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A grid structure for churches

TN104 Training Notes series: Structures

In two or three recent consultancy reports I have found the simple outline of a grid to be a useful means of illustrating how to structure different groups, congregations or departments within one church.

In these notes I develop this idea in a more general setting giving four examples where it might prove instructive. See if this idea can help you to understand how your church, your congregation or your group can be diverse yet united. I admit that all this will make more sense to those who enjoy thinking structurally!

To demonstrate my basic concept, here is a five-by-six grid in which I have highlighted the third row and the fourth column).
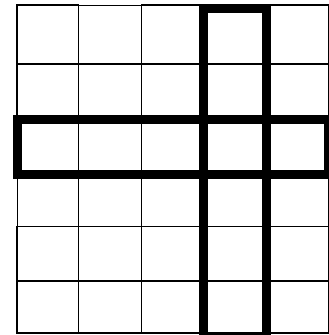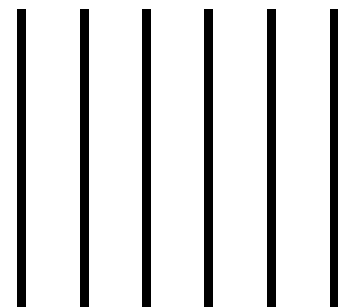
Now imagine that each column in this grid represents one person in a family – so this is a diagrammatic representation of five family members.

The five columns might then represent:

- Grandma
- Mother
- Father
- Daughter
- Son

In this grid, there are no horizontal lines shown at all – just columns. What this says is that nothing as such holds the five people together. They are independent agents with no connections with each other. Some would say they exist in 'silos'.
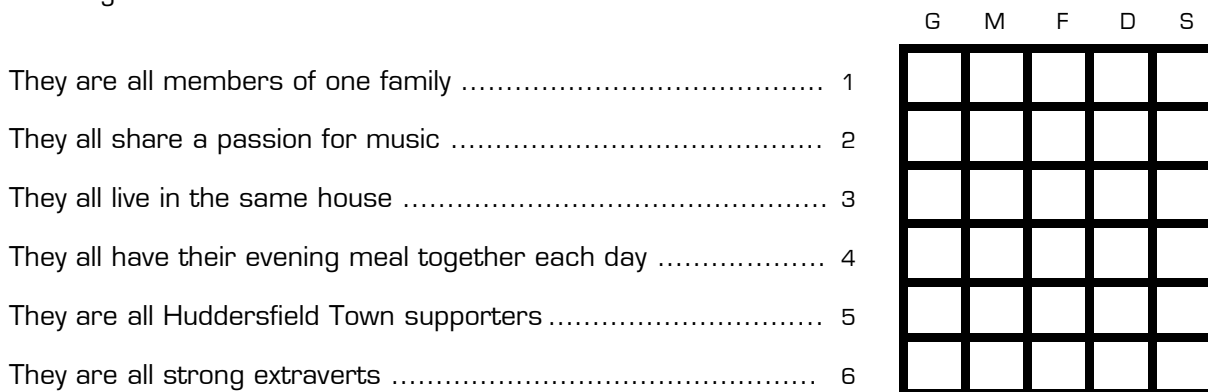
But that is not true here! They are closely related to each other for a start, and there may be other factors that clearly unite them.

Imagine now that each row in the original idea of a grid represents something that holds these people together. It, as it were, wraps round the columns giving a linkage between them all. Clearly the fact that they are all members of the same family is a major connector. Let's say that they are all very musical too, and that that forms a second connector. So our grid might now look like this.

G   M   F   D   S

They are all members of one family 1

They are share a passion for music 2
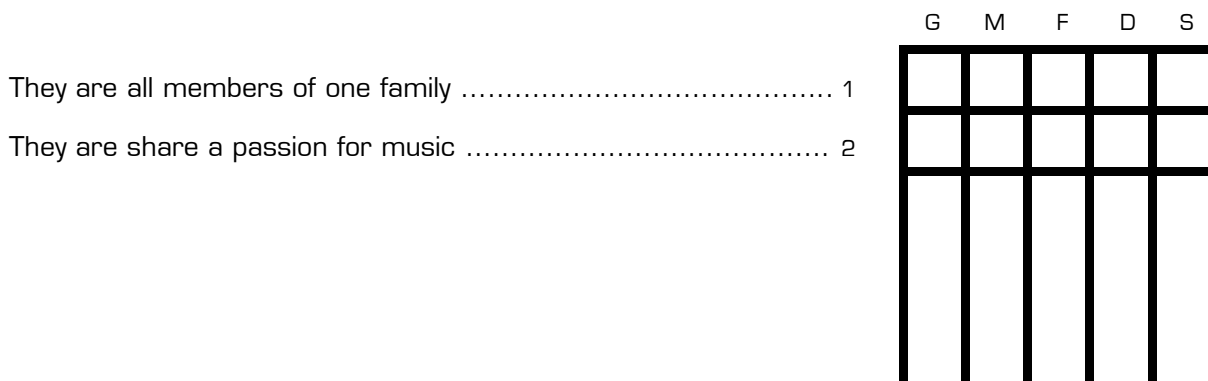
There are now two clear and strong features binding the five people together. They may be of different strengths (in our example, the first probably being much stronger than the second), but both are important for the unity of the group.

Imagine now that there are four more clear connectors. These might be those shown in the following list.

G   M   F   D   S

They are all members of one family 1

They all share a passion for music 2

They all live in the same house 3

They all have their evening meal together each day 4

They are all Huddersfield Town supporters 5

They are all strong extraverts 6

Each of those six elements gives a connection between the five people (as before, some are stronger than others). The five family members are held together tightly by six features.

So we have moved from a diagram of columns to a grid where the columns are held together by several definable rows   This diagram is strong on the horizontal rows as well as the vertical columns.

OK – St Paul's picture of the body may be your preference (you need to realise that I am a mathematician by training). The body parts are the columns and the listing of 'One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one Father…' (Ephesians 4:5,6) forms the rows. But be careful because Paul is trying to make a different point from the one I now want to develop – so too close a comparison is not advisable!

I want to apply this grid idea to church structures rather than to church members. Let's see if this picture of a grid with columns held together by rows helps us to think about structures in situations where we have different groups or activities needing to be held together.

I have four examples. I take the first in most detail.

Example 1: Different congregations in one church

Many churches will have more than one service on a Sunday and it may be that each service develops its own distinct congregation. Some larger churches make this a key feature of their overall structure by having staff and volunteer office holders who are assigned to just one congregation to provide identity and enable the large church to operate in congregational units.

The same principle applies to any church that has moved to multi-site. The key point here is that this is still one church meeting in different congregations but, in this case, in different locations. There may be a combination: two congregations at one site and a third at another.

In the case I give here the columns in the grid will be listed by their service/congregation/site. So, rather than our family illustration to date, the headings may look something like:

- Sunday 8.00 am.
- Sunday 10.30 am.
- Sunday 6.00 pm
- Saturday 4.30 pm.
- Wednesday 10.00 am.

Or, for a multi-site church (just three congregations and so columns in this example):

- Christ Church Sunday morning
- Christ Church Sunday evening
- Emmanuel Church Sunday morning.

If you wanted to stress that this was **one church** (so the rows that bind the congregations together need to be many and strong), you could emphasise or structure things as follows.

Ideas for rows to strengthen the horizontal dimension*

- One overall Senior Minister
- One church name (with shared logo, branding)
- Shared vision across all congregations
- One central decision-making body (Council, Elders, etc.)
- Shared communication: one newsletter, one website, etc.
- Monthly central celebration service for all

Our grid might now look rather like this. The rows have been stressed but the columns are clearly there.

If on the other hand you wanted to highlight the identity of **each congregation** and so strengthen the columns, you might include:

**Ideas for each column to strengthen the vertical dimension***

- One dedicated service leader for each congregation …
- … supported by a congregational team for planning
- Separate approaches to youth work in each congregation
- Separate teams for welcome, music, coffee, etc.
- Small group structure based on the separate congregations
- Each congregation with its own Administrator

Our grid might now look more like this. The columns have been stressed but the rows are clearly there.

*The first of these lists represents the rows themselves. In the second list the columns are the congregations: these points are *features* of the columns.

You could add the opposites of many row issue to the column list and vice versa. So you would strengthen the idea of separate congregations by having individual branding and localised decision-making. You would strengthen the idea of one church by sharing service leaders round and combining all youth work.

The point of thinking in this way is that it enables you to consider whether you need to strengthen the rows or the columns from what you have at present, and then list ideas for how to do this. A strong structure will be formed when BOTH rows and columns are strong – to have a strong congregational identity within a strong church identity may be the ideal. But the balance between the two can be adjusted to whatever you feel is right for you.
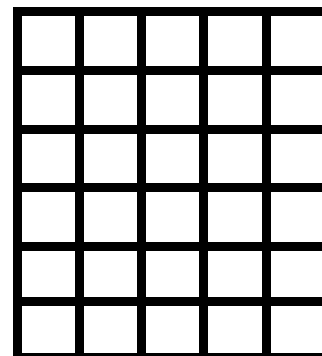
Strong rows *and* columns

Example 2: Different churches sharing resources

The example here is a group of churches that have been brought together to share a Minister or a building or other resources. Because these are different churches the elements of the columns will be strong and the elements of the rows may be correspondingly weaker.

Examples include Anglican multi-parish benefices, Methodist circuits and other similar group ministries.

Here the columns will be clearly defined by their church names, in many cases linked to their geographical location.

Ideas for rows to strengthen the horizontal dimension

- Clearly defined single Minister / Superintendent
- Central financial management
- One central council or other decision-making body
- Shared specialisms (such as a central youth group – non-viable in each church)
- Group or circuit church office
- Regular joint events or services

Ideas for each column to strengthen the vertical dimension

- Each church's own building, identity, location emphasised
- Perhaps local staffing for leading church services in each church
- Separate volunteer teams for all aspects of each church's life
- A church council or other governance body for each church
- The telling of stories for those who remember when each church had its own Minister

The point about the grid model is that it enables you to see what is at present working in column mode and what is in row mode, and then whether the balance needs to be changed in some way.

Example 3: Different departments in one church

Larger churches sometimes operate in departmental mode usually defined by a member of staff responsible for pastoral work, a leader for young people's ministry, an operations team, and so on. The grid idea can be used here too to assess the balance of such divisions.

The columns represent one department. These might be:

- Worship
- Discipleship
- Pastoral care
- Young people
- Outreach and service
- Operations

But such divisions in church life then need rows in the grid to hold the departments together.

Ideas for rows to strengthen the horizontal dimension

- Central staff meetings
- The Church Council / Elders / Deacons
- Weekly church-wide services and events
- The central church diary
- The church office and IT systems
- Shared means of internal communication

Ideas for each column to strengthen the vertical dimension

- Staffing by department with departmental staff meetings
- Church activities listed on website etc. by department
- Volunteer leaders in departmental teams
- The church budget and management accounts organised by department

Example 4: A small group structure

The same idea can be used for a small group structure within a church. Here there would be one column for each group so the columns might be a listing of:

- Each evening group
- Each daytime group
- Specialist groups by gender, interest, area of service, etc.
- Possibly young people's groups too.

The rows would be the elements of church life that hold the groups together to prevent them becoming isolated. You can choose how much you want to control and integrate all groups and so how much of the following lists to include. Some churches would want overall control stressing uniformity, others would prefer a much more flexible arrangement.

Ideas for rows to strengthen the horizontal dimension

- Small Group Co-ordinator appointment
- Regular meetings for all group leaders
- Central guidance notes on how to run your group
- Requirement to follow Sunday teaching syllabus
- Production of central study notes

Ideas for each column to strengthen the vertical dimension

- Each group do their own thing in their own way
- Groups develop their own names and identities

- They run their own social and even weekend-away activities
- They give reports in church services about just their own group
- They follow whatever study programme they decide on

How to use the idea

See how this idea of a grid might help you look at what works best when it is central, and what works well in some kind of 'local activity'.

1   For whatever structure you choose, define the grid's columns and rows.

2   Assess which of these two is currently emphasised and decide if either or both need to be strengthened.

3   List all the possible rows you can think of, then repeat for features that would strengthen the columns.

4   Now decide what combination would give the outcome you desire.