

# Chairperson

A committee chairperson presides at committee meetings, directs and guides the committee and may represent the committee in other settings.

## History and Background

While the term **chairperson** is relatively new, the concept of leadership for a small group appears to go back to ancient times. The Israelites had ruling elders who appointed individuals to do various tasks. The early church realized that everything couldn't be done by a few people, so they divided up the work. Paul's message to the people in Corinth was to help them understand that each person had a place in the work of the church and that all were to use their gifts, whatever they were.

In the past the person who chaired a committee was called a "chairman." That may have once been fairly accurate, for most committees in churches were led by men. Today, most churches have consciously changed their terminology to reflect their belief that gender is not a qualification for chairing a committee.

## Common Practices

Most churches have lots of committees because they have a lot of work to be done to carry out their mission. In some churches every

member serves on a committee. Occasionally a committee has two people serving together, but generally each committee has one chairperson. In some churches the governing board is made up of chairpersons from all committees. Even when that isn't the case, there may be times when a chairperson is asked to represent the committee at other meetings. Perhaps chairpersons gather to help set goals, work out the year's calendar or set budget requests. Sometimes they work together in preparation for an annual meeting or budget report.

How chairpersons are chosen depends on the type of committee and the church's constitution and bylaws. Sometimes they are appointed by and from the committee at its first meeting of the year. In other cases, the chairperson is appointed or elected by the congregation. Frequently the chairperson has served on the committee for a year or more before being named chairperson. The way people are recruited for being chairpersons varies, as does their training for the position.

## Responsibilities

Some responsibilities depend on the nature and size of the committee. The larger the committee, the more it is your responsibility for coordination. Look at the card in this series for your specific committee to see what other responsibilities may be yours. Your most important responsibilities are to

coordinate and facilitate. You will be responsible for doing the following, or seeing that they are done:

- Understanding the purpose of the committee.
- Presiding at each meeting, keeping order and making certain that all members participate.
- Beginning and ending meetings at agreed upon times. You may need to know how to deal with people's personal agendas as well as the primary agenda of the committee.
- Setting an agenda based on information provided by the committee members and others.
- Calling meetings and sending reminders of upcoming meetings to members.
- Providing time and leadership at committee meetings for worship, community building, changing the agenda and evaluation.
- Knowing how to use the appropriate decision-making process. That may mean understanding consensus and when it's reached; it may mean knowing **Robert's Rules of Order**. It's not necessary to have formal voting processes in a committee of three, but it probably is for a meeting of 300.
- Finding ways to learn more about the interests and abilities of committee members so that you can help them maximize their contributions.
- Knowing to whom you are accountable and making sure other people know to whom they are accountable.

- Being sensitive to interpersonal relations within the committee, between committee members and other committees and between the pastor and the committee members.
- Clearly articulating your values and hopes for the committee and church
- Helping the committee set achievable goals in keeping with its purpose.
- Preparing materials for meetings. A printed agenda, copies of correspondence and other background papers help the committee act efficiently. You may be responsible for having resource people or reading material available, depending on the nature of your task.
- Setting up rooms for committee activities and seeing that they are left orderly.
- Delegating tasks. Other committee members are there to work together and to take on specific delegated responsibilities.
- Monitoring and challenging committee members as they carry out tasks and supporting them in their achievements.
- Working with other officers between meetings of the committee.
- Carrying out your assigned tasks between meetings and seeing that others do, too.
- Meeting deadlines and following through on decisions.
- Providing information about the committee's work to the church

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newsletter, to newspapers, to other church members, to the governing board and to the pastor. The purpose will vary: to ask for help, to seek approval or to keep others up-to-date. Be sure you are aware of the reason for sharing the information.

- Providing budget requests and accounting for expenditures.
- Setting a timeline for tasks to be completed.
- Coordinating the work of your committee with other committees in the church.
- Using inclusive language and non-stereotyped concepts.
- Orienting new members.
- Making sure the committee grows in understanding and vision.

## Skills and Attributes Needed

- Understanding of what you do as ministry.
- Sensitivity to people's needs and feelings.
- Flexibility.
- Openness.
- Confidentiality.
- Ability to build on people's gifts and strengths.
- Commitment to the committee's task.
- Mutual respect of committee members and others in the church.
- Understanding of how groups work.
- Understanding of the decision-making process.

- Understanding of communication.
- Commitment to grow and learn.
- Ability to deal with details, while not forgetting the whole.
- Understanding of the church's organization and how the committee fits in it.
- Ability to delegate, providing people with information, authority and resources to do a job for which they are accountable. You'll need to check in with them occasionally so they know you care about them and their assigned tasks.
- Ability to organize, plan and set goals.

## Ways to Increase Skills, Knowledge and Effectiveness

- Observe others as chairpersons and see what seems to work.
- Ask someone to observe you during a meeting and give you feedback about what you did.
- Keep a learning journal.
- Talk to people on other committees, to the governing board and to the pastor to understand your committee's relationships and responsibilities.
- Pray and meditate.
- Worship regularly.
- Attend a workshop for committee chairpersons sponsored by your association or conference. Ask for one if none is scheduled.
- Take a course at a local college or technical school on leadership,

parliamentary procedure, decision-making, assertiveness training, public speaking or motivation.

- Be part of a support group where you can talk about your experiences.
- Have a friend role-play situations with you that you expect to come up during a committee meeting. See what happens when you say different things. Try out the best ones at the committee meeting.
- Keep a folder handy in which to file any information you come across related to your committee. Review this material periodically.

## Issues Facing the Church

- Some people find it difficult to delegate responsibilities and want to do it all themselves. Others delegate all authority and responsibilities. What is the right amount to delegate?

## Questions

- What is the purpose of your committee?
- To whom is the committee accountable? To whom are you accountable?
- Is it appropriate to use parliamentary procedure in your committee? If so, how might you learn more about it?
- What is one thing on which you need to work?

- What other topic in this series will you read next?