



A church council 'Code of Conduct'

TN141 Training Notes series: Structures

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These notes will enable you to write what is known as a 'Code of Conduct' for members of a church 'council'. They apply directly to a Church of England PCC a Methodist Church Council, or any church's Trustees. Note that the term 'church' may be taken to relate to any group of churches with one 'council'.

A 'Code of Conduct' is a statement of how people, often those in positions of responsibility, should behave. Council members hold significant responsibility as Trustees, as employers of staff and as stewards of funds and physical assets entrusted to the church. To maintain the confidence of church members they need to act with integrity. A Code of Conduct sets the standard that council members agree and seek to live by.

Much of what follows applies to the conduct of meetings but principles of integrity demand that attitudes and actions both in and outside meetings are consistent, so this Code covers all life.

It would be normal practice for all Council members to sign a copy of any such code at the start of each year. It would in fact be wise for those standing for election or chosen for selection to any church council to be made aware of the Code of Conduct before their nomination goes forward, explaining that they will be expected to sign this and abide by it.

This suggested basis for a council Code includes a number of ***principles*** followed by some specific ***examples*** of how these principles should be worked out in practice. An effective Code should include both of these. From here on, the explanatory commentary is printed in italic to distinguish it from possible text for your Code of Conduct.

Note: Such a Code for a church should complement a listing of all requirements for DBS checks and safeguarding training and other guidance about the Council. Examples for the PCC of Church of England churches would include an explanation of the PCC's role and make-up within ecclesiastical law (see <https://www.parishresources.org.uk/pccs/governing-documents/>), the role of Charity Trustees (see <https://www.parishresources.org.uk/pccs/trusteeship/> and the pdf accessed there) and induction training for new Council members regarding, in particular, current business. See also Training Notes TN88, *Advice to a new committee member*, in the Resources section of this website.

1 **Nolan principles**

These are generally accepted principles for the governance of public life. They are widely used in the NHS, local government, corporate bodies and charities. You will see that there is some measure of overlap between them. In what follows these are listed but then applied here not only to Charity Trustees but also to Christian leaders.

Selflessness

We are to seek the best interests of the whole church in pursuing its overall vision, rather than prioritising our own special interests or those of any one group. We are to pray for God's blessing on our business and for other council members including those we may disagree with. We are to seek the best for others on the Council.

Integrity

We are to promote the Christian values of the church and not be influenced by any form of personal benefit. We are to live consistent lives both in and outside meetings as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Objectivity

We are to aim to be impartial and fair, using the best evidence available for decisions we make, seeking to follow biblical principles (see section 2 below for examples), and avoiding any form of discrimination or bias.

Accountability

We are to be accountable to the church membership for our decisions and actions, and ultimately to the Lord Jesus Christ as his servants. We are to seek to enable God's will to be discovered and actioned. We are to hold a duty of care for any church staff we employ.

Openness

We are to seek to be transparent and accountable in our actions and declare any personal conflicts of interest. We are to work together with our fellow-Trustees in a team-like way rather than pursuing personal preferences. We are to seek to become a coherent team more than a group of individuals.

Honesty

We are to be open and truthful in our lives as Christians and in our discussions as Trustees. We are to give an honest, unbiased view of meetings to others but to be totally reliable on any issue of confidentiality.

Leadership

We are to model effective leadership within the church, to seek God's will, and so earn respect for our godly living. We are to support the church's services and events and hold attendance at council meetings as a high priority.

Respect*

We are to be courteous and respectful of our fellow-Trustees, as sisters and brothers together in the Christian family. We are to hold each other in high regard, to listen attentively to and understand the views of others even if we disagree with them. seeking to encourage and support each other.

**This is one of two extra 'Nolan headings' added in Scotland and worth including here. Note that the Charity Commission promote Nolan but also the 'Charity Governance Code' given in CC3a on their website at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/charity-trustee-whats-involved>.*

2 Biblical principles *(quotations from NIV)*

Section 1 has taken a standard set of principles and applied them in a Christian context. But you can also go to Scripture to see what principles you can find there.

One source of biblical wisdom would be the requirements for elders and deacons in the Pastoral Epistles. The two lists in 1 Timothy are remarkably similar but if you take the deacons one as being, possibly, closer to the idea of a council member, note (showing the equivalent Nolan principles in brackets) in 1 Timothy 3:8-13:

Worthy of respect (Respect)

As the Nolan list but here more about being respected for who we are within the church.

Sincere (Openness and Honesty)

Being genuine, an open book, dealing truthfully.

Self-controlled (Integrity and Objectivity)

The Timothy example is 'not indulging in much wine' and that is still relevant.

Reliable (Accountability)

The Timothy example is 'not pursuing dishonest gain' and that is still relevant.

Christian believer

The Timothy example is 'keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience' which adds a doctrinal element. Ideally, council members should have a firm faith in the Christian Gospel.

Faithful home life

The Timothy example includes both sexual faithfulness (still completely relevant) and family discipline. *The latter point needs to be applied with sensitivity within the world's culture today where bringing up the 'perfect family' does not always work out as we might wish.*

Note that the Nolan idea of leadership is covered in the very similar 1 Timothy list for overseers in verses 1-7. Also that it may occasionally be necessary to co-opt someone to the Council who can offer specialist knowledge or skill (such as in finance) but who is not a regular church member. Some faith-based elements of the Code may not apply in such cases.

Other passages to consider

- Acts 6:3 ('full of the Spirit and wisdom')
- Galatians 5:22,23 (the fruit of the Spirit: 'love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control')
- Colossians 1:10 ('a life worthy of the Lord')
- Matthew 20:25-28 ('Whoever wants to become great ... must be your servant')

3 Application to council meetings

The following shows how the Nolan and biblical principles will work out in practice regarding council meetings. These are in addition to actions already listed within the Principles section. Note that it is the responsibility of the Chair to ensure that normal rules of behaviour in debate are followed.

Overall

- We shall seek to work towards our big picture agenda*, rather than prioritising matters of minor or administrative detail.
- We shall seek to understand and promote the church's vision and values, its structures and processes.
- We shall always aim to build the team of the Council by being willing, among other points, to be vulnerable, seeking the common good, getting to know the other members and understanding their points of view.
- We shall seek to attend church services, mid-week groups and sessions for prayer as often as we can as we model Christian leadership to the whole church.
- We shall pray regularly for our meetings and for other members of the Council.
- We shall seek the views of a wide range of church members to inform us of viewpoints held.
- We shall respect any request for confidentiality in views expressed, news shared or decisions taken.
- We shall never use the distribution of letters, emails or social media messages to church or council members to canvas opinions or engage support for a view we hold without the Chair's express permission.
- We shall take an appropriate interest in the work of any church staff whom we employ.

**Cof E churches might instead use this wording: 'the PCC role of promoting in the parish the whole mission of the church'.*

Meetings

- We shall prepare for meetings thoroughly by studying the agenda, reading papers sent to us, discussing issues with other council members, and praying for each meeting.
- After a meeting we shall study and check the minutes and be responsible for fulfilling any actions assigned to us by given dates.
- We shall aim to prioritise council meetings in our diary and to arrive on time. If unable to attend we shall submit apologies in advance but still study the agenda and all papers, and the minutes afterwards.
- We shall aim always to be constructive in meetings as we seek to come to a common mind keeping to the topic in hand. We shall respect the Chair's leadership of the meeting in all respects.
- We shall seek to engage in discussion by listening carefully to what others have said rather than just focusing on our own interests.
- We shall express disagreement in a courteous and constructive manner, challenging ideas not individuals, and seeking to engage with each other's views. We shall be careful not to cause pain and distress in what we say or how we say it.
- We shall aim to be self-controlled in meetings and offer alternative views, where appropriate, with care and grace.
- We shall support a decision taken as the will of the Council, even if we personally disagree with it.

4 Discipline

The hope is that this section will rarely be required but it needs to be in place for when a specific need arises. Should a council member fail to observe this Code through unacceptable behaviour during a meeting and after appropriate warning from the Chair, the following procedure will be followed.

- 1 The Chair will ask the council member to leave the meeting.
- 2 The member will only be allowed to return to that meeting by majority vote of the remaining members present.
- 3 As the Code of Conduct is voluntary the Minister and Church Secretary / Church Wardens will make every effort to understand the person's argument, and to bring matters to a satisfactory solution in a way that enables the Council to conduct its business effectively.
- 4 However, repeated acts of unacceptable behaviour may result in an invitation to consider their membership of the Council. The Minister may bring the matter to the attention of the Moderator / Rural Dean (*or equivalent*) and ultimately, if felt necessary, to the (*appropriate external office holder*).

- 5 On less abrasive issues (such as members arriving late for meetings or failing to be regular in church attendance) the Chair will bring this Code to the attention of the Council and seek its proper application.

5 Preparing your own Code of Conduct

To draft your own church's Code of Conduct you may use any text as set out here or amend it in any appropriate way. You might like to follow this basic structure.

- 1 *An introduction explaining the reason for a Code of Conduct, how it has been put together, how often it will be reviewed, the need for council members to sign each year, etc. See page 1 of these notes for ideas. You may wish to add in requirements for DBS checks and safeguarding training.*
- 2 *The principles on which this Code is built. These notes have applied Nolan to churches and then taken a biblical passage. You could copy the headings and text in Sections 1 and 2 or develop your own ideas.*
- 3 *Some practical examples of how the Code works out. You could copy those given here or devise your own – see Sections 3 and 4.*
- 4 *Get the Code agreed by the Council and ask everyone to sign.*

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN141. 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 TN86, *Courtesy in churches*, TN88, *Advice to a new committee member*, TN94, *Becoming self-aware*, and TN119, *Group behaviours to beware of*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN141 under Structures (with a link to Leadership).

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