

Asking for and receiving help or advice

When the Task Group on Small Churches suggested the adoption of a protocol for asking for and receiving help we did not spend any time fleshing out what such might look like. The comments that follow represent ideas from three members of the group that were emailed to me and compiled . They therefore do not represent the views of the group and have not been tested or improved through discussion!

A possible method

1. All offers of assistance and requests for assistance to be filtered, initially via the Association. That way no potential helper feels any initial direct pressure from a church to assist.
2. Individuals with specialisms within the Association who are prepared to offer support to smaller churches complete a Help Offered Form, which is lodged with the Association Secretary or the person who agrees to administer their Association's scheme.
3. This list of helpers should be compiled mainly by recommendation. We know from past experience that requests for help illicit few responses and we are, in any case, looking for trusted and tested people. We suggest that Regional Ministers, Association staff and members of Council take it upon themselves to ask Ministers and Leaders they meet whether there are people within their churches (or known to them) who have skills they may be prepared to offer. These may be the best people to make the initial approach.
4. The Help Offered form asks whether they agree to their information being stored and if they are available for consultation by phone, e-mail and/or in person. If the latter, what is the maximum distance they are prepared to travel - assuming that the church seeking help pays their travel expenses.
5. The co-ordinator then creates a database of topics for which help is available. This is published within the Association by e-mail to ministers of small churches, along with the county in which the person lives. It is also featured in the next edition of the Association Newsletter.
6. Following this, small churches are invited to approach the scheme administrator – perhaps by completing a Help Wanted Form. It would be ascertained whether it's an on-going need or a one off (e.g. something to do with Listed Building Status or how to do a church people-audit.) Connections are made and the relationship begins.
7. Evaluation is always important. So Feedback Forms to be completed by the Helper and the Assisted.
 - a) From the Helper's perspective - to see if the expectations of the church were reasonable, whether he/she feels they helped solve the difficulty, any personal tensions and whether or not they'd be prepared to help the same church again if the need arose.

(b) From the church's point of view whether they got what they needed, any tensions and whether they would want the same person to be approached again if the need arose in future.

8. Review after 12-18 months to see how many churches have been helped and whether it's worth continuing.

9. If so continue the process of seeking new Helpers and bring it to churches' attention again - as we all often read only what affects us!

A possible protocol

1. The emphasis needs to be on the church setting the agenda - the church should be asked to define:

What exactly do you want/expect?

What have you tried in the past?

Who have you approached in the past?

Is this a need that has been recognised and agreed by the whole church body?

Are you prepared to pay reasonable expenses?

Please confirm that you recognise that the advice that may be given is in good faith, should be weighed etc... (i.e. the issue of indemnity)

2. This information to be shared with the helper in advance (in a letter) along with the following guidelines:

There is a need for sensitivity and tact – the problem or challenge may have become overwhelming.

Please give time and space for the church to think, respond and come back for clarification before making a decision.

You are not under pressure to 'sort it' but to offer advice. So questions phrased in the following manner would be appropriate:

'Have you tried doing things this other way?'

'I suggest these options as possibilities'

3. It would be helpful if any 'expert' invited meets with more than one member of the church so that the people dynamics are weighted in favour of the host church.