john truscott
church consultant and trainer

Roles for a church office

1: Three perspectives

A33 Articles series: Administration

In Articles A33 and A34 I explore the idea of a church office seen from six different perspectives, each one a possible purpose. This is the first one of the two.

By 'church office' I have in mind any place on the church site that operates as an administrative base in some way.

It may simply be a desk from where a voluntary Administrator works; in many churches it will be a room which functions as a work-station for a paid member of staff; in larger churches it may refer to a suite of rooms as a base for the staff team; sometimes it refers to the office for a group of churches, a Methodist circuit for example.

Each of these two articles explores three valid purposes for such an office, some of which will clash with each other. This first part covers the church office as a

1	reception point
2	communications hub
3	staff shield.

Part 2 adds to this list with the idea of a

4	community interface
5	volunteers' base
6	administrative work-station.

Many will see the final one of these as the main purpose of a church office but I have deliberately placed it last to help bring the others into focus. You will also find some overlap in points made about each of these six – again, this is deliberate.

1: Reception point

One purpose of most church offices is to be the reception desk for the church building. In my experience this is rarely stated as such. Perhaps it is too obvious, perhaps it is seen as incidental to the main purpose as a work-station. But I believe it to be important enough to come first in this listing. My hope is that churches will treat this idea more seriously in future.

Different forms of reception

In a large office block, visitors are asked to 'report to reception'. This is a matter of good order and of security. When I visit my doctor's surgery I go first to the reception room where I either talk to a receptionist or, if I have a pre-booked appointment, use a touch-screen to report in and be directed to the correct area.

When I go to my bank with an enquiry, I visit a 'welcome desk' (where the experience does not always match up to the title!). If I try to phone them I find myself being linked up to a distant call centre and this frustrates me.

But as well as actual reception, there is virtual reception too. When I visit the website of a charity I want to be put at ease, helped to feel they are glad I have looked in, and given helpful information. Before I even get to that stage I want to find the site easily on a basic search.

So when I 'visit' a church on any kind of business (midweek or Sunday) I hope to find a friendly face, a pleasant voice on the phone, or a welcome page on the website that can guide me to whatever I want.

With all that in mind I now explore the idea of your church office as a reception point, whether I drop in, telephone, visit the website or check out your Twitter feed.

Here are three possible purposes for reception. I consider others (including a communications point and protection for other staff) in later sections of this article. Reception is for both church members and those outside your church, and for some it will be more a matter of the telephone, email and social media than of personal callers.

1: **"We're open and you're welcome"**

A clear reception desk which can be easily found speaks of a building that is open through the week, not just on Sunday mornings. This has the advantage of being a neutral contact point with the church. The idea of approaching a Minister can be quite an ordeal for many people, church members included!

But it needs to be more than this. Reception also needs to say, 'You're welcome' and 'How can we help you?'. We need to learn some lessons from the best of secular practice here, the retail sector in particular.

As Christians a church reception point is a key element of witness. A poor welcome, an indifferent approach, a telephone that is not answered all give messages that are hardly Good News, whether to church members or to others.

Sadly, some people who staff a church's welcome area have not been helped to see just how powerful such negative messages can be. Reception is a Christian privilege but also an important responsibility. It needs to be genuine and prayerful. And, yes, some customers, often church members, will always be difficult!

To test out your welcome, ask someone who is not part of your church to do four things.

1   Drop in to the office one day with a general enquiry.

2   Telephone the office when it is manned and likely to be busy.

3   Do so again when unmanned to evaluate the voicemail message.

4   Find the website and see how easy it is to make personal contact with a named Administrator.

Ask them what these four experiences were like. It is best to ask someone who has no regular links with a church.

2: **"We represent our church to you"**

The receptionist works at the interface where the church meets the visitor or caller. Consider the following examples.

- For church buildings that are hired by external groups, the receptionist may be the one person from the church whom the visitors see. In addition, the organisers may have queries about keys, cleaning, equipment, heating, availability and will often judge the church on the efficiency and the manner of this person.

- Enquirers (eg. about a wedding) by telephone (direct or voicemail) or email may be nervous and need putting at ease.

- The regular postal worker and occasional delivery drivers may assess their views of the Christian faith against this one person, and all within a few seconds.

- Maintenance engineers who stay on site longer will note how well they are served, whether with refreshments or with someone prepared to help them find meters or switches.

- But the office represents the church to church members too who call in for a wide range of reasons but who want to find that the heart of the church's business is run efficiently but in a friendly way.

When anyone phones in it will be the tone of voice that makes all the difference. A voicemail message that is too complicated or which starts in a negative way, such as 'The office is closed…', may put people off. When people send an email from the website they will be looking for a friendly and efficient response. How many churches pray regularly for the person who sits at this point of interface with everyone, church members and others, who interact with the office?

This idea is considered in more detail for those outside the church in the fourth section of this article,' Community interface', which comes at the start of Article A34.

3: **"We're here to help you"**

The third purpose is a more difficult one. To what extent should the reception point seek to meet people's emotional and practical needs and offer counsel and support at any price?

One way to deal with this is to agree that people needing pastoral help are immediately referred to someone else. In this case the Administrator or Receptionist is clearly advised not to get personally involved.

However, what happens when either someone just wants to let loose about how they feel about the church or to have a moan about their bad hair day – and then be off? And, in particular, how do you deal with all this when the Administrator is very much a people person who prefers to be a shoulder to cry on than a producer of the weekly notice-sheet? This is not uncommon.

Again, if a visitor asks a question about the meaning of the Christian faith, is the Administrator expected to say this is not on their job description, admit they don't know much about the faith themselves, or dive into a theological discussion?

What if church leaders and members ask the office to provide services that are not strictly within the office remit? Or if members of staff expect administrative work to be done for them that they might just as well do themselves?

Once you highlight reception as a purpose, these issues arise. The important point is to sort them out in advance. The answers you come to will depend on all kind of factors: person, primary role, availability of volunteers, gifting, location and more.

Last week I was visiting a church where there are volunteer welcomers on duty every morning and every afternoon, and they are able and more than willing to engage visitors in discussion whether practical or theological. But telephone calls and emails still went directly to the office, as did several of the technical enquiries the welcomers were unable to handle in person.

Practical implications

These three aspects of reception immediately raise a number of practical issues.

The route to reception

Can a stranger find the office with ease? If it is visibly obvious from the site entrance, no problem. But many of us have buildings where the route in is not so clear. Here there needs to be helpful, attractive signage. People who find little to help them may give up.

To get to the virtual office, how easy is it to find all the contact details from the way the navigation is laid out? If someone finds the home page, is it clear from there where to find this information? I often find myself having to try out one or two possibilities on a church website before I reach the right page. When there I like to see a photo of the Administrator/Receptionist and their name, plus clear ideas of when they or volunteers are available. Also postal address, email address (or a direct link) and telephone number.

The office location is rarely ideal, unless you have the good fortune to have a church with an office suite that has been designed for such purposes. Physical reception needs to be by the entrance, but this is not always possible. Sometimes office reception and office work-station need to be in separate places. This is difficult for staffing but solves the interruption problem for the work-station.

It is worth testing how easy it is for a church member to find the telephone answered and for leaders to obtain the services they should be offered.

Yet some churches photograph the Minister and any other pastoral staff but leave the Administrator and any other receptionists both nameless and faceless. Have they failed to notice just how vital a front-line role such people play?

The design of the reception area

Even if you are working to a tight budget, is the reception area (often the church office itself) tidy with helpful notices and racks of information available? It need not be state-of-the-art, but it can be attractive, decorated well with some measure of comfort in terms of seating, heating and lighting. It should not double as a crèche area on Sunday if at all possible. It needs to be large enough to do its job well – but often will not be.

Look at your layout to note whether or not the Administrator has their back to a visitor as they arrive, whether there is any kind of hatch arrangement, and whether there is separation between reception and work areas in the office.

It is worth checking up on the website reception again to see how positive it is about welcome. And, although moving into other territory here, the church's letterhead or, more importantly these days, its email signature (the wording that you automatically add at the end of each email) might be checked too for what it says and how it looks.

The training of the receptionist

The receptionist will usually be your Church Administrator, but it may be a designated member of staff or a team of volunteers. Here are some areas to consider.

- the way they come across and the words they use to any visitor;

- the speed with which they answer the phone and respond to emails;

- the way the office (or all church) staff role-model care to each other;

- the basic information they need to know to answer frequent enquiries;

- the help they give to maintenance engineers and others who arrive to work on site.

The receptionist is on the church's front line. It is a job worth doing well. Training in customer care is essential for the Administrator, volunteers, interns or other staff who take turns on the desk.

After all, it only needs one tired Minister or pesky youth worker or nervous volunteer to answer the phone when it rings and ruin all that a gifted Administrator has built up over time.

The safety of all who work there

But having an open reception point brings with it a measure of danger, especially for churches in isolated locations, those with offices away from a main thoroughfare, and any office on a dark winter's afternoon or evening.

It may be worth obtaining professional advice from your local crime prevention team but you should consider suitable locking arrangements for main doors, possibly CCTV, panic alarms, arrangements so no one is ever working in a vulnerable position on their own, and appropriate training in dealing with difficult customers and in basic self-defence.

Along with safety you need to consider security. It can often be easy for a visitor to pick up a laptop, perhaps one containing sensitive church information, or to have a peek at a PC which has a confidential file open. The more open and welcoming your reception, the more vulnerable you become.

The clash with other purposes

You will have realised by now that there is a problem with all this emphasis on reception: the work of the office may never be done if the office becomes a doormat on which church members, leaders, staff and visitors may trample.

In my work with Church Administrators I often find that reception duties (dealing with callers, phone calls and enquiry emails) take up a considerable part of the working week, most of it for church members, but this is not recognised in the job description.

Someone arriving for the playgroup who has a query about hiring the church for a child's birthday party may take 10 minutes of time, but with the disruption, any logging, actions and, possibly, emotional upheaval, it might be nearer half an hour of the Administrator's time. The same may be true if the Treasurer comes in unannounced and needs detailed information from digital and paper files for research purposes.

So is reception seen as interruption to the main purpose of the job, or a key element of the overall task? What if there are deadlines to be met each week – and the Administrator is forced to take work home each day to meet those? Is it the responsibility of the Administrator or of others to be a receptionist?

These issues need to be sorted. But first it is wise to see the office through other lenses.

2: Communications hub

Under this second heading I deliberately confuse the office as a location with the role of the people who work there.

Co-ordinating messages

Communication is all about messages successfully passing between two points. Such points may be the church's leadership, its entire membership, church groups or individuals, or groups or individuals beyond the church.

In a church's communication system there can be large numbers of inter-connected messages flying around and creating a complex network. The value of a church office or a well-planned website is that it can be a point through which many of these messages can be channelled. Then when one message has an impact on another, there is at least the possibility of some co-ordination.

If groups A and B acting independently both want to use the church hall for an activity and tell their members to come, it is helpful to have a central booking system so that the two activities do not clash. Confusion can result even when the groups have different spaces (such as if one is the silent meditation group and the other the youth rock band, in adjoining rooms).

Or if six different people want to pass on messages to major segments of the whole church, a printed notice-sheet or centralised email may be better than individual notices.

An office communications overview

For most people if you mention 'church office' and 'communication', they think of a weekly notice-sheet and/or a monthly newsletter. But the focus is shifting away from such well-respected tools towards something more web-based.

Up until recently church (and other) websites were seen as a sexed-up version of a promotional folder providing information, but technology moves on and websites can now be very much more interactive and the equipment you view it on has moved from a home-based desk to your pocket. Is the future of the church office wholly virtual? (Answer: I certainly hope not!)

Website pages can now be updated by those responsible for the activity in question (which raises as many problems as it solves), the site can include messages in two directions not just one, it can encompass the church's database where individual members can edit their own entry, and it can be integrated with social networking sites.

In many churches the website has been controlled from outside the office because it needed a level of expertise to do this. Now there is scope for the website and physical office to become very much more closely linked.

But I do not want to restrict your thinking to individual means of communication, such as a notice-sheet or even a website. It may be healthier to take a wider-lens view of how a church office can oversee the whole of a church's communication systems.

So my idea is to step back from the routine task of collecting information, editing it, setting it out and then copying it which, for many church offices, is a major task week by week. Instead let's consider a wider range of message transmissions.

A few, larger churches have appointed a member of staff with this broader responsibility. Most have not, but it makes sense for this view to be taken from the church office, since that is (or certainly should be) ideally situated as the hub of many of these messages.

So here is a checklist of five types of church communication, each broken down into seven elements. After each I provide some questions to get you thinking. You will quickly realise this is only one possible analysis and the boundaries are far from tidy. So amend what I write to fit your church.

A: **Messages for the whole church**

Here are some well-known means of putting out messages to the whole congregation.

A1   Weekly church notice-sheet – family news, forthcoming events and general information

A2   Occasional church newsletter/magazine – as A1 but more stories, features, reports and discussion

A3   Mass circulation of letters, emails or text messages – personally addressed, mail-merged, through Mailchimp or equivalent

A4   Information leaflets, annual or church meeting reports – for information

A5   Notice and display boards, maps, photographic displays, video projection notices – a more visual approach

A6   Teaching materials / sermon recordings (CD or downloads) – for learning

A7   Oral announcements – usually in services for motivation but not for detail

Should churches be moving away from print to electronic forms of communication, bearing in mind many churches have members without home computers or smartphones?

Do you have a strategy for what information goes into print, what into visual and what is announced in person – and all for good reasons? For example, who decides who can put notices into print, up onto screens or give them out in person in a service?

In what way can/should the church office oversee this whole area when much of its energy goes into producing just A1? Church management systems can help here, But should there be a shift from 'getting the notice-sheet out' to 'helping people understand what they need to know'?

B: **Messages for more limited circulation**

Much internal communication does not need to go to the whole church (even if there are people who want to know everything because knowledge means power!).

B1   Limited circulation of letters or emails – this is A3 again but it is often only for one group

B2   Agendas, papers, minutes and reports – a key issue for decision-making groups

B3   Leaflets or programme cards for groups – normally in print but may be by Yahoo! groups or equivalent

B4   Financial records and information – budgets and accounts for decision-making groups but also for information

B5   Personal and prayer news – prayer chains by phone/email, prayer diaries by print, grapevine

B6   Telephone and text messages – the latter increasingly being used for reminders and church news headlines

B7   Website and social networking – Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms now becoming useful church tools, and no longer only for youth groups

What level of quality do you believe to be right for internal print in an age when colour on coated paper is the norm?

Are social networking sites worthy of church use or little more than a band-wagon to jump onto?

In what way can/should the church office oversee this area too when many of these messages will be generated by individuals (eg. group leaders, committee secretaries)?

C: **Messages for/from a wider group**

The focus here is on messages that connect the church to the wider world around its area and networks.

C1   Website – for promotion, identity and interaction, increasingly as the church's main non-personal means of local contact internally and externally

C2   External telephone calls – enquiries, individual messages

C3   Community magazine – distributed free or sold beyond the church's membership as a means of public service and local community outreach

C4   Area-wide leaflet distribution or surveys – posted, hand delivered or used as a means of doorstep conversations, whether for general promotion/stories or seasonal church services

C5   Media releases – to the local press and radio to get valid stories across to a wide audience

C6   Signboards, car/window stickers and press advertising – for information and identity in the local community

C7   Welcome pack – a free hand-out for visitors and enquirers of all kinds with scope for response (website in print)

Are you communicating what people want to receive or what you want to give them?

In what way can/should the church office oversee this area of a church's outreach or would this be muddling means and method?

Whatever the answer to the last question, does the church office see at least the production of outreach communication as part of its purpose and valid activity?

D: **Co-ordination of messages**

The focus moves from getting messages out to linking messages up to avoid frustration.

D1   The church office facility itself and its records – the central point where questions can be answered and information discovered

D2   Membership information: database, gifts, printed directory, newcomers lists are all key means of enabling the right messages to get to the right people

D3   Big picture planning and review – statements about purpose, values and vision for the church need to be put across regularly in different ways (print, sermons, etc.)

D4   Church diary, year chart – a central registry of the church's programme to avoid overlap and confusion

D5   Bookings for rooms/spaces – for those churches that hire out their premises to internal and external groups

D6   Wider church information (such as diocesan/district/area/ecumenical networks) – because no church is an island

D7   Staff base working together – the increasingly common idea in larger churches for the staff team to work out of one base and so keep more tightly in touch with each other

The office is clearly more centre-stage in this group. In what ways, and how effectively, does your church office co-ordinate the church's life?

When mistakes get made and there are clashes of date, place, effort, etc., who is responsible for patching the hole that allowed this to happen?

Does/should the word, or at least the idea, 'co-ordination' appear strongly in your church office's purpose and in the job descriptions of those who work there?

E: **Messages/enquiries to the centre**

Finally, a section on the messages back to the leadership or staff of the church – for communication should always be seen as two-way.

E1   Telephone enquiries – and the office as a means of putting enquirers in touch with the right person

E2   Informal grapevine – people chatter and gossip and that is part of the messaging network

E3   Questionnaires, suggestion sheets and church meetings – that give people a sense of ownership in that they can see that they are listened to

E4   Feedback from website and social networking – are the messages from interactive pages picked up by leadership and acted on?

E5   Networks of group leaders – the idea of small group leaders meetings feeding back ideas and reactions from members to church leaders

E6   External publications, newspapers, directories, books – information and views from outside the church's immediate sphere that impact the decision-making processes

E7   Statistics – from the church, from the community and nationally, that inform the leadership and sharpen plans

In what ways does/should the church office pick up grapevine vibes and pass these findings on to the leadership? Or does this put the office staff in a difficult position?

Who studies the feedback from suggestions, website and Facebook/Twitter and draws out lessons to learn from it? Or is it ignored, and therefore only a pretence?

In what ways does/should the church office see itself as a means of communication back to the leadership from all the messages it is putting out in the other direction? If so, how?

Implications

There are at least two main implications in all this: equipment and database.

Most church offices I see how have good equipment, renewed regularly and enabling the Administrator to undertake their tasks without unnecessary frustration. But I still hear people saying "I'm sorry, our computers are very slow, just wait a bit longer", or see materials copied on an old copy-printer whose quality creates a poor impression, or listen to the frustrations caused by an unsuitable telephone system or poor WiFi, or hear of Administrators having to waste time to try to coax elderly equipment to work.

We need to provide administrative staff with the right hardware, software and training if they are to run a communications hub to an acceptable standard.

My second point is to emphasise the need for a proper church database. There needs to be a central reference point so that the congregation is known for who they are, how they are involved and what they can offer. This is not just a matter of names and addresses. Databases these days are going into the cloud and many churches now

use a church management system such as ChurchSuite or one of the others on the market. We need to hold the right information about people and then use it well – taking into account all the legal issues to do with data protection / GDPR.

I return to this point in Section 5 in Part 2 of this article on the office as a volunteers' base.

Final communications questions

This is only one suggested analysis of means of church communication. You might like to consider what key aspects have been omitted and amend the lists accordingly.

Having taken this very broad look at church communication means, come back now to the idea of the church office as a communications hub. Is this a valid purpose for your office? If it is, what changes need to be introduced to make it more effective in this task?

Which is better: untidy, individual, local initiative or central, controlled, unified format?

What does the church office communicate about the Christian faith by the voicemail message, the way the phone is answered and the way visitors are welcomed?

By asking such questions it quickly becomes clear that my six sections to this double-part Article all overlap with each other. They have to be seen together.

3: Staff shield

For this third section I consider the office as a means of protecting the Minister and other pastoral and outreach staff from interruption that would take them away from their priority ministry. Note carefully that some interruption **is** their priority ministry and so distinguishing between the two is vital. To do this I take the differing perspectives of three groups of people: the Minister and other staff, those who serve in the office and those who contact the office. But first I need to ask ….

Why do Ministers need protection?

There will be long-standing church members in the traditional denominations who can remember when the concept of a church office and, in particular, the need to protect the Minister were unknown. Ministers should be people-people, available to everyone at all times, not hidden behind a study door. The idea of a church office to protect is, they would argue, dangerous.

This is a view that needs to be taken seriously because there is much truth in it. However, what it fails to do is to take account of the changes that have taken place in the UK culture in recent years. Consider these points.

- The administrative demands upon churches from the society we are placed within have increased significantly: consider safeguarding, health and safety and the speed and complexity of a digital environment for starters.

- The pastoral and evangelistic demands have become more complex. Society has lost its basic Christian underpinning and people's lives are in stress at work, at

home and in relationships. Many Ministers now have to offer time-consuming counsel at a deep level in people's churned-up lives.

- The more collaborative way in which churches now operate involves a greater need for the co-ordination and 'management' of people. There has rightly been a shift from the Minister doing almost everything to a more biblical concept of enabling the congregation in their ministry, from a weekly Sunday service to a variety of services and groups.

- But at the same time the number of volunteers available in working hours has decreased with the norm being for both partners in a couple to be out at work, many retired people either exhausted or offering childcare for grandchildren, and everyone travelling away from base to visit friends and family more than in the past.

- The number of Ministers has significantly decreased, though the number of churches has not declined at such a rapid rate, leaving most Ministers with a wider area of pastoral ministry. This can reach a point which is unsustainable.

Putting these five arguments together shows the need for some form of administrative support and, often, paid staffing. One key reason for this should be to enable Ministers to focus on their proper priorities and to protect them from routine business that can be handled more effectively in other ways.

If they spend their days dealing with maintenance engineers, general enquiries, print production, web maintenance, stationery purchase and record keeping they will have little time for the role for which they were ordained or appointed. If the Jerusalem Church just after Pentecost had to solve this same issue, how much more is it necessary today! (see Acts 6:1-7)

Note that the protection I have in mind here is not from people but from whatever diverts the Minister from his or her primary roles. This is not a strategy to enable the Minister to sit at their computer undisturbed all day, but to give them time for study, prayer, preparation and getting alongside the people they serve.

And so I turn to the three perspectives.

1: **The Minister's perspective**

The key issue here is one of **priority for spiritual leadership**. That requires space and time to think, to plan, to pray, to develop personal discipleship, to role-model a healthy lifestyle. In an age when churches were seen as fundamentally pastoral, leadership was not so important. Now in a time where mission should be the priority (not that it ever should not have been so), leadership is vital.

Within this lie the needs to develop **key ministries**. We ordain Ministers as gifted teachers of the faith, to counsel those in need, to spearhead outreach – and then (as they will tell you) we place burdens of administration upon them that divert them from what they should be doing.

If the Church is to grow again, we must release our gifted evangelists, pastors and teachers – and this is just as true of youth and children's workers, community evangelists, music directors and others – to fulfil the roles they have been appointed to.

I see this as one of the most urgent issues facing us today. The Church will grow when teachers have the time to prepare and deliver quality biblical teaching; when pioneers appointed to spearhead mission initiatives are unencumbered by routine demands that they are ill-equipped to deal with but which fill their diaries; when youth workers can chill out with the kids and get alongside them in their pressured lives to show them authentic Christian discipleship, instead of

slaving over a computer trying to sort out DBS forms.

I was speaking to a group of Church Administrators last week and told them that one test of the effectiveness of *their* ministry was better sermons from their Ministers who now have the time to do the necessary preparation and study. The Administrators liked that!

There is of course a **danger** in this. Ministers and other staff can become so well protected from the people they seek to serve that they become remote, they lose touch with the daily lives of the people they need to connect with. This is a danger to beware of but the urgent need for the church office and those who work there is to give the right measure of protection to Ministers so they can be the ministers of God's truth.

2: **The office perspective**

I now consider those who work in the church office to provide this protection. There may be a paid Church Administrator or Office Manager and perhaps a small team of volunteers who act as either receptionists or assistants. What does this purpose of protection look like in their shoes?

The first need is to recognise the **validity of this role** and therefore to see their administrative service as a vital part of the spiritual ministry of the church, not an awkward add-on that seems somewhat out of place. The Bible clearly sees administrative service as a wholesome and vital gift of God, but one that serves all other forms of service.

When we see the office's work as protection to enable the ministry of Ministers and other staff to flourish, this should give a deep satisfaction and appreciation of the holistic partnership. The work of the office then becomes seen at the heart of the church's spiritual life – not quite how some would view it. When seen like this it should attract proper resourcing and, for the people who work there, due appreciation.

But if this partnership is to be truly effective there are clear implications for the **working relationship** between Minister (and other staff as applicable) and those who work as Administrators. If Ministers see the office as 'other', if they hardly ever call in to relate to those who work there and talk through their work, if they fail to share insights of their work with the administrative staff, if they fail to encourage, how can the office workers ever feel they are partners in ministry? There is a need for this partnership to be nurtured and developed. It is painful for those in the office to feel cut off from those they are seeking to protect and serve (as some confide in me with feeling).

There is of course a **danger** in this. The work of the office can be viewed in such a spiritual light that it itself becomes a centre for pastoral counselling (by the Administrator!). In this case interruptions are viewed as the priority, a risk for any Administrators who in fact relish the thought of having a ministry of welcome and counsel. The office becomes a happy place, but one where there is little administrative output or where the quality of that output suffers, to the frustration of many.

So the idea of Reception in Section 1 can in itself become a function to shield the office from too much interruption.

3: **The users' perspective**

But what about those who make use of the church office, whether they are church members or from the local community?

First, they should receive **a better administrative service** from an office than from a Minister. Provided they can know when the office is open and find that information reliable, they can deal with a person rather than a voicemail message. Then they should (I emphasise the 'should') find themselves dealing with a professional who can sort out their enquiry, provide the information they need or give the assistance necessary. This should apply whether they call in in person, write, phone, email or respond off the website.

There should be a feel that this church is actually dealing with people in a competent and friendly way. For those who need the Minister, there should be a simple forwarding option or a reliable means of a necessary call back. Where the office works well, the protection purpose also means that there is efficient service for whatever the need. But this does of course depend on quality staffing.

But there is also the advantage of contacting **a neutral point**, rather than the, for some, more scary prospect of trying to make contact with an ordained person. The office will normally be staffed by a 'normal' human being! And in this role the office does indeed find itself on the interface of church and world and, as such, needs to be seen as having a strategic evangelistic ministry (which has all kinds of implications for matters such as training and selection of both staff and volunteers). I return this point in the next section of this two-part article.

There is of course a **danger** in this. The office can become so protective that it can be seen itself as uncaring and inhuman. If it exists for its own systems so that everyone feels estranged from it, or controlled by it, its administration becomes its own mission instead of the means of enabling the church's mission, it has lost sight of its purpose and may even have set up a monster. The Office Administrator can become the office dragon – and that may be done quite subtly. But this again is a danger to be aware of and correct if necessary, not one to stop this protecting role being seen as primary.

In all these cases there is a genuine role for a church office and those who staff it in protecting the Minister and other pastoral staff from a considerable volume of day-to-day business which needs to be done well but which does not need to come to them.

Churches need to release their leaders to fulfil their own ministry and at the same time provide a more 'professional' administrative output as a witness to Christian values and beliefs.

How the office serves the staff

Linked to this idea of shielding pastoral staff from unnecessary interruption is the taking of routine administration off them to free them for the work for which they were appointed. This 'principle of release' needs to be seen to work for our Ministers but it applies just as much to youth workers, family workers, community staff and others. There is also the wider issue of whether and how the office might serve volunteer office-holders too.

The church office should be a work-station that enables other staff to offload agreed types of work which takes them time and in which they may not be gifted. This may then be extended to the idea of a PA appointment, especially for Ministers.

This raises issues of confidentiality because if a PA is working from a public church office there may be digital and paper filing that needs to be kept strictly confidential.

However, I have seen a number of churches recently where the appointment of a Minister's PA has been a considerable help in coping with workload, and especially handling emails, but this has then focused even more lines of communication to come through the Minister when these would have been better diverted in other directions.

In other words might, sometimes, it be better to appoint a specialist member of staff to take responsibility for areas of ministry currently under the direct control of the Minister rather than to appoint a Minister's PA?

The office as a base for all the staff

A growing number of churches now see the value of a number of Ministers and lay staff working from one base and thereby interacting helpfully with each other, rather than all working in isolation from their homes. In these cases the office becomes a work station for more than just the administrative staff. But, for the idea of

'shield' to work, there needs to be a clear distinction between front office and back, between reception and work areas. The danger here is that all the staff will be disturbed by people dropping in for a chat.

This point has already been mentioned at D7 in Section 2 of this article and is covered in more detail in Training Notes TN66 on this website, *A daily office for church staff*.

Part 2 of this article, ref A34, now continues ***here*** where I investigate three more perspectives on the church office: a community interface, a volunteers' base and an administrative work-station.

This article is available at https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles-index then A33. See also Articles A42, *What do Church Administrators do?* and A55s, *The management of church record,* plus Training Notes TN49, *Appointing an Administrator,* TN66, *A daily office for church staff,* TN86, *Customer care for churches?,* TN102, *People who visit the church office,* and TN112, *Set my leaders free!.*

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A33 under Administration.

John Truscott, 24 High Grove, St Albans, AL3 5SU
Tel: 01727 568325   Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk   Web: https://www.john-truscott.co.uk