



## Discussion Starters for Church Councils

This resource is offered as a tool to promote growth and capacity. It offers a self-help style of training that can be tailored for individual councils, as well as providing the opportunity to further build relationships and trust. The discussion style of learning/sharing is a starting place – please feel free to take your discussion in whatever way is most helpful. We hope it will help each Council ensure they are fulfilling their responsibilities and duties in life-giving and rewarding ways. You may like to use it in place of your regular devotional time or set aside a portion of each meeting time. It was written by Rev. Bron Murphy. Please contact her if you have any questions/concerns or would like further training. Email: [bronwynm@nswact.ca.org.au](mailto:bronwynm@nswact.ca.org.au) / ph:898388920

### **Session 1: Who can be on Church Council:**

- Any ministry agents in placement
- Retired ministers or minister-in-associations
- Elders, if you have them, should make up at least 50% of the entire council – if you don't, aim for having at least 50% of the council people known for their spiritual wisdom.
- Confirmed members, members in association elected by Congregation in keeping with Regulations.

### **How often would Church Council meet?**

The regulations suggest that Church Council should meet at least quarterly. Mostly, Councils meet monthly. This is determined by your congregations needs.

In smaller congregations, the entire congregation serve as the council. Regardless of size, it is vital that people regularly meet pray, discuss and record minutes of what is decided.

#### **Discussion:**

- Reflecting on the people in your church council, discuss the variety of gifts present. Is there a good balance of spiritual gifts in the people of our council? Perhaps you could name the various gifts within your Council in an exercise of affirmation.
- What gifts might we make our council even stronger, and who in our congregation might hold them?
- Do all feel that each member speaks up and shares in the discussion and decision making?
- Are we content with how often our meetings are held as well as how accurately our decisions are recorded?
- What improvement/changes might we like to see?



## Session 2: What am I responsible for?

The task of Church Council is to provide leadership and spiritual oversight to the congregation.

It is Church Council's responsibility to think strategically and look to the future. Their job is to help and guide the congregation as they live out their desired missional goals. Please note that Church Council does not decide on or impose the missional goals - it serves the congregation as they are lived out. Meetings are not to tick off agenda items but to engage in forward thinking. This ensures the congregation/s remain outwardly focuses - active and vital in ministry and mission. Church Council is to guard against apathy and complacency and to guide the congregations as it seeks to be God's servants, serving God's world. The regulations suggest that Church Council is to this by 'building up the Congregation in faith and love, sustaining members in hope, and leading the Congregation to a fuller participation in Christ's mission in the world.' This is supposed to shape the agenda of each and every ordinary meeting. Councillors need to guard against their meetings becoming a totally business oriented meeting. All councils need to remember each person is called to contribute to leadership and action, ensuring it isn't left to one or two people to carry the load. It is very easy for councillors to forget their responsibilities as soon as the meeting is over.

### Discussion:

- Is providing leadership and spiritual oversight our main priority in reality?
- If not, what is? Are we content that this be so?
- By what measure can we be sure we are fulfilling this task of building up the Congregation?
- If we are not so sure, how might we get back on track? Who might help us? How can we ensure this doesn't get lost in the future?
- Are we all sharing in leadership or are we leaving the bulk of the load to one or two people? Discuss how each person feels.
- Do we go from meeting to meeting without acting on the decisions we have made?
- Which of the pictures below best sums up each individuals understanding of leadership? Why?



### Session 3: How to think Strategically and Missionally.

(This runs for 2 sessions)



Read these quotes and discuss what you think they mean as well as how they might relate to your council/congregation?

**The Christian Church is the one organisation in the world  
that exists purely for the benefit of non-members**

William Temple

**“The Church is by nature missionary - to the extent that, if it ceases to be missionary, it  
has not just failed in one of its tasks, it has ceased being Church”**

*What is Mission?: Theological Explorations* by J. Andrew Kirk, 2000, p. 30.

**Mission is not a task that is one among several... Mission, rather, belongs to the very  
purpose, life and structure of the church – mission is its “royal charter”**

Bevans & Schroeder, 2003: 290

**The mission of God has a church. The church does not have a mission.**

Quoted by Rev Dr Clive Pearson 2009

#### Discussion:

- What do we think each quote is saying? How might it relate to us?
- If we look honestly at our congregation as well as our church council, are our attitudes missional? Are our actions and activities missional? In what way/s?
- How might we as a council guide our congregation into thinking Missionally?
- Are we mostly looking outward at the needs of the community and wider world, or are we mainly inwardly focused, ensuring our doors stay open, worrying about our finances, rosters and buildings?
- What have we noticed God is doing in our community? How might we join in?

## Session 4: How to think Strategically and Missionally. (continued)

If your congregation has set mission goals and has a plan for the next few years, it is Church Councils job to keep sight of them. Each month a different part of the mission plan could be discussed as to whether you are on track or not. This might also help Church Council guard against becoming business focussed rather than mission focussed. It is vital that Church Council keeps the congregation's eyes looking outwards to its community rather than inwardly self-caring. This is not to say the Congregation/ Council should be irresponsible with church affairs – of course we need to maintain ourselves appropriately – but, following Jesus Christ who called the church into being, the majority of our thought and actions should be for others.

### Discussion:

- How does this congregation know what direction it wants to move in? Are there specific goals or things we want to achieve in the short/long term?
- How are these held before the congregation so we don't lose sight of them? How might we do this more effectively?
- How might Church Council use them as a standard against which to measure any future proposals or suggestions?
- If we have no goals or direction, how might we guide our decision making?
- Do you feel it is possible to stand still as a church? If we are not moving forward is there a possibility we will end up drifting backwards?
- Does the cartoon below resonate with you? In what ways?



"All those in favour say 'Aye'."

"Aye."

"Aye."

"Aye."

"Aye."

"Aye."

## Session 5: Importance of Relationships



People should matter even more than regulations. The way church councillors treat one another is often more important than the decisions we make. A church council meeting should be a place of hospitality and generosity where all people are valued and affirmed. Confidence must be maintained. That means what happens at Church Council stays at Church Council – it isn't talked about in the car park afterwards! Each person is expected to contribute – not dominate the conversation nor shrink away from speaking at all. The consensus cards are especially helpful in indicating to the Chair that you

would like to speak. The tone and manner with which you speak will be even more important than what you say. We are part of God's kingdom – thus we build each other up, encourage and affirm one another as well as hold each other accountable. That means if someone becomes overly aggressive, critical or hurtful, the chair and another 1-2 people might need to sit with that person and lovingly encourage them to reflect on how they might choose a different way of communicating next time.

### Discussion:

- Look at the life of Jesus and discuss who/what he treated as sacred (share examples). What that might tell us about how we treat one another?
- How do each of us feel as the Church Council meeting draws closer? Give each person present time to answer this honestly.
- How do each of us feel as we go home? Do we feel worthwhile and that we have spent our time well – or are we frustrated and resentful? Again, listen to each person.
- As we express an opinion or thought at a CC meeting, how do we (mostly) feel... listened to and heard – or de-valued and judged? How is this communicated to us?
- In what ways does our Church Council meeting model the kingdom of God and the hospitality of Jesus Christ?
- How can we intentionally improve our relationships and the mood of our meeting?

## Session 6: Worship:



Church Council has the responsibility of maintaining and overseeing the worship services of a congregation. That means deciding the time as well as the content. Any new services should be discussed and approved by Council. It is important that CC members not be gate keepers, but open to the needs and ideas of the congregation, enabling creative and fresh expressions of worship to blossom.

It is CC's task to see that the needs of the least are met. Is there something for children? Is it a valued part of worship, or is it the first thing to go if pressed for time?

Is the worship inclusive e.g., if everyone stands up to recite a creed, how does that make those in wheelchairs feel? Do mum's have a carpeted area for their children to play and so feel less self conscious? How are visitors welcomed, not just in the service, but do people talk to them at the cuppa afterwards? Is the content of worship healthy and varied? Do people feel energised and spiritually refreshed by attending church or are they bored? Councils task is not to simply give people what they want, but to provide meaningful worship that challenges and offers variety as well as encourages and affirms.



Church Council also oversees an annual covenanting service wherein the people are commissioned to work and serve in the name of Christ for the coming year (see your Presbytery Resource Minister for such a service.) It is also CC's task to ensure appropriate acknowledgement of the church calendar and seasons is reflected in worship – e.g., dressing the church appropriately and overseeing any additional furniture/features in the church and hall. That doesn't mean church council have to do it all – but to oversee that it happens. Sometimes the best thing CC can do is to find a creative person and let them experiment!

### Discussion:

- Any or all of the above questions.
- How do we each feel about attending worship? What might make it an even more positive experience?
- Consider appointing a few people to objectively critique a month of worship and feed back to us what they learned and observed? Perhaps talk with the congregation via feedback sheets to see how they are feeling about worship? Church council could then commit to addressing any issues that might arise? *(feel free to contact your Presbytery Resource Minister for any help required in preparing critique)*

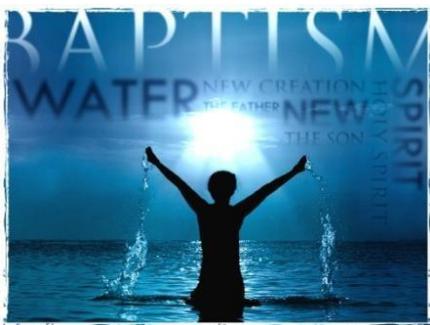
## Session 7: Sacraments:

### Holy Communion:

Church Council oversees Communion – they decide who is trained and licensed to preside. Who might be invited to assist as communion stewards – do they have to be Elders or Church Council members, or may any member of the congregation be invited? Would children be allowed to serve? In line with the Assembly National Working Group’s paper on Holy Communion (see appendix 1), Church Council is responsible to ensure Holy Communion is served in a variety of ways and that appropriate liturgy is used. It is also Church Councils responsibility to ensure the communion stewards know what they are doing and what words are appropriate to say as well as when to say them. They may ask their minister or resource minister for help in this training.



### Baptism



Church Council, with the minister in placement, has oversight over who gets baptised and ensures the congregation maintains its promises **Reg. 1.1.3**. This is not meant to be a rubber-stamping type approval, but a genuine discussion about how the church might grow a real relationship with the family concerned. Who would be the best person to be their sponsor? Remember it doesn't have to be a Council Member. Does the desired date fit in with the church doings? Could a special morning tea be

implemented, celebrating baptisms in a more social setting? What follow up might there be to ensure the relationship doesn't drift away? Could you hold an annual picnic in the park or a special service giving thanks for all those baptised in the last year? Do you have a cradle role? Perhaps you are already doing these things – or more – consider letting Bron know so she can share your ideas with other congregations.

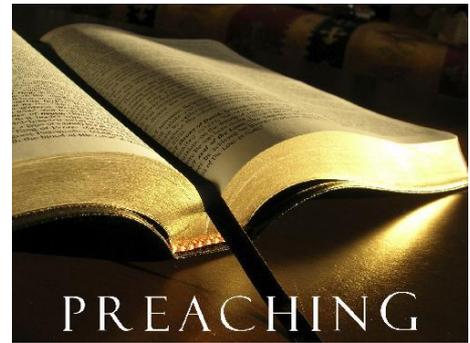
The other responsibility is to promise nurture for the person being baptised – regardless of age. This means your congregations should have some way of offering an ongoing and life-giving relationship with those it baptises.

#### Discussion:

- What is Church Council policy and approach to baptisms?
- Do we intentionally seek a growing relationship with the family or do we simply provide a service? Are we content with our approach? What might we do to lift our game?
- Who is invited to serve as communion stewards? Could we name different people who might feel blessed to be asked?
- In the past 3 months, what variety has there been in the way Holy Communion is conducted and served?
- Invite each member to read Assembly's paper before the meeting, and then discuss together what might this Church Council need to do in order to fulfil its responsibility?

## Session 8: Who preaches and when.

It is Church Council's responsibility to ensure the congregation is being stimulated and grown in mission as well as their own personal and corporate discipleship. Church Council has the task of promoting theological literacy amongst its people and ensuring a range of theological perspectives are offered. Actively encouraging and providing opportunity for further learning such as bible



studies, and workshops; seeking out potential lay preachers and encouraging them to study and to seek accreditation as well as liaising with Presbytery about due process is a vital part of being a Church Councillor. It really is so much more than attending a regular meeting.

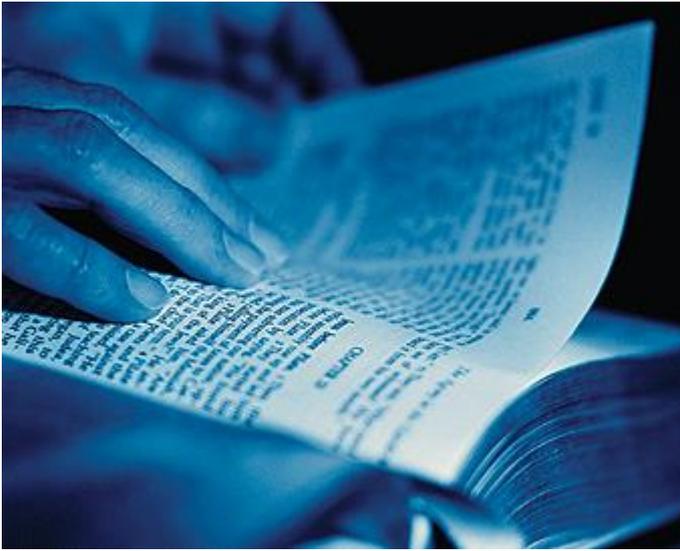
Church Council oversees the preaching plan; decides who can preach and what level of theological training is necessary. Should a lay preacher overstep the mark in some way, it is Church Council who follows up with appropriate discipline procedures (see reg's or contact your Presbytery Minister, Rev. Graeme McRaid)

Church Councillors should be in touch with congregation members to see that the people leading worship are meeting their needs and not just responding to their wants. Church Council may also like to consider inviting preachers from other places. One of the concerns about shrinking clergy numbers is that fewer people in congregations have access to new understandings of theology as well as a variety of preaching styles. This means that we can listen to the same voices again and again – which can be wonderful! But it can also mean that our people start to think they have heard it all before and so cease to listen. It can also mean that our interpretations become narrower and more rigid. We rarely learn from hearing what we already agree with – it is only when we are challenged that we think deeply about what we believe – thus variety is essential to robust and enduring discipleship.

### Discussion:

- What is the standing of training our lay preachers are expected to have?
- Do we make exceptions? If so, for whom? Is this fair and helpful?
- What support do we offer potential lay preachers – in encouragement and financial contribution to study and books?
- Are CC members pro-active in encouraging people to use and develop their gifts in leadership and ministry?
- In what ways do we encourage theological literacy and discipleship training to our congregation?
- Do we as Church Councillors, take seriously our own discipleship growth and so serve as role models for other members of the congregation?
- How might the needs of the congregation differ to their wants – how can we responsibly provide leadership in this?
- Are we willing to grapple with new ideas and seek to more deeply explore and understand what we believe?

## Session 9: Place of Devotions:



Most of our Church Council meetings usually begin with a devotional time. While this is not compulsory, it is up to each council to ensure it is more than a tokenistic gesture. It is Church Councils task to set aside adequate time for opening worship and prayer. I encourage you to set aside at least 30-45 minutes so as to allow time for respectful and a meaningful conversation and debate. If Church Council members cannot converse about theological issues, it will

struggle when encouraging the congregation in doing so. Any congregation is well served when its church council can speak to one another of personal belief as well as shared hopes and dreams. This also has the added benefit of growing relationships of trust and mutual respect. It also guards against a council becoming agenda driven and business focussed.

### **Discussion:**

- How do we each feel about our devotions – are they meaningful or routine?
- Share a devotional time that you found especially meaningful. What was it that made it so helpful?
- What kind of opening worship/devotions would stretch us, encourage us and grow our relationships?
- How can we implement this and keep it from getting lost in a busy agenda?
- What place might discussion play in our opening time together? What advantages/disadvantages might this have for us as a council of the church?
- If we need help with topics or resources, who might we ask?

