates into power groups, any cutting mission-edge will be lost.

It is time to get back to the idea of leadership, not as too often modelled in the world but as modelled by the great Servant Leader who made himself nothing and humbled himself. Leadership goes with vision and enables change. Representation too easily takes the edge off everything.

4: **Aim for role-model rather than status**

This may well be a new idea, but consider it carefully. Once you have the church's purpose and then the Council's role defined, it is time to consider the person profile for each Council member.

You cannot have one without the other. The New Testament is far hotter on person profiles, whether it is for elders and deacons in the Pastoral Epistles or the holiness of all the people of God throughout the letters. So why do churches too often go coy at this idea?

My point here, however, is more specific than this. One part of the person profile should, I believe, be to role-model the church's values to the rest of the church. Council members are people that the congregation should look up to as disciples of Jesus Christ. Council membership has nothing to do with reward or status, but of example for the congregation to follow. And, yes, this is scary.

I return to person profiles in Part 3.

5: **Be proactive in planning**

Many Church Councils wait for it to happen. They are not sure what 'it' is but when it happens they will have to think what to do about it. And, quite amazingly, there is never any shortage of items for the agenda on this approach. There will always be plenty of matters arising, some correspondence to share, reports from endless committees, and then time for AOB.

If mission is to be at the heart, the only way to clear all this lesser stuff out of the way is to prepare an agenda for the year in advance, to determine what the big items will be and when they will come. Emergencies can fit around them, routine stuff can also fit, but only if there is any time left for it.

So don't restrict an agenda to one meeting – have a one-year agenda planned too to ensure you cover the items you need to get your teeth into.

6: **Establish a small 'prophetic' group**

If this is not your normal language, please don't switch off at this point. What I am saying is that if the Council has a clear purpose to follow, and if leadership is somewhere in the purpose of the Council itself, then an idea of vision and the direction to go in becomes essential. But a vision is where you believe God would take you, not your own endeavours. You don't normally discover destination by committee.

So who is listening to what God may be saying about this, and feeding it into the Council? It may be the Minister but it really ought to be more than this. It may be a special leadership or vision team of some kind. But if you don't have that, how about tasking two or three people in the church to study the Scriptures, to pray and to ponder, and then to feed back their ideas?

7: **Study budgets more than accounts**

I have written about this elsewhere (see Article A18) but my point is that a budget is a faith and planning document, whereas accounts are history. Don't misunderstand me: I am not saying that accounts are not important, but only that if you focus all your financial thinking on them, you are in danger of losing the plot. The budget is the more fundamental tool because it expresses something of your belief in your vision and it is all about leadership and risk.

8: **Review both purpose and performance**

Why are churches so frightened of the idea of review? Many Ministers are scared of it, many church members would be affronted by any kind of OFSTED of their ministry (and, before you ask, I am not thinking at quite that level!).

If the Council has no clear role or values, you cannot review it. But if you have purpose it is worth looking back at the end of the year and scoring yourselves on how well you achieved what you set out to cover. Include performance too.

9: **Invest in training**

As Jesus trained the Twelve, so Councils need training in how to fulfil their responsible task (now defined). New members need some form of sensitive induction. Old hands need to be lined up with everything else covered in this section. Everyone needs a regular chance to think how to work together as an effective team (see later). Office-holders need training in chairing skills, or in how to be a great Secretary.

The trouble is that, unless this is in the church's bloodstream, people see this as a threat. Sitting in a meeting for a couple of hours every other month? Who needs training for that?

But once you have purpose, vision, and the challenges presented above, everyone ought to be so concerned at the responsibility they hold that they relish any chance to do it better.

10: **Understand trusteeship**

The need to register as charities is helping many Councils to reconsider what it means to be a Trustee. I have written about this elsewhere (see Training Notes TN5, *Responsibilities of mission agency boards*) but the key point is that a Trustee takes big picture responsibility for the ultimate well-being of the whole. This means that Trustees, acting as Trustees, don't get involved in the day-to-day business of the church, but set the context in which that everyday activity takes place. Sorting out role helps all this to become much clearer, as it needs to be.

2: The need for a big agenda

The first part has sought to shift the key question from the normal 'How?' that we love to ask to the more fundamental 'Why?' that we shy away from. Define why the Council exists then, vitally, go on to work to that purpose with all the consequences. You have now taken the first giant stride towards some mission-shaped administration. As others have said, it is not so much that mission is now *on* the agenda, it is that mission *is* the agenda.

But there have been hints of this second point because, once mission is the agenda, there is little room for the trivia that infects many a meeting. So I now move on from the 'Why?' question to ask 'Why not?'. Are you prepared to think big-picture?

Notice, in passing, that the heading talks about a 'big' agenda and not a 'long' one! These are quite different points. I follow the same structure as before.

Biblical background

There are a number of passages in Paul's epistles that can be applied with profit to a Council, since these were written for small groups of Christian disciples. But my favourite has to be Colossians 1:9-14. This is a prayer you might take and apply to your Council with profit.

Paul prays that the churches he is writing to will be 'filled with a knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding'. Then comes a point about living a life worthy of the Lord (see my role-model point above) and that they 'may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God', and so on in a complex sentence that eventually opens up into the magisterial passage about the supremacy of Christ.

This is an appropriate way to open up a discussion about a big agenda.....

Three principles to follow

First, **Council members should devise and follow a distinctively Christ-centred agenda** for the year. He is supreme. It is his will we seek to discover and follow.

I don't mean this in a simplistic way. There are dangers in over-spiritualising a business agenda. But your business should be all about Jesus (even if it's the church roof you are discussing). You cannot afford to leave him outside the room while you get on with the stuff that, you claim, has nothing to do with him. This in turn means that those of your Council who are used to secular business meetings, especially those at high level, may have plenty of unlearning to do. The danger is, they may not realise this.

Secondly, **the Council should take a big-picture overview** of all of church life: discipleship, community, outreach, leadership and support, resisting every pressure to pull back into the safer territory of detail and, often, trivia. There is a place for detail, but it is not at a Council meeting. Better for two people to put their heads together for 15 minutes and decide what to do. The Council needs to see life on a bigger scale.

Thirdly, as mentioned earlier, **mission is what the agenda is all about**. It is not that one item on tonight's agenda is entitled, 'Mission', but that every item on the agenda is mission-focused. Mission is in the Council's DNA. That will come as quite a shock for many people who have picked up a different idea over many years.

Ten practical applications

So how can these principles work out in practice? Here are ten ideas.

1: **Make God's will the priority**

Let's stop playing with the idea that God only comes in to the meeting for the opening prayer and the Grace at the end. Instead, determine to seek his will for the direction to go in and the main decisions to take.

Do not misunderstand me. I am not recommending you spend hours in prayer before a decision on the colour of the new carpet. What I am saying is that when considering your priorities as a church for the coming year, or a major investment in time or money or both, or issues to do with your primary activities of discipleship, outreach, etc, acknowledge that your task is to discover and follow what God wants. As we pray, 'Your will be done...'

This point sounds so simple. It's actually revolutionary. Think about it. It has implications for prayer at meetings, but exactly what those

implications are you will have to work out for yourselves. It has implications for theological input into meetings too. But above all it has implications for people's *attitudes* about meetings.

2: **See every agenda item in 'future' context**

Meetings are there to take decisions, and decisions are all about change for the future. You need history (reports), you need to analyse the present position, but your end should always be to decide on what you are going to do in the future. That involves both decisions and actions. Discussion is only a means to an end.

So teach your Council that they are the 'futures' body of your church, that you are the people who, under God, shape where this church will be one year from now. Ask of every item, 'So what for the future?'. Assess the past year on how well you are determining what the future looks like and then helping the church to get there.

3: **See the Council as a change-agent**

Back to purpose here. Traditional thinking sees the Council as a maintenance body or a safety net. What if, instead, you moved up a gear and saw it as a change-agent? Not the body in the church so constituted as being fairly representative of all views that it maintains the status quo, but the one that is charged with helping everyone through the hurdles of change.

There are huge changes churches need to move through if they are to be effective in today's culture. Moving out of maintenance-mode, challenging the way things have been done throughout our lifetimes, seeing what discipleship of Jesus Christ as opposed to church membership means. But at the same time you need to determine what does not change and where your anchors lie. That's a big agenda to tackle!

4: **Encourage an overall perspective**

Most people will have what might be termed a 'departmental' view of church life. They will see things from the perspective of their own groups, whether the particular congregation they are part of, or the small group they belong to, or the team they work in. The hope is that they will be passionate about their own interests: children's ministry, literature outreach, the church office, or whatever.

That is all fine on specialist decision-making groups but on the Council everyone needs to put their private interests into second place (no lower than that) and see the picture from a whole-church perspective. It's not easy but very necessary.

So you want to appoint a Youth Minister within the salaries budget, but might a Seniors Minister be a higher priority just now? You want the main Sunday service to stay at 9.00 am. because it suits your programme, but might a switch to 10.00 am. allow more people to get involved?

5: **Expect a fight to keep trivia at bay**

Do not be fooled! You will never keep the big picture at the centre of Council business without a constant struggle. Trivia will attack from all sides at every available opportunity. The issue of who runs the White Elephant stall at the fete or whether the colour of the welcome page on the website is quite right will come at you at every opportunity. Be prepared and resist these with dogged determination.

These may well be issues that need a decision. But they are decisions that, if they come to Council, will stop you tackling what you should be doing. Aim to get small, detailed decisions taken by small, detailed groups (see point 7 below).

6: **Highlight the mission dimension**

If mission remains the core of the agenda, it needs support. One way is to amplify each agenda item with just a few words that spell out how this item affects mission. The church roof, mentioned above, is needed to provide a building that can be used for welcome and for mission. The report on the external meeting a group went to is to enable the Council to decide whether these ideas would support your mission, and so on. Help everyone see this is a mission agenda.

In fact most agendas are little more than shopping lists of topics. Some explanation of each item, whether this is for information, debate or decision, is helpful. See Training Notes TN61, *Mapping out a meeting.*.

7: **Give detailed business to small groups**

Detailed items (trivia for Council but not when tackled at the correct level) need to be given to small groups – and I mean small – which can be trusted to do the work and get on with it. But of course the problem lies in that word 'trusted'. Too many Councils do not trust any group and want to rake over the discussion again at their next meeting.

This calls for some guidelines or rules to seek to prevent this waste of time and effort. It comes down to scale: does it matter if the decision over the colour of the carpet is questionable if the Council has had time to make the right decision over next year's priorities?

In all this avoid the word 'committee'. By all means have 'action groups', or 'working groups'

or just 'Tom and Jerry' who will meet and decide. 'Committees' talk – you want action.

8: **Monitor and encourage these groups**

This point is closely connected with No. 7. Such groups need to be monitored for that is quite correct, but they should not be policed. Ask for reports from time to time, but designed for information and questioning when necessary, not for nit-picking.

Ensure there is plenty of encouragement and thank-you's or these groups will lose heart.

9: **Encourage the whole church to be involved**

Councils need to stay in close contact with their congregations. The church needs to be praying for each Council meeting, given the agendas they now have to tackle, so this has implications for public intercessions, church prayer diaries and prayer chains.

If the Council has problems it is worth being honest with the congregation as far as is wise. Too often a church appoints a Council in some way and then hears nothing more. This is a disaster for encouraging people to stand and for understanding what decisions for the future are being taken.

The point is that a mission-focused Council should now be a body whose reports are eagerly awaited by the whole church. Their business is no longer all about 'general purposes' (just think what such a term communicates) but about charting the way ahead for the whole life of the church.

10: **Communicate effectively both ways**

The Council should report back regularly in a way that is vibrant and relevant (see Training Notes TN45, *Are you sure it's minutes you need?*).

But at the same time Council members need to be in touch with how church members are feeling about topics under discussion. This calls for a continuous programme of informal research. Council members need to have their fingers on the pulse of church thinking, and be seen to be listening to the ideas and views of everyone. This in turn brings the Council into the mainstream of church life – where it ought to be.

3: The need for an effective team

I have now asked 'Why?' and 'Why not?'. But when it comes to Church Councils the question that many people ask is 'When?'. That is because their thinking centres itself on the meetings. This is a serious mistake. If your Council is going to become mission-centred you should instead consider the disciples who make up this Council and see them being built into a team of godly people. The relevant question is therefore 'Who?'. This gives a very different take on the subject. I explore this idea now in Part 3.

Background

I touched on the need for person profiles in Part 1 point 4. When thinking about a team rather than meetings it will be wise to study 1 Timothy 3:8-13. This is the passage on deacons – so Council membership cannot be far removed from this.

St Paul had no problems in defining in no uncertain terms what kind of people Timothy was to choose as elders and deacons for his young churches. The very idea sounds odd in most sections of today's Church, which may demonstrate how far we have drifted from right thinking.

Of the many points that could be made it is worth noting that a person's home life matters, that their understanding of the Christian faith is important, and that candidates should be tested. What does that say about the quality of service required of Christian leaders and Council members?

Now for three more principles and ten applications.

Three principles to follow

First, the Council is a **clergy/lay team that exists 24/7**, not just at meetings. Just as the real meaning of church is the people not the building, so for Council it is team not meetings.

Meetings become special events in the life of the team, means to enable the team to function, never ends in themselves. In between the

meetings the team still exists. Purists will say that an elected body cannot be a team. Well, they can certainly work like one, and should do so.

Secondly, **the team is seeking to achieve something for Christ together**, not to be a forum where groups either aim for dominance or rubber-stamp others' decisions. This means the team itself needs leadership (a different role from chairing a meeting).

In the traditional way of thinking individuals turn up for a sparring match known as a meeting. In our mission-shaped paradigm a group of people are being built into a team, and the meetings give an opportunity to try out their team effectiveness. That is a very different way of looking at the situation.

Thirdly, as Scripture teaches, **character becomes a vital characteristic for the members**, and **love** for the body as a whole. The expectation is for members to grow in **discipleship** through Council service, so membership is a challenge for everyone.

All right, that may be light years away from your Council but, if I am reading the New Testament correctly, isn't it something worth working towards, even if you are at present a long way off?

Ten practical applications

Let me now sketch out ten applications from this thinking.

1: **Start with the annual meeting**

You will need to adapt this point to fit your denominational systems. But the point is that if your Council is elected in any way, you start by educating those who nominate and vote. They are the people who, first of all, need to get the message. It means that you are asking your congregation to choose people with exemplary Christian character and who are prepared to be team players. The person who sits on the boards of several multi-national companies is not necessarily what you are looking for!

How you manage such a transition may need some careful handling. People will hardly get the message overnight. But a mission-shaped church demands a godly set of team-players at the helm.

2: **Give time to building the team**

The Council is now not a business committee but a group of disciples seeking to become a team. But team-building takes time – although if the Council only has a one-year life there is not much of it available.

This may mean getting together without a business agenda to worship or socialise, it might mean some means of praying regularly for each other, or sub-groups that meet occasionally outside formal meetings to grapple with some of the background issues to the business. But the important point is that Council membership has to be an investment in team, not just attendance at business meetings.

3: **Learn the art of team-working**

This means investing not just in training in meetings (see Part 1 point 9) but also training in teamwork. It is unlikely that all or even most of the members will understand what this term really means. It may be that the Minister is the one with most to learn.

Christian team-working involves a strange mixture of love, humility, trust, vulnerability, listening skills and much more. And every time the membership changes by even one, all this has to be built all over again.

4: **Keep the team small**

Teams cannot go much beyond 12: Our Lord knew what he was doing. But many Church Councils are larger, and sometimes much larger, than this. There is also an illogical (and official) idea that the larger the church, the larger the Council. That speaks of representation, not leadership.

So aim for a Council of no more than perhaps 15, which means that some denominations will have to be somewhat creative with the rules – there are ways of doing it.

5: **Pray together**

Some Councils will pray for the business to be done, but on a team basis the Council will be praying for each other as disciples, as team members and about the dynamics of how they work together.

If members are scared of what I have written about role-modelling and vulnerability, and well they should be, they will be praying about it for each other, and in the doing of this will be building the team further.

6: **Recognise 'team leader' as a distinct role**

Once you focus on the idea of team rather than meetings, some interesting points follow. One of these is that a team needs a leader, but most Councils don't have one of these; it is not an official role!

Of course, the Council has someone who chairs, but that is a meeting-enabler, a different idea from a team-leader. So you need to appoint a leader. The Minister will usually be the right choice. His or her role is then to feel the responsibility for building up the team, so that does demand some understanding of teams and of human behaviour and of group dynamics. I do hope those are clearly on the syllabus of every Bible and theological college.....

7: **Appoint a meeting enabler**

Now you have a team leader in place you can consider who will chair the meetings. Why should this be the same person? Team leader and meeting enabler are different types of task requiring different gifts. But, more importantly, the two roles clash: how can a team leader put forward a case with passion and simultaneously enable the meeting to find its way forward?

Once you think team not meeting, you realise that the Minister as team leader makes much more sense than the Minister as the one who chairs. There will be some groups where skilled meeting enablers are in short supply, but let me make the case and then see how closely any particular Council can work towards it.

8: **Agree how to take decisions**

With the idea of team now established, you can consider the tricky matter of decision-making. In general, the more formal the group the more likely it is to follow a majority voting system. But a close-knit team can consider other means (as some Church Councils already do).

Consensus may be possible, or an agreement not to go ahead until everyone is agreed. The latter may sound particularly spiritual but there are questions that need to be asked about this. See Training Notes TN8, *Major decisions: a new approach,* for another idea for key decisions.

9: **Utilise time outside the meetings**

Now that you have been freed from the idea that everything centres round the meetings, you can start to experiment with the times between meetings times. The team exists 24/7, remember. Meetings are just specific events.

Big issues cannot be tackled and solved in one short meeting. They need time to be considered, to be talked over in small groups. One idea is to determine people's views through a simple questionnaire and circulate an analysis well before the meeting. Time-consuming perhaps, but it makes good use of meeting time.

10: **Embrace diversity**

The best teams are built of people of different personalities and gifts. You don't need to understand all Professor Meredith Belbin's research to recognise this. Strong teams have learnt to work together across such differences, not to be threatened by them.

The best teamwork I have been involved in has been with people I found it particularly difficult to work with (and I am sure they with me). It is out of such differences that strong teams are born and conflict handled creatively.

And so back to Mark 3 where I started to note not only a purpose statement for the Twelve, but names that give away that this team was no set of clones! Their amazing variety in terms of jobs, personality and political views is staggering.

Questions for groups

For each of the three parts in turn:

1 What (if anything) excites you within the three principles and in the light of the Bible passage?

2 Which aspects of the three concern you in any way: what do you disagree with and why?

3 Which of the ten applications do you feel your church needs to take special note of?

4 Which of the ten intrigued or challenged you personally in some way? Why?

This article is available at https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles-index then A24. See also Articles A5, *How to chair meetings*, and A40/41, *Going deeper into meetings, plus* Training Notes TN71, *Seatings for meetings,* and also TN5, TN8, TN45, TN61, TN88, TN97, TN118, etc.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A24 under Structures (with a link to Planning).

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