

People are on committees because the church has tasks to be done and decisions to be made. They are also there because serving on a committee can fill personal needs. Contrary to popular sayings like “a camel is a horse designed by a committee,” people working together can be more effective than people working alone.

History and Background

There is no doubt that the early church found the need for committees. In Acts 6, when people were muttering against the Hebrews for not taking care of their widows, a committee of seven was appointed to do this work, so that the disciples could get on with preaching. This division of labor worked, for we are told “The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem ...” (Acts 6:7).

Martin Luther called for the “priesthood of all believers.” It wasn’t enough for clergy to minister, he said. Ministry is the work of all the people. Committees are one way that the members of a church share in its ministry. The American concept of democracy enhanced the idea of committees, but the ministry of the church involves more than simple “majority rule”.

Common Practices

While practices vary, much of the

work of all churches is done by committee members. Some committees continue from year to year. Others are ad hoc committees or task forces set up to deal with a short-term project, problem or need.

People agree to be on committees for personal reasons. They may feel they can do the job well or, at least, “better than they did it last year.” Sometimes they just want the fun of working with other members of the committee, or to deepen their relationships in the church. Often doing something helpful makes people feel good and fulfilled. Some people volunteer to be on committees to deepen their faith through study and action.

Committees are finding that in addition to the time designated for their specific tasks, they need to set aside time for group building and worship at each meeting. Worship helps keep the vision of the church before the members, and their focus on God’s will for the church’s life. Group building makes it easier for people to work together by deepening relationships and trust. Both worship and group building are necessary for a committee’s work.

Responsibilities

Specific responsibilities related to the tasks of the committee vary, but all committee members share the responsibility for:

- Understanding the purpose of the committee.
- Attending committee meetings and

taking pertinent materials.

- Listening carefully to other committee members, and clarify to be sure you understand them (using active listening).
- Preparing for meetings by reading advance materials and doing assigned tasks.
- Listening to suggestions from members of the church who are not on the committee.
- In conversations with others in the church, represent the ideas of the entire committee (while respecting individuals’ confidentiality) and not just your own views.
- Communicating your own ideas and feelings clearly.
- Encouraging other committee members to express their ideas.
- Asking questions when you don’t understand what’s going on.
- Maintaining confidentiality.
- Agreeing to take on only the tasks you are able to do and doing them.
- Asking questions that are caring and, at times, tough, about the value and purpose of the committee and its actions.
- Being willing to lead group building or worship when asked.

Skills and Attributes Needed

All committee members don’t have to have the same skills and attributes. A committee to renovate the church kitchen might have members with different skills, such as meeting

skills, color sense, cooking experience, plumbing expertise, a measure of reality or a hint of vision. A committee working to support a bond issue could value members with specific knowledge, with experience at lobbying, with writing skills or with organizational skills. There are opportunities for people to use different skills within the committee: as chairperson or secretary, as doer or dreamer. On any committee, you’ll find it helpful to:

- Be committed to the mission of the church.
- Have an interest in the particular work of the committee.
- Be enthusiastic.
- Be able to work within a structure and cooperate with other people.
- Understand basic parliamentary procedure.
- Know how decisions are made.
- Know how groups function.
- Be willing to listen to others and to help others express their opinions.
- Understanding of your own and others’ attitudes toward disagreement and conflict.

Ways to Increase Skills, Knowledge and Effectiveness

If you have a solid background in the matters with which your committee is dealing, you may want to increase skills related to meetings. If you’ve been on dozens of committees, you may need some specific information

about the task at hand. It may help if you:

- Find out what your church's constitution and bylaws say about the committee.
- Ask for a position description outlining responsibilities, expectations and accountability.
- Have a schedule of meetings and make plans to attend.
- Participate in an orientation to review history and clarify the task. Learn the relationship of this committee to others in the church.
- Ask questions.
- Talk to the pastor, previous members of the committee or current committee members.
- Attend workshops or seminars (sponsored by your conference or association, ecumenical group, colleges and universities, or community group) on topics related to the committee's task or on parliamentary procedure, leadership, etc.
- Use materials prepared by the association, conference or national bodies of the United Church of Christ.
- Learn about group process from books or seminars which describe churches (or non-profit organizations in which volunteers participate in leadership decisions).

Issues Facing the Church

For a number of reasons, many churches have found that there are not as many volunteers available as there once were, and that committees are increasingly unpopular ways to serve. How does this phenomenon affect the way the church works? What are the implications for the way the church works with other community agencies which also use volunteers?

- How do environmental concerns (use of electricity, disposable cups, excess paper, etc.) affect where, when and how committees and their members function?
- How can the needs of the church be balanced with the needs of committee members?
- Conflict is a recurrent pattern in church life. How can committees work to recognize disagreements and encourage open discussion and resolution of everyday issues? How can larger conflicts be recognized and addressed?

Questions

- What are your particular responsibilities related to your committee?

- Is there any responsibility upon which you need to work?
- What do you find easiest about being a member of a committee?