

Church Consultants

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Church consulting began centuries ago but has become somewhat lax on several issues. This article will clarify the definition of church consulting by first reviewing the history of church consulting, followed by developing a clear definition. The article will then turn to skills and competencies needed for such a career in church consulting, concluding with a review of options for church consultant certification including secular business certification, finishing with some action steps church consultants can take to instill integrity for authentic, credible consulting.

Bellman is not at all encouraging about a career as a consultant:

Consulting is a much maligned profession—and for good reason. For one thing, it is too easy to enter the profession. All it takes is the cost of some stationery and a business card. The term consultant is also used to cover a wide range of sins. Out-of-work executives call themselves consultants while they are between jobs, brokers of financial products call themselves consultants to mask their aggressive selling efforts, and, in general, when people take our money and we are not quite sure we got anything of value in return, we call them ‘consultants.’ The fundamental problem facing the consulting profession is that of integrity. This holds whether our consultants operate on their own as external consultants or are internal to a company. In fact, the larger the consulting firm and the larger its reputation, the greater our distrust.”(Bellman, 2002, p. xiii)

Though harsh, Bellman’s words ring true. Add to the above issues the problems faced by church consultants—resistance to change being one of the most difficult problems—and consultants understand the necessity for some standardization of competencies in the sector.

With approximately 300,000 houses of worship in the United States (Bedell, 1993) and an estimated 3,000 consultants working with those churches (Los Angeles Times Staff, 2013; Sataline, 2013a, 2013b) we presume training in ecclesial effectiveness has occurred. Taking a small sampling of about one hundred church consultants from a Google search, one finds expertise in the five major segments: (1) Information Technology; (2) Strategy and organization; (3) Marketing; (4) Operations management; and (5) Human resource management (Greiner &

Poulfelt, 2010, p. 166). Consulting services tend to fall under operations management (financial, fundraising, building new facilities, or ministry growth, etc.) advertising on the side they also do strategy development. A few academic, or former academic consultants pursue the specialty of strategic planning, and so far, in this brief search, just one consultant claims an expertise in strategic foresight consulting.

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the definition of church consulting by first reviewing the history of church consulting and developing a clear definition. This article will then turn to skills and competencies needed for church consulting, and availability of certification for church consultants, concluding with some action steps church consultants to create a church consulting certification.

The History of Church Consulting

The secular world of consulting may reach back as far as Gaius Maecenas in the first century B.C. who consulted Augustus. In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas is thought to be a consultant stating, “May those in need of independent guidance have the courage to seek counsel and the wisdom to distinguish good from bad advice” (Kitsopoulos, 2003, p. 16). Notice, the skills mentioned can apply to any consultants, coaches, pastors, mentors, or counselors.

Scripture provides numerous stories of consulting. Dembitz & Essinger convey the story of Moses and Jethro to illustrate the earliest consultant.

Exodus 18:13-27 has Jethro—Moses’ father-in-law—advising Moses to stop trying to be the only person who gives the people advice because this is too exhausting for Moses and means that the people are kept waiting many hours. Instead Jethro counsels Moses to select capable men from the people and appoint them as officials who can decide all simple cases, with Moses himself only deciding the most difficult cases. Was Jethro the worlds’ first management consultant? Possibly. (Dembitz & Essinger, 2000, p. 10)

Sprinkled throughout the Old Testament are kings seeking consultations with prophets, priests, and wise men. For instance, King Ahasuerus (Esther 1:13-14 NRSV) sought out advice from sages regarding the fate of Queen Vashti. The New Testament church found Paul’s consultations with them beneficial, such as in Acts when “he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches” (Acts 15:41 NRSV), and “the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily (Acts 16:5 NRSV). Biblical consultations made the church stronger as it grew in number, and in leadership, as exemplified in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, when Paul advised the two leaders how to better lead their churches.

Defining Church Consulting

Definitions of church consulting vary. Doctoral candidate, Smith, found three definitions: (1) “One who assists the congregation in identifying and breaking out of existing cycles and in allowing the church to find viable alternatives to its current situation” (Bullard, 1980); (2) “The process where a person or persons provide insights and recommendations to improve the overall health of a church, or to provide [expertise] in a specific area of church need” (Rainer, 1980, p. 4); and (3)

“Coaching or any form of Christian partnership that has a goal to fulfill the great commission” (Bandy, 1980). As a fourth option, Smith developed his own definition: “The process whereby an individual or individuals with presumed expertise for facilitating the effectiveness of a ministry or ministries, in recommending a plan or effecting some strategy, provides advice and/or encouragement to the local church(es)” (Smith, 2006, p. 9).

Another strong definition is that of Peter Block, who delineates consulting as “a person in a position to have some influence over an individual, a group, or an organization but has no direct power to make changes or implement programs” (Block, 2011, p. 38). Articulating a demarcation between managing/doing and influencing/advising is vital. As Greiner & Poulfelt put it, “consulting involves the independent study of a client issue, and often times with assistance in implementation, but not with taking over the managerial function” (Greiner & Poulfelt, 2010). When consultants get involved in the actual management function, it can lead to a conflict of interest and more media attention than most consultants want to deal with. For our purposes, the definition will be:

A church consultant is a God-follower who holds teams and personal relationships as sacred and has some influence over a pastor, leadership team, or church due to personal experience, formal and informal training, and certification but has no direct power to make changes or implement programs or ministries.

Skills Necessary for Church Consulting

Church consulting requires distinct skills and competencies to serve houses of worship, though the skills of a management consultant must also exist. As Macdonald discovered, churches are different than businesses. For instance, business consultants live in the world of “performance indicators or measures of efficiency. ... The very order and efficiency that is central to so much consultancy advice sits awkwardly with an ecclesiastical tradition. ... Most consultants would be unable to offer much of value” (Macdonald, 2006, p. 418). Yet, more churches are seeking the assistance of consultants, even though they have “little tolerance in the church of peddlers of fad and fashion” (Macdonald, 2006, p. 418). Church consultants, then “are found through personal recommendations and individual networks” (Macdonald, 2006, p. 418). The church consultant is “someone whom people in the church will respect and whose skills they will value as essential” (Macdonald, 2006, p. 418).

On the other hand, experts in the field of management consulting identify the following necessary competencies for all consulting, and thus applicable to church consulting:

- Ability to manage client relationships
- Ability to manage teams
- Ability to play positive politics
- Ability to help expand client relationships
- Ability to work through others and make them productive
- Ability to manage ambiguity
- Ability to manage time horizons
- Ability to earn people’s trust and confidence

- Ability to give advice without being assertive or patronizing
- Ability to deal with personnel conflict
- Ability to manage and facilitate meetings
- Ability to supervise others so they want to work with you again
- Ability to get the best out of those in support or administrative roles
- Ability to get someone in a more senior role to want to help you
- Ability to say no to a senior person or client
- Ability to get feedback from others (Greiner & Poulfelt, 2010, pp. 102-103)

Stroh adds, “listening, not telling is one of the most valuable skills in the consultant’s repertoire” (Stroh, Johnson, & Loyola University–Chicago, 2008, p. 72); “interpersonal skills” (Stroh et al., 2008, p. 91); “time management skills” (Stroh et al., 2008, p. 186); “interviewer skills” (Stroh et al., 2008, p. 200); “planning skills” (Stroh et al., 2008, p. 365); “project management skills” (Stroh et al., 2008, p. 368); and “change management skills” (Stroh et al., 2008, p. 402). These competencies would certainly be necessary, no matter what organization the consultant contracts to serve.

An often-overlooked skill for consulting is extrinsic and intrinsic motivational competencies. What makes church consulting extraordinary are intrinsic skills and abilities. In fact, Baard suggests “consultants from the discipline of psychology, as opposed to general business advisors, would appear uniquely able to serve [churches] ... since more complex intrapersonal dynamics are involved in intrinsically or self-motivated behaviors than in extrinsically driven ones” (Baard, 1994, p. 19). Thus, church consultant competencies describe “one’s innate desire to pursue growth, to be optimally challenged as to current skill or knowledge level, and to experience personal effectiveness” (Baard, 1994, p. 23), including, “relatedness, ... caring for others, and being cared for by them in return” (Baard, 1994, p. 23). Smith adds competencies for church consultants include “cross-cultural competency” (Smith, 2006, p. 337), and “doctrinal integrity and spiritual sensitivity” (Smith, 2006, p. 338).

The key to church consultancy – doctrinal integrity and spiritual sensitivity – comes through personal recommendation and individual networks, as Macdonald suggested. A consultant must understand each church’s doctrinal similarities and differences as well as hold spiritual concerns as sacred. For instance, in a church that believes strongly in the institution of marriage as only male and female, a consultant would not encourage the church to create ministries to the LGBTQ community. The consultant would lose credibility in a heartbeat if they attempted such advice. However, the opposite is also true. The church consultant must not condemn the church that embraces LGBTQ communities. The church consultant must hold the same values of doctrinal integrity of each individual church and their members, as well as spiritual sensitivity to that church’s doctrine or expression of spirituality. Perhaps in church consulting aligning values is more important than competencies, as one of Macdonald’s church clients wrote, “If the client does not accept the consultant’s value system, he is unlikely to give that person credibility” (Macdonald, 2006, p. 418).

In priority order, church consultants must first know and follow God daily. Second, they must value the church’s doctrinal integrity and expressions of spirituality. Third, they must embrace the intrinsic skills of self-awareness, growth, knowledge, personal effectiveness, caring for others, and

allowing others to care for them. Finally, church consultants must also refine their competencies in management consulting, including their technical skills in their specialty area.

Church Consulting Certification

The first program offering certification in church consultation was the Charles E. Fuller Institute between 1980 and 1984. In 2006, Smith found nine consultant training or certification programs either under development or currently offered (Smith, 2006, p. 179). Twelve years later all but one has retired and the rest of the individuals and their ministries either no longer exist, or no longer certify, as is the case for Natural Church Development (NCD). NCD never has trained or certified consultants but used Coachnet to certify their coaches.

Today, several certification programs are available following training by the organization. Research did not result in finding lists of church consulting certification, so the results identified here come from a Google search for “church consultant certification.” Others may exist without a website, or without the search parameters used. The website options, listed in alphabetical order, demonstrate the breadth of certification available today.

Some Church Consultant Certification Options

The Center for Congregational Health. The Center for Congregational Health is a ministry of Wake Forest Baptist Health’s Faith Health Division. They also provide consultant training, though one must have a member log-in to have access to the information. Training costs between \$1,665 and \$1,765 (including room and meals) for one course on “Consulting with Faith Communities, but no certification information appears on their website.

Church Life Resources. Church Life Resources, co-founded by Wayne and Sherry Lee in 2004 with 300 persons participating in educational and certification cohorts, primarily connected to the Pentecostal or Assembly of God churches, though many others have benefited from their training. Four sessions compose the training certification process (\$700/session), plus an online Essentials Training. No mention of renewal of certification was on the public website.

The Effective Church Group. Founded by Bill Easum in the 1980s, this program has expanded to include noted experts with hands-on experience. This group serves many denominations, has written over thirty books, and has been around over 30 years. Training is available, but no certification appears on their website.

NACDB Certification (NACDB). NACDB is a 501(c)(6) nonprofit organization that exists “to connect like-minded firms by educating and equipping them to serve and provide resources to faith-based markets and customers.” Their vision “is to integrate biblical values into the creation of facilities that positively impact the Kingdom of God,” and their values include integrity, excellence, and teamwork. The organization operates with a leadership team, board, and education committee.

Consultants dealing with buildings may obtain certification through NACDB (National Association of Church Design Builders), although the only requirement prior to training is that individuals become a member of the Association first. Their website contains no competencies or

skills necessary prior to or after certification. Their purposes are to educate the church and help each other become better at what they do (NACDB, 2011). Anyone can become CCC (Certified Church Consultant) after a 2-day training costing \$750. Certification is good for two years, with annual refresher courses available to extend certification for two years (NACDB, 2011).

Society for Church Consulting (SCC). Envisioned by Dr. Thom Rainer and Tom Harper when Church Central's consultant training launched, Dr. Rainer withdrew in 2006 to become the new president/CEO of LifeWay Christian resources. The SCC launched in 2007 and became a professional association nonprofit in 2010. Since 2016, SCC provides training and steps toward certification online, by DVD, and at live training events across the country. Prior to certification, one must become one of two levels of membership: Basic for \$139/year; or Premium for \$395/year.

A certified church consultant must (1) be a society member in good standing; (2) have a minimum of five consecutive years in consulting work OR complete adequate training (levels 1-5 with the SCC or equivalent training by another body); (3) Submit a 1,000 word paper on philosophy of consulting; (4) Submit two consultation reports; (5) Submit three signed ministry reference letters; and (6) agree to abide by the Consultant's Code of Ethics (Society for Church Consulting, 2017). The initial certification fee is \$189 with renewal, including SCC membership at \$238.

Some Secular Consultant Certification Options

Association of Accredited Small Business Consultants (AASBC). The AASBC is the only global association focusing on training and certification of small business and SME consultants. The awarding of the first certifications comes after becoming a member and passing a basic exam indicating global competence. The cost for both the initial year fee and certification is \$499. Annual renewal dues are \$149 (AASBC, 2018).

CMC – Global. This is an international membership organization and network of the management advisory and consultancy associations and institutes worldwide, who have a common purpose and shared values and goals. The CMC designation developed, established, and promoted globally gives recognition to those certified as having a common body of knowledge and competencies (CMC - Global, 2018).

IMC USA Certification (IMC USA). As a member institute of CMC – Global, one of the reasons IMC USA exists is for certification. Once a consultant joins the institute, encouragement follows to pursue certification as evidence of their commitment to management consulting as a profession. Some of the Certified Management Consultant (CMC) certification requirements include 3-years' experience as a full-time consultant; a degree from a four-year college; five satisfactory references from officers or executives of client organizations; written summaries of five client assignments and a presentation to a panel; written responses to an engagement case study and a presentation to a panel; a qualifying written examination and an oral review; and a written examination and oral interview on the IMC Code of Ethics and ethical aspects of consulting (IMC USA, 2018). Three streams of certification apply to IMC USA's options: Basic, Experienced, and Management levels. Member pricing for the initial application is \$350 with an annual change of \$395. Triennial re-certification is required at the cost of \$150.00 (IMC USA, 2018).

Why not just use the options of secular certification for church consulting certification? The processes are in place with some intense requirements, including for renewal certification. The only Church Consultant Certification process that comes close to the stringent requirements of secular certifications is the Society for Church Consultants, requiring renewal every two years. However, no indication of special competencies specific to church consulting seem apparent such as psychology, doctrinal integrity and spiritual sensitivity discussed earlier.

Church leaders and consultants do a disservice to God's church to not ensure competence in consulting. Certification indicates the consultant has completed training and has attained a certain level of competence and will continue to grow in their skills in consulting. Former pastors, weary of the role of pastor, should not assume they can hang a shingle to become a church consultant. While they may have the competencies of doctrinal integrity and spiritual sensitivity, they may not have systems, structure, or strategic knowledge to lead other church leaders in the direction of growth and health.

Next Steps

As the secular world of consulting has found, certification requires consultants to continually grow in their skills, to think broadly and globally, and to constantly challenge their own assumptions. Consulting, whether church or business, requires people skills—consultants who put relationship before almost anything else. What can we as growing consultants do? Here are a few steps to ensure church consultants work toward certification.

Step 1: Identify foundational competencies for Church Consultants. What skills must church consultants develop to be successful? This paper has identified at least some knowledge of psychology would be helpful. Developing doctrinal integrity and interacting with spiritual sensitivity also strengthen a church consultant. What other skills or competencies are mandatory for church consulting?

Step 2: Decide certification option. With both Church and business certification possible, which should Church Consultants support? Both are possible, though most Church Consultants have not the time nor the resources to invest in more than one, especially initially. Adding credibility to the career through certification can help protect the church from unscrupulous consultants taking advantage of organizations not accustomed to hiring consultants. Certification should also indicate specialty areas, such as finance, children's ministry, etc.

Step 3: Sustainable Certification. To provide certification for a few years and quit does not help instill confidence in the process. One possibility is working with a secular business certification to develop a specialty area for nonprofit or, preferably, church consulting as it requires a different set of skills. The likelihood of sustainability of certification from an industry standard would only boost church consultants' credibility.

Conclusion

As the secular world of consulting has found, certification requires consultants to continually grow in their skills, to think broadly and globally, and to constantly challenge their own assumptions. Consulting, whether church or business, requires people skills—consultants who put relationship before almost anything else. To ensure church consultants become certified, here are a few steps to get conversations started:

Step 1: Identify foundational competencies for Church Consultants. This paper has identified at least some knowledge of psychology would be helpful. Developing doctrinal integrity and interacting with spiritual sensitivity also strengthen a church consultant. Identifying other competencies needed for church consulting will strengthen and help hold church consultants accountable.

Step 2: Decide certification option. Both church and business consulting certifications are available. However, some Church Consultants have not the time nor the resources to invest in more than one, especially initially. Adding credibility to the career through certification can help protect the church from unscrupulous consultants taking advantage of organizations not accustomed to hiring consultants. Certification should also indicate specialty areas, such as finance, children's ministry, etc.

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Church Consulting is a privilege and honor. Providing certification of consultants can help consultants stay current on issues and options while offering church leaders assurance that the consultant is both competent and committed.

About the Author

Karen Cress is currently pursuing a doctorate in strategic leadership at Regent University while starting her own consulting firm, Culture Shift, LLC, after years of employment in a variety of pastoral positions. Karen has worked successfully as a consultant, senior executive, director, and pastor. Questions or comments regarding this article may be directed to the author at: karen@cultureshift.co.

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