

*South Georgia Annual Conference
Office of Connectional Ministries
Local Church Resource*

Introducing . . .

The Church Council

Preface

The South Georgia Conference Office of Connectional Ministries receives periodic inquiries about the Church Council structure, which is the only local church organizational format detailed in *The Book of Discipline, 2008*.

We offer this brief summary to assist those considering adopting this new structure for their local church. Additional resources will be referenced at the end so those interested may gather more detailed information. The Office of Connectional Ministries staff stands ready to offer assistance where practical.

(All disciplinary references in this resource are from *The Book of Discipline, 2008*.)

Introduction

The 1996 General Conference approved the Church Council structure in response to growing frustrations surrounding the Administrative Board/Council on Ministries and the Administrative Council structures. Many congregations felt overwhelmed by the exhaustive list of leadership positions “required” in these structures. Some members would hold several positions just to fulfill the mandated structures. In other churches, some people would hold an office “in name only,” but not be expected to do anything. For many, the structure seemed to get in the way of actual ministry and mission.

The Church Council format seeks to give each local church the flexibility to establish the most workable structure for their ministry setting. While certain essential programmatic and administrative components are required, each local church has the freedom to adopt a format that will maximize their Christ-mandated disciple-making mission.

Two Significant Shifts

Spiritual Leadership

The Church Council shifts the primary energy of all lay and clergy leaders toward their becoming spiritual leaders, rather than being board members concerned with routine administrative matters.

The emphasis on spiritual leadership begins in the discernment process as the Committee on Lay Leadership (§ 258.1) matches the spiritual gifts of members with the various leadership roles needed. Leaders are encouraged to focus on the mission of the church through Bible study and prayer. The spiritual focus is sustained by designating the Council as the group responsible for developing and pursuing a shared vision of what God is leading the church to become.

The Church Council will certainly have administrative matters to consider, but the Church Council format directs the energy away from routine logistics to the offering of visionary leadership. One practical way this is accomplished is in the formation of the meeting agenda. The Council should engage in a significant period of spiritual formation (Bible study and prayer) around the church’s primary tasks and the role of spiritual leadership before considering the agenda items related to nurture, outreach and witness. The administrative and supportive responsibilities of the church are given consideration after focusing on spiritual formation and disciple making.

Additionally, the Church Council legislation recommends a different style of decision-making. Most congregations have used some variation of Robert's Rules of Order to guide their meetings. This format of debate and voting often degenerates into people choosing sides, which results in some becoming winners and others losers.

The Church Council format recommends changing to a consensus / discernment mode of decision-making. In seeking consensus, the council will work to obtain agreement from around 70-80% of those present. This process requires establishing and following ground rules for respectful (even prayerful) dialogue; clearing up communication and sharing accurate facts; and opening oneself to the possibility of changing positions as all points of view are shared. The consensus / discernment format seeks honest, respectful dialogue to discern the common wisdom of all spiritual leaders around the direction God would have the church move.

The Church's Primary Task

The second significant shift offered by the Church Council format is for the leaders to continually focus on the church's primary task of making disciples. Leaders always have some target to which they aim their efforts and by which they judge their effectiveness. Business leaders seek to grow the revenue. Sports leaders work to have the most wins. Educational leaders endeavor to increase learning. Spiritual leaders have a target to which we aim our efforts and by which we judge our effectiveness. Our target is making disciples. Disciple making is the bottom-line by which we evaluate our effectiveness.

The Book of Discipline 2008 (§§ 243, 122) clearly states the process by which we make disciples. We make disciples by:

- Reaching out and receiving with joy all who will respond;
- Encouraging people in their relationship with God;
- Inviting them to commitment to God's love in Jesus Christ;
- Providing opportunities for all to grow spiritually; and
- Sending all out to live lovingly and justly as Christ's representatives.

The Church Council members are to be focused, dare we even say obsessed, with disciple making. As a result, each Council meeting will look and feel much differently than what most of us have experienced in other governing body settings. Mission-driven Church Councils will have meeting that include:

- Examination of the degree to which the church is fulfilling the primary task outlined above.
- Celebration of the spiritual fruit being realized.
- Confession of underdeveloped disciple-making dimensions.
- Discernment of the next steps to be taken in each disciple-making dimension.
- Assignment of teams to intentionally expand the congregation's fulfillment of the primary tasks.

Fully embracing the importance of spiritual leadership and the primary task of the church will make the Church Council structure a strategic tool through which the local congregation can intentionally join in God's mission of reaching the world with the love and Good News of Jesus Christ. Focusing on these two emphases will make a quick and noticeable impact.

The Church Council Structure

Essential Functions

The old adage states, "Form follows Function." The most effective structures are those designed around the organization's functions. The structure should align the organization's resources for maximum fulfillment of its mission.

In light of the Local Church's primary task outlined above, the Church Council structure is designed around these essential functions. (§§ 243)

1. Planning and implementing a program of nurture, outreach, and witness for people within and without the congregation.
2. Provide for effective pastoral and lay leadership.
3. Provide for financial support, physical facilities, and the legal obligations of the church.
4. Utilizing the appropriate relationships and resources of the district and annual conference.

5. Providing for the proper creation, maintenance, and disposition of documentary record material of the local church.
6. Seeking inclusiveness in all aspects of its life.

Required Components

The bare skeleton of the Church Council requires the following programmatic and administrative committees. The chairs of each of these required committees are members of the Church Council.

- Nurturing Ministries (§ 252.2a)
- Outreach Ministries (§ 252.2b)
- Witness Ministries (§ 252.2c)
- Committee on Lay Leadership (§ 259.1)
- Committee on Pastor (Staff) Parish Relations (§ 258.2)
- Board of Trustees (§§ 258.3, 2524-2550)
- Committee on Finance (§ 258.4)

Other members of the Church Council are (§ 252.5):

- Chairperson of Church Council (§ 251.3)
- Lay Leader (§ 251.1)
- Membership Secretary (§ 234)
- Church Treasurer(s) (§ 258.4.b)
- Lay Member(s) to Annual Conference (§ 251.2)
- President or representative of United Methodist Men (§ 256.6)
- President or representative of United Methodist Women (§ 256.5)
- President or representative of United Methodist Youth (§ 252.5.k)
- Young Adult representative (§ 252.5)
- The Pastor(s) (§ 252.5.l)

Optional Components

Each local church may determine that one or more of these optional leadership positions are needed to maximize their ministry of making disciples. Typically, “chairpersons” of these ministry groups are full members of the Church Council. Where desirable, one or more of these assignments may be combined. Where needed, committee members may be recruited to form a team around certain ministry tasks.

- Age-Level, Family and Specialized-Ministries (§ 253)
- Coordinator of Children’s Ministries (§ 256.2.a)
 - Coordinator of Youth Ministries (§ 256.3)
 - Coordinator of Adult Ministries
 - Coordinator of Family Ministries
 - Coordinator of Young Adult (§ 256.3.d)
 - Older Adults Ministries (§ 257)

Other Ministry Group Coordinators (§ 254)

- Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns
- Church and Society
- Community Volunteers
- Education
- Evangelism
- Higher Education and Campus Ministry
- Missions
- Prayer Advocacy
- Religion and Race
- Status and Role of Women
- Earth Advocacy
- Stewardship
- Worship
- Persons with Special Needs
- Church Media Resources

Church School Superintendent and Small Group Coordinator (§ 255)
Superintendent of the Church School (§ 255.1)
Coordinator of Small-Group Ministries (§ 255.1)
Health and Welfare Ministries (§ 255.2)
Communications Coordinator (§ 255.3)

The Church Council may appoint other committees, as it deems advisable, including:
Records and History (§ 247.5)
Memorial Gifts

Embracing Flexibility

Remember, each local church should customize the Church Council model to fit your ministry. This is not a “cookie-cutter” mandate for local church organization. You are encouraged to think missionally: ***What will help your local church maximize its mission of drawing people to Jesus Christ?***

Some medium-sized and large-sized congregations have faced a similar challenge with the Church Council format. The challenge is centered in the need to adequately plan and implement the mission and ministry formerly coordinated by the local Church Council on Ministries.

The Church Council calls for all programmatic and administrative leaders to be in the same meeting. While there are certainly benefits to having shared wisdom around programming, the reality is that the Church Council meeting can get bogged down in logistics and other details if everything is discussed by “the committee of the whole.”

We recommend that churches feel free to allow the flexible nature of the Church Council structure create space for a solution that will work for you. One suggestion is to have all the programming leaders meet periodically for planning and partnering. The results of such a meeting can be shared with the Church Council. This is no different than the administrative committees who meet as needed prior to Church Council meetings to formulate proposals for Council consideration. Some churches will find an informal gathering of program leaders works fine, while others may have such elaborate program offerings that something more formal will be necessary to effectively accomplish the primary tasks related to disciple making.

Some may worry about the willingness of leaders to gather for additional meetings. We believe leaders will be excited about gathering if they know their efforts are mission-driven Kingdom moments, not just a routine meeting to maintain the status quo.

Some Practical Considerations

First, each local church should have one or more copies of the current *Book of Discipline* available for use by interested parties. The availability and use of *The Book of Discipline* during the design process should help eliminate confusion and misunderstanding that might arise if only one person possesses the book.

Second, each local church will want to spend some time evaluating the efficiency and fruitfulness of its current disciple-making efforts and its present organizational structure. You may consider changing to some customized version of the Church Council format if the results are not to your liking, or you think you could increase your effectiveness in reaching more people for Christ. ***The decision to change structures should be mission-driven!***

Third, the Charge Conference must approve whatever structure you adopt. It would be best to have a task group work on the structure proposal and present it back to your current governing body (Board or Council). This would be a good time to begin embracing the shifts in practices mentioned in the Spiritual Leadership and Primary Task sections above. For example, the process should be driven by Bible study and prayerful discernment regarding the mission of the church. The customized version of your Church Council should evolve from a consensus building process, which may take some time.

Fourth, once approved by your governing body, you may choose to consult with your District Superintendent about having a called Charge Conference to consider approving the new structure. The

called Charge Conference session would allow your Committee on Lay Leadership to prepare nominations based on your customized Church Council structure for the regularly scheduled fall Charge Conference.

Fifth, ***without exception, spiritual leadership is the most significant factor in the effectiveness of your church's ministry!*** While this resource is written to explain a new organizational structure, we know that all structures have limited impact. *The Book of Discipline, 2008* gives new focus to the leadership development process by enlarging the responsibilities of the Committee on Lay Leadership (§ 258). Typically, we have used the Nominations Committee during those weeks preceding the fall Charge Conference. The importance of year-round leadership preparation and support is now stressed. The Committee on Lay Leadership members should join the Pastor in reviewing and engaging in the detailed list of responsibilities. Your faithfulness in this ministry of leadership development will be blessed by God and will positively impact the vitality of your congregation.

Finally, a church is not presently required to shift to the Church Council format. While Church Council is the only local church structure detailed in the *Book of Discipline 1996, 2000, 2004, and 2008*, churches may still use the Administrative Board/Council on Ministries format or the Administrative Council format.

Resources for Further Exploration

Each pastor/leader/participant involved in a restructuring conversation should read the *Book of Discipline 2008*, beginning with § 201 through § 258. This resource is a summary paper and is not intended to replace the Book of Discipline.

Cokesbury offers two resources for training leadership using the Church Council format.

-- ***Guidelines for Leading Your Congregation*** is a set of 26 Booklets with a slipcase. Individual booklets may be ordered for specific committees. See Cokesbury the catalog for details. The most recent version is 2009-2012.

NOTE: Each guide begins with a focus on "Identity, Call and Mission." This clearly states our mission to make disciples and the role of spiritual leaders. The booklet then engages the new leader in exploring the four essential leadership functions: Discovering Current Reality, Naming Shared Vision, Developing Bridges (between present and desired future), and Monitoring the Journey. The specific functions/responsibilities of each position are covered last.

-- ***Job Descriptions and Leadership Training for Local Church Leaders*** 2009-2012, written by Betsy Heavner. This is a packet for leaders in the Church Council, Administrative Board/Council on Ministries, and Administrative Council formats. These are one-sheet (front and back) summaries of committee/position responsibilities with a common series of questions intended to engage the leaders in theological reflection as they begin their work. Pastors can pass out handouts to appropriate leaders based on their position.

For Additional Assistance

You may contact one of the following Office of Connectional Ministries staff members to further assist you with the Church Council concept. The toll-free office number is (888) 266-7642. Address: PO Box 20408, St. Simons Island, GA 31522.

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