

3Dnet Mission Network

EFFECTIVE CHURCH COUNCILS

INTRODUCTION: What is the purpose of a Church Council? What is the culture that a Church Council should reflect and seek to create in a congregation? How can councils be more effective? What is the best way to select people for Council? What are the traits of an effective Church Councillor? These are some of the questions that this study seeks to answer. The study is primarily for councillors and pastors. It is written for use by a Church Council and key leaders so that Church Councils can operate more intentionally and productively. Candidly, a church is never going to be healthier than its leadership team. If that is so, we had better give attention to this inner group.

WHAT THE REGULATIONS SAY

Uniting Church Regulation 3.1.13(a) lists the duties and responsibilities of the church Council.

"The Church Council shall give priority in its life to building up the congregation in faith and love, sustaining members in hope, and leading the Congregation to fuller participation in Christ's mission in the world. This priority shall be reflected in the agenda of its ordinary meetings."

PROFILE OF AN EFFECTIVE CHURCH COUNCILLOR.

Church Councillors are to exercise Christian leadership. They contribute time, wisdom and skill to lead the church to advance the work of the gospel. Councillors need to understand and to live out the principles of Christian discipleship and leadership and to work at being effective team members.

1. Christian leadership is appointed by God.

Because God delegates leadership to them, Church Councillors are accountable to God for how they exercise leadership.

- 1 Corinthians 4: 1-4. Paul teaches the requirements of faithful servants or stewards. They will be judged by God.

- 1 Thessalonians 2:4. Paul clearly states that his motivation is to please God, not people.
- 1 Peter 5: 2-3. Peter exhorts us to be examples to those we lead, and not to lord it over them.

2. Christian leadership is focused on Christ.

Jesus Christ is both the substance and the goal of ministry. Christ-like maturity is the goal to which the whole church is moving. The aim of Church Councillors is to facilitate this process in their church community.

- 1 Corinthians 2: 2. Knowing Christ was at the core of Paul's ministry.
- Ephesians 4: 11-15. People's gifts from God are to be used so everyone grows in Christ.

3. Christian leadership is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Without the power of the Holy Spirit, leadership is merely human endeavour. The Spirit equips us for ministry and encourages us to persevere. Church Councillors must not only be people known for maturity and wisdom, but also filled with the Holy Spirit and full of faith.

- John 16: 13. Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will guide the disciples to the truth.
- Psalm 127: 1. Unless the Lord builds the house, the labourers work in vain.
- Acts 6: 3-7. Stephen, and by inference the other six who were chosen, was full of wisdom, faith and the Holy Spirit.
- 1 Corinthians 3: 6-7. Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.
- Philippians 4: 13. Paul acknowledged God as the source of his strength.

4. Christian Leadership is centred on God's Word.

God speaks through scripture, we meet Christ in it, and the Spirit illuminates it. Because scripture is essential to a Christian's growth, it is especially necessary for a Church Councillor to be immersed in God's word and to live it.

- Matthew 4: 1-11. Here and elsewhere Jesus evidenced working knowledge of scripture.
- John 1: 30-31. John wrote his account to enable people to believe and have life.
- 2 Timothy 3: 14-17. Paul instructs Timothy to continue in his understanding and study of scripture.

5. Christian leadership is steeped in and dependent on prayer.

Prayer is speaking with and listening to God. It is waiting on God and discerning God's purposes. Intercssory prayer is powerful. Prayer recognizes that God is at work in and through the church. Church Councillors are people of prayer, both individually and in the example they set at the corporate prayer gatherings of the church.

- John 17. Prayer was a common practice for Jesus. See also Hebrews 5: 7.
- Ephesians 3: 16-19. Paul prays that the Ephesian Christians will have strength, faith, hope and knowledge of God.
- Colossians 4: 12. Paul describes Epaphras as 'one who is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills.'

6. Christian leadership is always lived out in daily life.

Christian ministry and leadership are about who you are as well as what you do. There are many 'C words' that describe an effective leader and they all apply to Church Councillors.

- **Character** - Are you a person of integrity that you would like others to imitate? Can you keep confidences and exercise discretion?
- **Chemistry** - Are you a good team member who understands culture and appreciates synergy?
- **Conviction** - Are you convinced about the centrality of Christ, faith and scripture?
- **Competence** - What skills, potential, wisdom and experience do you have that can be applied to your leadership as a Church Councillor?
- **Commitment** - Are you willing to invest time and effort to the important ministry of Church Council leadership?
- **Communication** - Are you able to clarify your ideas and clearly communicate them to others?
- **Confidence and Courage** - Do you have the confidence to be decisive and to make decisions that advance the mission?
- **Commendation** - Are you cultivating the ability and desire to praise and encourage people rather than be quick to criticize? Do you take a personal interest in those for whom you are responsible?
- **Co-operation** - Are you able to work with people from different perspectives and backgrounds to achieve a common goal?

- Change embracing - Do you expect God to act, and do you believe that God will work through you and the Church Council to achieve God's purposes?

Discussion

1. Which of the above characteristics of Christian leadership stand out for you?
2. To what extent does your congregation consider such attributes in selecting Church Councillors?
3. What other qualities would you want to add to the above list and why?
4. What do you look for in selecting someone for a position of leadership as a Church Councillor?

BEING AN EFFECTIVE CHURCH COUNCILLOR

The ministry of Church Councillor is not confined to the regular business meeting. The effectiveness of Council is dependent on how the councillors function as a team - both at meetings and outside the meeting.

1. Between and prior to meetings.

For a church council to really be effective, there is as much work done outside the meeting as there is done at the meeting. This applies to all on Council and not just the office bearers.

2. Papers and proposals

- If you are responsible for an issue or proposal, gather all the relevant information and facts. Evaluate the proposal, including the pros and cons of a particular course of action, and then formulate recommendations. A SWOT analysis at times can be very helpful - Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. This needs to be done well in advance so the members can receive any papers at least a week before the meeting.
- The meeting and its effective decision making, especially on policy or ground breaking matters, is helped considerably by the circulation of relevant papers. The writing of these papers helps the proposers to clarify the issues and to bring well thought through recommendations. It also enables the members to have the opportunity to fully consider

the matters, and even to have informal discussions with other councillors prior to the meeting.

- If your role, at any one time, means that you don't have to do the above, you might like to offer help and ideas to the writers and so bring collective wisdom to the writing.

3. Personal Preparation for a meeting

- Read any papers that have been distributed prior to the meeting, and do so not just on the day of the meeting, so you have the opportunity to think through the issues.
- If you are uncertain about something, or you have a disagreement on an item, discuss it with the relevant person prior to the meeting, rather than just bringing it up at the meeting. This enables you to clarify and further understand the situation and the person's view. It also means that there are no detrimental surprises during the meeting.

4. Relating to the congregation.

In many congregations, councillors also hold the office of elder. This entails spiritual and pastoral leadership beyond merely turning up at meetings. Councillors therefore are in active pastoral relationship with the members of the church and seek to understand their perspectives. They also have the responsibility of communicating the decisions of council accurately and sensitively. Many conversations are opportunities to help the members to enlarge their understanding and to develop their growth in Christ.

5. Prayer

Church Councillors are spiritual leaders who desire to grow in their faith and to model Christian discipleship. Therefore they follow the example of Jesus Christ in developing a pattern of prayer.

- Seek out a person or people with whom you can pray regularly. Remember to keep confidence regarding any delicate matters or matters yet to be processed before they are announced to the congregation.
- Ensure you are supported in your leadership by friends committed to praying for you.
- Pray about the issues to be considered at a meeting, don't merely think about them.

- Pray before you leave home for a meeting.
- Pray for understanding, for wisdom, for vision, for clarity, for unity and for decisiveness.

6. At the meeting of Church Council.

The focus of Church Council is the making of decisions that advance the cause of Christ through the mission of the church. Effectiveness at doing this is determined by:

- A clear understanding of the main role of Church Council.
- The effectiveness of the preparation outside of the meeting - in thought, prayer and seeking necessary information.
- How well the members of Church Council work together during the meeting.

Discussion

1. How do you rate the team work of your Church Council?
2. In what way could this be improved?
3. To what extent do your Church Councillors come to a meeting well prepared?
4. What do you understand the role of a Church Councillor to be outside the meeting?

CHARACTERISTICS OF HEALTHY AND FUNCTIONAL CHURCH COUNCILS

1. Clarity of purpose.

- Commit to working together toward common goals. If these are uncertain, spend time as a group working through your vision, mission, values and beliefs. This is a process that can take some months and is best done in interaction with the congregation.
- Church Council has the task of spiritual oversight and governance. It should focus primarily on the big picture and strategic directions rather than the details of management and day-to-day operations.
- What are the systems and accountabilities to ensure that the church as a whole is healthy, and its life is based on core values, beliefs and vision?

- Governance concerning the financial and other resources of the congregation.
- What are goals for the next one to three years?
- What strategies are necessary to achieve the agreed goals?
- Remember you are there to make strategic decisions on behalf of the congregation, and not to be indecisive or just to discuss things that lead nowhere.

2. Trust and respect for each other on Council

- Trust and respect between the Church Councillors is vital for effective discussion and decision-making. This may take time to develop.
- Get to know councillors whom you perceive to be difficult or with whom you tend to clash. Invite them to meet with you socially so you can develop healthy understanding and build relationship.
- Work hard at discerning other people's strengths, especially when their weaknesses seem very obvious.
- Appreciate each other's skills and competencies.
- Know and understand your own areas of strength and weakness.
- Enjoy humour but not humour at other people's expense.
- Remember you are building and modelling community for the church as well as doing the work of a very important committee. Have fun and do what you can to make the meeting enjoyable.
- Too many councils gather, quickly pray, do business and go home. Look for ways to socialize and to develop healthy rapport.

3. Risk and safety

- Keep a healthy balance between being challenged and feeling safe.
- Be prepared to step out of your comfort zone and to view things differently.
- Work to make the Church Council a "safe place" where everyone is encouraged and supported.
- Be aware of the duty of care and safe place practices of the church.

4. Open and clear communication

- Listen well before speaking.
- If you are responsible for a report or to present a proposal, ensure you have a written report distributed beforehand that

- comprehensively details the facts, the pros and cons, and appropriate recommendations.
- Feel free to ask questions if the matter seems unclear or confusing to you.
 - Accurate recording of minutes of the meeting is an important part of the communication process. Minutes include the decisions made and may include a brief outline of reports given. Minutes should be distributed within a week of the meeting so that relevant action can be followed up on a timely basis.

5. Cohesion and balanced participation

- Know your own area of skill and expertise.
- You don't have to express an opinion on every item.
- Comments in support of a proposal are equally important to comments against.
- The purpose of discussion is to discern the way forward under God. Often the task is to refine a proposal rather than to rubber-stamp it or, alternatively, to dismiss it.
- Some proposals may need more dwell time and it can be appropriate and wise to defer a decision pending more information and/or time to think the matter through more thoroughly.
- Develop the confidence to speak. If you feel intimidated by other people's forthrightness, remember that those who elected you placed confidence in you and your leadership. Your voice could be particularly valuable in the debate.
- Remember that the Council is a unit, whether you are the pastor or an elected member of Council. Even when a decision is not unanimous it is still a decision of the whole Council. It is "our decision" not "their decision."

Discussion

1. Based on the above, rate your Church Council's effectiveness on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being poor and 10 being excellent. In what way could the processes of your Church Council be improved?
2. To what extent does your Church Council exercise true leadership? In what ways is your Church council leading your congregation to fuller and effective participation in Christ's mission in the world?

3. What does the agenda of your Church Council say about its priorities? Brainstorm what you consider to be the current issues your Church Council deals with? Check recent minutes to see how you invested time? Is your Council faithful and obedient to the missional charter?
4. What would need to change to make your Church Council function more effectively?
5. What is one thing you could decide to do immediately that would begin to change the culture, function and effectiveness of your Church Council?

SELECTING MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH COUNCIL.

The Uniting Church Regulations guide the Church Council election process. Nevertheless many churches today have developed processes to ensure the most suitable people are elected, and that the council has a good balance of maturity, experience, skill, age and gender. Some churches appoint a nominating committee, elected by the congregation. This committee calls for confidential nominations or actively encourages certain people to nominate. It then interviews the nominees and brings to the congregation for vote only the names of those they recommend. The number of nominees brought normally equates the number of vacancies. In this way, the culture, philosophy of ministry and direction of the church are not disrupted. It also is commensurate with the notion that the office of Church Councillor, which in many congregations is also the office of Elder, is in reality in response to God's call which needs to be tested and processed in a very responsible manner.

The Uniting Church Basis of Union and Regulation 3.1.11(b) state that the government of the Church will be "entrusted to representatives, men and women, bearing gifts and graces with which God has endowed them for the building up of the Church." This supports the principle of the process of having a nominating committee that interviews people and brings the names of the most suitable people for election.

WHAT IS THE MAKE UP OF AN EFFECTIVE CHURCH COUNCIL?

Personally I prefer a Church Council to comprise all elected members with no member being on Council because they hold a particular office, apart from the pastor. In larger churches, only the lead pastor from amongst the staff, and perhaps an associate, attend Council. Some churches espouse a model of church councillors representing and even heading up areas of ministry. This model unnecessarily takes up the time of area leaders, and may actually work against having a well-balanced council. Staff and ministry leaders should meet in other settings for sharing life and for open communication.

WHAT IS A GOOD SIZE CHURCH COUNCIL?

Somewhere between six and ten is about the right size. This helps communication and increases the sense of responsibility. It also increases attendance. Moreover it avoids the problem of getting the wrong person on Council simply because there was a vacancy to be filled.

Smaller, gifted and motivated councils reflect good corporate practice. A smaller council is more likely to be flexible and adaptive in its meeting and decision making processes. The smaller group enhances richer fellowship and understanding. More focused care and support can be given by the Lead Pastor and Chairperson.

CREATIVE AGENDAS FOR EFFECTIVE MEETINGS

The agenda of a meeting, and the priorities it indicates, will dictate the effectiveness of a meeting and of the Council generally. A good agenda will be established by the Chairperson and the pastor (and perhaps the secretary) consulting to determine the aim of the meeting and what ought to be the main items. It is better to have fewer key items to consider in depth than to have many items that merely make for a busy but essentially unproductive meeting. In larger congregations most routine matters are handled by an executive or dealt with by staff.

It is important for the leadership of the church to determine the agenda for the Council meeting, rather than outside influences. For example, much of the correspondence received by a church need not be brought to Church

Council. It can easily be dealt with by staff or an executive. Also meetings should not be merely a report-fest whereby reports on all and sundry are discussed and reworked. The Council's task is to look to the future and to determine matters of policy, vision and practical mission. In forward oriented churches Church Councils receive reports from departments only once a year, perhaps at a meeting designed specifically for that purpose.

Discussion

1. How are Church Councillors appointed in your congregation? Could this process be improved? How?
2. What practical action could be taken to improve the effectiveness of your Church Council?
3. What could be done to clear the way for only important items to get onto the Church Council agenda?
4. What stands out for you in this study and what changes can you make that will really make a difference?

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