



The role of the PCC

TN147 Training Notes series: Structures

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These notes are a rare example of where I write for Church of England churches alone. They will be of value to church Trustees in any denomination but some of what I write relates specifically to ecclesiastical legislation.

What exactly is the role of a church's Parochial Church Council (PCC)? The answer is not nearly as clear as some would make out and different churches interpret it in different ways. So what follows seeks to bring some clarity. After all, a PCC cannot function effectively if it is not clear why it exists!

Source material

Formal literature about Parochial Church Councils often starts at the wrong point by listing the membership and focusing on the Council's meetings. Where you need to start is to understand what the PCC's role should be. Why does it exist in a Church of England church?

For this you need to consider two sources. The first is a piece of ecclesiastical law, the 'Parochial Church Councils (Powers) Measure 1956' and how this has been amended in the 'Synodical Government Measure 1969'. The second is a more general understanding of charity law and the role of the Trustees of a charity.

Ecclesiastical source

According to the 1956 measure as amended, the general functions of a PCC include:

- 1 It shall be the duty of the Minister and the Parochial Church Council to consult together on matters of general concern and importance to the parish.
- 2 The functions of Parochial Church Councils shall include –
 - (a) co-operation with the Minister in promoting in the parish the whole mission of the Church, pastoral, evangelistic, social and ecumenical;

- (b) the consideration and discussion of matters concerning the Church of England or any other matters of religious or public interest, but not the declaration of the doctrine of the Church on any question.

There then follows various matters relating to communication from and to synods and views expressed in any parochial church meeting (such as, but not only, the APCM).

In law the PCC is a 'body corporate' which means it exists as a body independent of its individual members and has 'perpetual succession'.

Charity source

But it has become more obvious in recent years that the PCC is the trustee body for the charity of the church it serves and therefore falls under the watchful eye of the Charity Commission.

Trustees are responsible for the overall health and work of the charity. In particular, their role is to agree and then monitor the charity's vision, to appoint the Chief Executive, to oversee and protect the assets and good name of the charity, and to ensure that the charity is well managed. This aspect of the PCC's role is rarely stressed in official church literature. The Trustees work under a Chair, the staff work under a Chief Executive. The Trustees are responsible for governance oversight and the staff for day-to-day service.

One point where this breaks down in a church is with the incumbent as in ecclesiastical law he or she is ex officio Chair of the PCC which confuses the picture somewhat. Increasingly, however, incumbents of larger churches hand over to the lay Vice-Chair to chair meetings. This is always my recommendation for any PCC provided there is someone skilled at chairing meetings – and it is a real skill. Another point of difference is that there is of course no Chief Executive to appoint – licensed clergy are not employed by the PCC but are seen as 'office holders'.

But charity good practice helpfully places the focus on the vision for the church and the management of its assets including, therefore, its lay staff.

Specifics

All the above is pretty general, but to make it more specific here are the normal responsibilities of a PCC in a church or united benefice, taken from the Measure already referred to and with the addition of safeguarding.

- The church's safeguarding policy and the work of the Parish Safeguarding Officer (PSO).
- The financial affairs of the church.
- The care, maintenance, preservation and insurance of the fabric of the church building and its equipment and ornaments.
- The acquisition and holding of property for the church (the Measure goes into considerable detail about this).
- The employment of staff.

If one considers the role of Trustees and part 2 of the Measure cited above, one could then add: with the Minister...

- The setting and monitoring of the vision for the church's ministry.

- The setting and monitoring of the plan to work towards that vision.
- The protection of the church's reputation.
- The oversight of all matters of importance in the total ministry of the church.
- Matters for the church relating to the wider Church of England.

Application to the role of the PCC

So what do these two sources tell us about the role of the PCC in any one church or united benefice? Here are four suggestions.

1 The role is high-level

The first, and most important, point to grasp is that both our key sources point to a high-level agenda for the PCC rather than one of day-to-day operations. This will surprise many! The reason why this so often does not work out in practice is that church members are likely to default to detail for the simple reason that they are used to that in life.

Everyone will feel pretty comfortable discussing the colour of the church carpet because we discuss such things in our own homes. Most people will be happy to talk about security or drains or the state of the churchyard because we are concerned about these same things for our own houses and gardens.

But if an agenda item is something like: 'How can we make discipleship a priority in all we do this year?', many people feel somewhat out of their depth. So they quickly turn the discussion from discipleship to something more trivial. We all, to some extent, default to detail.

But our ecclesiastical source sets the bar much higher than that. It is even clearer in charity legislation where the key role of the Board is to set and hold the vision and monitor the plan to achieve it. So is your PCC focusing on the big picture vision for your church or is it only dealing with detail? Smaller churches may well need to tackle some detail, but this should never be at the expense of the major items that a PCC is properly responsible for.

2 The role is broad

The ecclesiastical source is pretty clear when it says that the PCC is to work with the incumbent on the 'whole mission' of the church. It then spells that out to make it clear: 'pastoral, evangelistic, social and ecumenical'. A PCC is not to concern itself only with finance and fabric and leave matters of discipleship and outreach to the clergy or ministry staff. Otherwise it simply becomes a 'General Purposes Committee'!

So when did your PCC last discuss evangelism for your church, or your pastoral care structures, or your young people's teaching syllabus, or your links with other local churches, or issues from Deanery, Diocesan or General Synod? Such areas should regularly be on your agendas.

If your church employs lay staff, the PCC are normally the employers and so have a duty of care for those who work for them. So how well are your staff line managed and by whom? Are they supported effectively in their ministry? How do they feel about their employment and about you, their employers? The PCC are responsible for all this. You cannot just leave it to the incumbent.

And of course finance and fabric issues are included too, but not as the sole areas of PCC concern, and not (from the earlier point) in too much detail so that the strategic aspects are lost.

3 **The role is operational**

But all that is no excuse for the PCC to have their heads in the clouds. They do have to deal with the realities of parish life. The Treasurer is actually the PCC Treasurer. She or he has the responsibility of advising the PCC on financial strategy as well as handling the money that comes in and goes out. Church members want to know that the money they give to the church, often a significant proportion of their income, is being managed responsibly. The Treasurer is accountable to the PCC for this.

The church buildings and equipment are valuable assets and need to be maintained properly. So the PCC should be handling such business but at a strategic level not on a day-to-day matter of small detail.

Other operational issues should be on the PCC agenda too: consider the following.

- the use of IT by the church in its management and communications;
- safeguarding overview;
- communications both within the church membership and to the outside world;
- HR issues of employment, volunteering, health and safety, compliance with legal requirements;
- the policies and risk assessments now required of any institutions.

Just as day-to-day finance will be in the hands of the Treasurer who is accountable to the PCC, a growing number of churches now have Operations Managers to handle the considerable amount of work involved in such areas. But, again, they are accountable to the PCC for all this.

4 **The role is about leadership**

The PCC is therefore a leadership body for the oversight of all church life, a responsibility of governance. This means that its members need to display Christian character as described in Training Notes TN141, *A church council 'Code of Conduct'*. It also means that PCC members need to be people of prayer.

In summary, the PCC are the Trustees of the church, responsible for the big picture oversight of all its ministry. The PCC is a leadership body. Its members should be models of Christian discipleship.

Practical implications

So the PCC agenda should include:

- the church's vision, monitoring the Mission Action Plan, seeking to lead the church in the direction the PCC believes God is calling it to travel;
- issues of mission: service, outreach, nurturing new disciples, nurture;
- reports from the Parish Safeguarding Officer;

- matters of financial strategy more than detail;
- matters of fabric and equipment, but not day-to-day maintenance.

Matters of detail should then be handled as appropriate by:

- incumbent and staff;
- a specialist working group or committee;
- an ad hoc working group or committee;
- any people appointed as ministry leaders in a specified field.

Specialist groups asked to handle detail can be small: most churches think of appointing formal committees of six or more people. It is far better for a church to appoint a working group of two or three people who can meet for ten minutes after a Sunday service rather than holding long mid-week committee meetings.

Examples of where detail may be delegated with appropriate reporting back to the PCC include day-to-day safeguarding processes, financial record keeping, staff employment, maintenance work.

The PCC should NOT:

- find itself rubber-stamping decisions taken by others that rightly belong to the PCC;
- be re-discussing the detail of business which it delegated to a small group;
- be micro-managed by the incumbent and clergy;
- seek to control the incumbent and clergy.

Larger church PCCs need to delegate detail as above. Very small church PCCs may well need to tackle some of it but not at the expense of the higher level agenda.

This all means that the PCC is a leadership body within the church, and that has implications for those elected to it at the APCM, and for those who do the electing. The PCC members are the Charity Trustees for the church, responsible to God for the wise conduct of the overarching vision and plan for the church. That is quite a responsibility!

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN147. They have been revised from the original paper written at the request of the Diocese of Ely. See also Articles A5, *How to chair meetings*, and A24, *Mission-shaped Church Councils*, plus Training Notes TN88, *Advice to a new committee member*, TN130, *Appoint a 'Staff Action Group'*, and TN141, *A church council 'Code of Conduct'*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of training in making meetings work well.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN147 under Structures.

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