



Structured to Flourish: Organization Design Lessons from the Early Church

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Imagine a small-scale but expanding, semi-autonomous, networked organization with aspirations for global countercultural influence, populated by devoted members willing to die for their cause. While today many would think of the transnational terrorist organization Al Qaeda, this is actually a description of the fledgling Christian church in the first century. Despite the drastic differences between the two organizations, organizational design has played a key role in the success and survival of each group. While there is always danger in attempting to extract practical organizational lessons from a divinely empowered movement, it is clear the early church provides a rich case study in organizational design. The chronicles of the early church provided in the book of Acts provide key reminders on how to approach the design process, including keeping to the leader's intent, ensuring senior leadership empowers the design/redesign process and aligning structure decisions with the organization's mission. Once on the right structural path, the lessons of the early church remind us to employ structural concealment when necessary, limit structural components to essentials, make design decisions with internal and external resistance points in mind, and make strategic grouping decisions to optimize the structure for execution. Taken together, the lessons of the early church provide a great primer on how to approach and execute organizational design.

Imagine a small-scale but expanding, semi-autonomous, networked organization with a vision for global countercultural influence, and populated by devoted members willing to die for their cause. While a common response might be the transnational terrorist organization Al Qaeda in the twenty-first century, this is actually a description of the fledgling Christian church in the first century. Despite the drastic differences between the two organizations, organizational design has played a key role in the success and survival of each group. Too often forgotten as a model today, the early church provides a rich environment for contemporary organizations to capture lessons on structure to help them thrive in challenging or hostile environments.

Value of Structure

In the allocation of leadership focus, structure typically takes a backseat to strategy. While necessary to a certain extent, a preoccupation with strategy to the neglect of structure is akin to the hunter who spends all of his time aiming a rifle that is out of alignment. Organizational structure, or “the way an organization’s activities are coordinated and controlled,” is much more than a simple by-product of strategy development.¹ Structure informs strategy development, enables strategy execution, and determines its success or failure. Decisions on structure shape the organization’s culture and decision-making processes, and they directly determine the shape, distribution of power, and degree of specialization and departmentalization.² Additionally, like strategy, structure is not a one-time decision for the leader. Instead, organizational design must be a continuous process that is responsive to internal and external pressures on the organization. Further, within the organization, structural decisions must balance the need to address the “top-down” aspects of power and lines of authority with the “bottom-up” issues of job design and work flow that emanate from the nature of work being done.³

Regardless of the structure selected, the goal “is to fashion a set of formal structures and processes that, together with an appropriate informal operating environment, will give people the skills, direction and motivation to do the work necessary to achieve strategic objectives.”⁴ This goal is important for any organization seeking to be competitive, but it quickly becomes an issue of survival for organizations threatened by hostile environments. A closer look at the Jesus movement of the first century reveals how a simple strategy employed through the right structure resulted in growth despite massive resistance.

Structural Approach of the Early Church

In many ways, the early church was note-worthy not for its structure but for its lack thereof. Given the sometimes-exhausting superstructure associated with modern Christianity, it is important to remember the fledgling community-based nature of the early movement. Only after the Christian community had reached substantial size and survived heavy persecution did it begin to assemble much of the hierarchy with which we are now familiar. To appreciate the organizational design of the early church it is instructive to first look at the establishing guidance Luke provides in the opening passage of the Book of Acts.

He gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit... But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”⁵

In these four sentences, Luke uses conversionist rhetoric to ignite and guide the fledgling countercultural movement.⁶ Luke’s commentary highlights three important lessons that are essential to structural decisions. First, **follow the leader’s instructions**. While this seems obvious, a lack of patience can be disastrous to organizational design. The maxim “measure twice, cut once” definitely applies in the design process and part of that measurement is ensuring you do not get ahead of senior leadership in the process. Luke’s narrative makes it clear the small group of believers was not sitting idle, but they were clearly waiting in Jerusalem to receive direction and be empowered by their leader before attempting to take on the world.

The second structure lesson we can extract from Luke's discussion is **the need to ensure you are fully empowered by your leader prior to engaging in a major design/redesign effort.** While today's leaders may not be waiting for tongues of fire to rest over their heads, empowerment is needed to ensure all members are motivated and see the full support of leadership for their efforts. This empowerment may come from a verbal appointment, an action memorandum, or the allocation of funds or responsibilities needed to arrange the new structure. Just as it would have been pointless for the early believers to attempt their countercultural revolution without the promised power of the Holy Spirit, today's change agents must remember to seek the appropriate source of authority and support when modifying the organization's structure.

The third critical lesson Luke provides for organizational design is the importance of **ensuring you have a clear understanding of your mission so it can guide your structure decisions.** Luke's use of recitation in verse 8, "be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth," connects back to Jesus's charge in the closing verses of Matthew's gospel, which we commonly refer to as "The Great Commission." For the small group of believers in the first century, it was a concise capture of the strategic approach they would use to transform the world around them. This strategy provided the foundation for all of the structural decisions that would be presented later in Luke's text. A firm initial grasp and continuous reference to the core strategic concept is essential to ensuring alignment in organizational design.

Designing for Success

The great benefit of evaluating structure through the lens of the early church is the ability to take lessons from the initial guidance and from the organizational design efforts that followed. The clear mission and powerful events at Pentecost propelled the establishment of a distributed Christian network that quickly reached most of the known world. Without the technological connections enjoyed by today's networked organizations, the early church employed a hub-and-spoke network centered on major cities and executed through the surrounding communities. Paul's letters highlight the prominence of Jerusalem, Antioch, and later Rome as key hubs and his travels show many of the major arteries of this framework. Although it would be challenging to diagram the exact structure of the early Jesus movement, there is sufficient clarity to derive several key design principles.

Principle 1: Camouflaged Initiation

The first important lesson from the early church structure is its concealment in the environment during its early growth. Meeks states, "To outsiders, the Christian groups would have looked like the voluntary associations or clubs that were so popular in all parts of the empire."⁷ While resembling other religious cults, "they performed no sacrifices, staged no processions, and in general had few of the outward rites typical of ancient religion."⁸ The strong emphasis on moral training and exhortation, repeatedly demonstrated by Paul, led many to associate Christians with the philosophical groups that were also common at the time. This "blending in" during the early stages of the Jesus movement provided the camouflage necessary to grow the membership and resources of the organization critical to its survival once it was more clearly recognized by the opposition. This principle is applicable today for start-ups or new product lines where efforts are most vulnerable in the initiation period.

Principle 2: Structure Lite

The second structural lesson from the early church is the idea that less is more when it comes to organizational design. Throughout the book of Acts, it is clear the early church sought to create only as much structure as necessary to execute their mission. When faced with the task of replacing Judas, even though they knew the daunting challenges ahead, the disciples did not take both Barsabbas and Matthias or add a significant number to the group.⁹ Further, there is no other apparent addition to the organizational chart until the issue of daily food distribution is raised in Acts 6. In this case, it was obvious the current structure was insufficient to meet the needs of the organization so the position of deacon was established.¹⁰ This purpose-driven structure ensured great agility for the early church and avoided the centralization of power that would later cause it so much trouble.

Principle 3: Design for Resistance

In environments where organizations expect to struggle, it is best to make your organization difficult to target. For the Jesus movement, the lack of structure and informal network of believers prevented the Jewish leaders, and later the Romans, from clearly identifying and completely extinguishing the church leaders and membership. This design-to-survive approach was adopted by the terrorist network Al Qaeda, and it has made them very difficult to locate and eliminate. They have been described as “an underground army so scattered and self-sustaining that even the elimination of Mr. Bin Laden and his closest deputies might not eradicate the threat they have created.”¹¹ Reports describe Al Qaeda as a loose association of two types of persons, planners and doers. The former gather intelligence, pick targets, and provide the materiel.¹² Although fundamentally different in mission, the early church network was also a scattered, self-sustaining organization comprised of missionaries and core support personnel. The decisions by the early church leaders to pursue a networked organizational structure, similar to modern insurgent or terrorist frameworks, helped ensure its survival given its dispersed countercultural role and growing persecution. For today’s leaders, designing with a clear understanding of the forms and focus of potential resistance will improve organizational durability and vitality.

Principle 4: Strategic Grouping for Success

Nadler and Tushman argue, “Strategic grouping is the most important step in the design process ... Grouping gathers together some tasks, functions or disciplines, while pushing others apart; in essence, it focuses the organization.”¹³ “The initial choice in strategic grouping—the shape of the core organization—is a direct outgrowth of the organization’s or unit’s strategy.”¹⁴ For the early church this strategy is captured in Acts 1:8, “Empowered global witnesses to build the body of believers.” In the same way contemporary matrix designs bring the organization together cross-functionally, the early church attempted to bridge the tasks of witnessing, fund-raising, and establishment and preservation of doctrine by connecting the geographically separated church. From the initial leadership of the apostles, through the establishment of the council at Jerusalem and the early structure of bishops, presbyters and deacons, effective grouping by geographic area, culture, and mission helped unite and strengthen the dispersed church body.¹⁵

Conclusion

While there is always danger in attempting to extract practical organizational lessons from a divinely empowered movement, it is clear the early church provides a rich case study in organizational design. Contemporary leaders may not be able to depend on the distribution mechanisms of speaking in tongues¹⁶ or heavy persecution¹⁷ to facilitate growth, but today's intense competition demands serious deliberations when approaching the structuring or redesign of an organization. The chronicles of the early church provided in the book of Acts provide key reminders on how to approach the design process, including keeping to the leader's intent, ensuring senior leadership empowers the design/redesign process and aligning structure decisions with the organization's mission. Once on the right structural path the lessons of the early church remind us to employ structural concealment when necessary, limit structural components to essentials, make design decisions with internal and external resistance points in mind, and make strategic grouping decisions to optimize the structure for execution. Taken together, the lessons of the early church provide a great primer on how to approach and execute organizational design.

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¹ Hughes, R., Ginnett, R., & Curphy, G. (1993). *Leadership: Enhancing the lessons of experience*. Boston, MA: Irwin Inc. (p. 320).

² Galbraith, J. (2002). *Designing organizations: An executive guide to strategy, structure, and process*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. (p. 6 & 11).

³ Nadler, D., & Tushman, M. (1997). *Competing by design: The power of organizational architecture*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. (p. 52).

⁴ Nadler & Tushman. (1997). (p. 14).

⁵ Acts 1:4b-5 & 8, *Holy Bible, New International Version*.

⁶ Robbins, V. K. (1996). *Exploring the texture of texts: A guide to socio-rhetorical interpretation*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press. (p. 72).

⁷ Meeks, W. (2009). The social world of the New Testament in the Oxford study bible. *Oxford Biblical Studies Online*. Retrieved from <http://0-www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com.library.regent.edu/article/book/obso-9780195290004/obso-9780195290004-div1-40> (Chap. 8, Div. 1, p. 40).

⁸ Meeks. (2009). Chap. 8, Div. 1, p. 40.

⁹ Acts 1:12-26.

¹⁰ Acts 6:1-4.

¹¹ Rothenberg, R. (2002). From whole cloth: Making up the terrorist network. *Connections*, 24(3), 36-42. Retrieved from <http://www.sfu.ca/~insna/Connections-Web/Volume24-3/Rothenberg.web.pdf> (p. 37).

¹² Rothenberg. (2002). p. 37.

¹³ Nadler & Tushman. (1997). p. 73.

¹⁴ Nadler & Tushman. (1997). p. 73.

¹⁵ Shelley, B. (1995). *Church history in plain language*. Dallas, TX: Word. (p. 70-71).

¹⁶ Acts 2:4-13.

¹⁷ Acts 8:1 & 4.