

amount of time this sort of case will take up if it happens in your church. I estimate that the pastoral care, administration, consultations, court appearances (as a character witness) and planning meetings have taken up to a month's full time equivalent in the last eighteen months - quite apart from the nervous wear and tear! But it certainly means you see Christians having to put their faith into practice.

The author of this article is an experienced Anglican parish priest.

## **TAMING THE COMMITTEE!**

### **Chris Skilton**

“Please may we have the minutes of the Working Party on the ‘Colour of Music Stands’ from the Musical Instruments Sub-Committee of the Worship (Morning Services, Term Time) Committee?”

It may not have quite come to that in your church - but it may feel like it for those who have been drawn (or sucked) into the seemingly endless round of committees which we establish to run the local church. Of course we need groups of people charged with much of the day-to-day work and thinking and planning that enriches church life. Thankfully we have mostly moved beyond the minister who does everything to delegated responsibility involving several others.

But have we gone too far? We have committees for everything, established in five minutes at a church meeting, set up in perpetuity and twenty-five years on are still meeting on the third Thursday of each month. After all, they always have! Some of the best, most able and most gifted people in our churches have been ground into weary submission by membership of committees. In fact, a good indication of how well established a person has become in the life of the church may be gained from the number of committees they serve on. It may leave little opportunity for bridgebuilding into the wider community and the development of mission initiatives - because everyone is at a committee meeting!

**Does it really have to be like this?**

Every denomination and individual congregation needs a structure for the best ordering and government of the church. This may be the church meeting, deacons' meeting or church council. There will also be other statutory bodies (the existence of a standing committee may be a legal requirement). Many churches also have found value in non-statutory ministry or leadership teams which are charged with developing its vision and strategy. We should have no quarrel with any of this, although the structure and its meetings should be seen to be serving the needs of the church and not vice versa! When these bodies meet they need to work with clear ground rules, such as:

- \* clear agendas stating the purpose and aim of each item;
- \* briefing and information papers for each major item attached;
- \* AOB notified before the meeting and for items of information only;
- all of which make for better use of time.

It's the rest of the committee edifice that calls for attention. Why not do away with it? That is not a recipe for church life stuttering to a halt, but rather the creation of a new way of working. The church in which I currently work has largely no perpetual committee structure. In its place, task groups and working groups are appointed to undertake a particular piece of work. This might involve planning an open-air celebration for Pentecost, making recommendations for replacing the church carpet or bringing to the church council proposals for revising the pattern and practice of preparing children to be admitted to receiving Holy Communion.

### **Define the group by the task in hand**

The group's life is defined by the task in hand. When the work is done, that group disbands, having fulfilled its role and helped the church forward in its life, mission and maintenance. Groups are set up by the church decision making body and their terms of reference and membership established by it.

The main advantages of this way of working include:

- \* A group responds well to a focussed task and is satisfied to see it completed. It's good for morale to see an end in sight!
- \* The group has a given purpose rather than having to search for one to justify its existence;
- \* The most appropriate people can be asked to undertake a particular piece of work;

- \* More people have opportunity to offer their gifts and skills where appropriate. Sometimes committees can be hard to break into!
- \* In a busy world, time is a precious commodity. People are more willing to give a specific, limited amount of time to a measurable task rather than an open-ended commitment to joining a committee;
- \* There is less likelihood of a church doing things because they always do and because that committee has always done it (and done it like that!);
- \* Having completed a piece of work, individuals can have a break from a group until it is appropriate for them to serve on another body.

### **Making it all work**

It is important at the same time to beware of some of the pitfalls of this way of working and of how to avoid them! For example:

1. The church leadership needs to be skilled at holding the different elements of church life and its working groups together to avoid fragmentation.
2. Continuity and received wisdom must not be lost - there is no need to rotate membership of groups for the sake of it!
3. Groups need to be aware of how their task contributes to the overall mission plan and statement of the church (revisiting this should be something that the leadership is doing anyway!).
4. A watching brief needs to be kept to ensure that a group doesn't wander off from the task in hand and it is always advisable to have at least one member of the church council (or equivalent) as a member.
5. Communication is vital (but not always undertaken). The group must be clear about their task; the whole church should know the membership and purpose of a group and how to feed information and responses into it; recommendations and action from the decision-making body should be made known before they are implemented.
6. Churches should beware of setting up too many groups at once - there needs to be a self-denying ordinance of only four or five (maximum) pieces of work being undertaken in this way in a given year. Having said that, the church does need to see that this is a way of decisions being made and action taken and not a delaying

tactic to lose something difficult to handle in a complex bureaucracy.

The key tests of exploring this way of working will include whether it helps the church to be more effective and efficient in its work and most crucially whether it sets more people free for the work and mission. That alone would be a significant step forward for many local churches.

**Chris Skilton is Archdeacon of Lambeth and Board Member of Ministry Today**

## **WHAT DO BAPTISTS MEAN WHEN THEY DEDICATE "THINGS"?**

**Paul Beasley-Murray**

“As *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship* (the Baptist Union liturgical resource) recognises, the difficulty we face is that “Baptists have not generally placed much emphasis upon sacred objects, places and ceremonies. Their free tradition pays more attention to the inward, spiritual consciousness of the worshippers”. So, for instance, our earliest Baptist places of worship were the plainest of “meeting houses”, devoid of any sacred symbols. Strange as it now may seem, less than fifty years ago the presence of even a wooden cross in many a Baptist church could be a matter of controversy, while only in the last twenty years or so has the presence of Advent candles on the communion table become acceptable.

And yet, in *Orders and Prayers for Church Worship* compiled by Ernest Payne & Stephen Winward and published first in 1960, seven pages were given over to ‘The dedication of church furnishings and memorials’. Similarly *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship* devotes three pages to such dedications and contains suggestions for the dedication of a communion table, lectern, a pulpit and a baptistery - but, unlike *Orders & Prayers for Christian Worship*, there are not suggestions for the dedication of an organ, window or a memorial!