

PREPARING A PROPOSAL

Elsie Froment, PhD

Introduction

This article provides basic guidance on preparing a proposal for a new way of doing things in ministry settings. Perhaps the leadership team desires to bring a facility renovation forward. Perhaps a ministry leader would like to propose a new program. Perhaps a member of the congregation seeks to propose a community outreach. If the church decision makers consider news ideas via a proposal process, they will have at hand the necessary information to make informed decisions.

That the decision makers for the proposal have a thought-out presentation to consider is the important advantage of a proposal process. Supposing the church librarian has glimpsed a possibility through her leadership of the church library. The library recycles curriculum materials and uses materials derived from the internet. This cost-saving practice involves skills not generally highlighted in a church, such as the ability to provide illustrations for concepts and craft projects. A member of the library staff is a competent artist. The librarian thinks art classes would make fledgling artists more familiar with the library and create a pool of artists to support the ministry of the church. She tells her supervisors her idea. The supervisors discuss the idea but do not relate to it and are not convinced that art classes are an appropriate activity of the church. The idea dies.

The librarian's oral observations lacked the substance of a piece of paper or a video presentation. Her supervisors may not have grasped her vision or found it compelling. A prepared presentation would have given her the opportunity to test the idea first and, satisfied it could be done, decide how to present it. If the librarian had conveyed her passion and made it practical, her supervisors might have endorsed her idea, at least for a trial run.

In fact, this was an actual learning experience on the part of the author. She learned the value of a proposal and the art classes served their purpose as long as the art instructor attended the church. Later in her professional life, the author was responsible for the preparation of a broad range of proposals. This article is intended to provide an overview of proposal writing, to assist church leaders and congregants to effectively present their ideas for the advancement of their shared goals.

Tips

Every initiative needs a champion. Top down or grassroots, the proposal must have

at least one, and hopefully more than one, champion. If there is no one who believes in the idea and is willing to see it through to fruition, there is no proposal. The proposal should demonstrate to the decision makers that the idea is important, if not necessary, to the mission of the church and that it should receive approval and the support it requires.

The first step in preparing a proposal is to identify the decision makers for the proposal. The decision makers for grassroots proposals are identified through consultation with the lead pastor. They may be church officers or staff members operating within governance guidelines. All completed proposals are submitted to the lead pastor for consideration and action. The lead pastor may direct the proposal to the appropriate decision makers, return it to the champions for further work, or advise champions that its consideration will be delayed and why. If the lead pastor directs the proposal to the church board, the church board decides whether the proposal needs congregational approval. Acceptance of a proposal by the lead pastor indicates that the lead pastor supports the proposal.

Proposals should provide the information that decision makers need to evaluate the idea. The decision makers may indicate the level of proposal they desire to receive, depending on the significance of the initiative. Church decision makers have a responsibility to make thoughtful decisions. They need to be able to settle both mission compatibility and resource issues before an idea is implemented. They also have a responsibility to not let initiatives proliferate to the extent that focus on the church mission and vision is dissipated. Instead of having to think of all the questions for those proposing the idea and perhaps not bothering to do so, the decision makers have a guide to the issues. They then can fill in gaps with further questions as they evaluate the proposal.

The information provided in the proposal should be factual and precise. Many amateur proposals consist of little more than several pages of vague reasons why a program should be instituted, seeming to assume that “if we build it, they will come.” The idea may be stellar but the research that can facilitate decision making is lacking. Will congregants want to take advantage of the program? Will there be a enough volunteers to run the program? The proposal should seek answers to these questions. For example, the art class proposal may state that six people have indicated interest in attending art classes and being on call for curriculum work. A teacher is willing to deliver the classes. Here are the financial details.

Proposals can be short or lengthy, depending on the preferences of the decision makers. Decision makers can consult the comprehensive elements below and tailor

the proposal to their specifications. If a condensed version is requested, the champions should prepare a full proposal to test the idea and be able to speak to it if asked. If the champions will not be invited to the meeting at which the proposal will be discussed, they could submit the preferred short copy and a long copy for reference.

The timing of the presentation of the proposal is important. Proposals should respect the normal planning and budgeting cycle of the church. Key times include the approach to the annual meeting and the start of the educational year. Church leaders may establish their preferences for the intake of proposals, depending on the nature of the initiative.

Structure

A fully developed proposal consists of four parts. It begins with an approximately two-page executive summary of selected key points from the detailed proposal. Realistically, this is all many decision makers will read.

There will be some, however, who will read and carefully consider every word and number. The executive summary is followed by the detailed proposal, which provides precise information and seeks to answer questions that the decision makers might ask. The writer should strive for brevity and precision because this part of the proposal will be the persuasive part of the document.

The detailed proposal is followed by appendices consisting of evidence for the claims made in the proposal, such as survey summaries. The appendices also provide lengthier information that would make the detailed proposal bulky and difficult to follow, such as personnel descriptions.

Finally, the budget for the proposal may be included in the detailed section or presented as a companion document. If the proposal will not be adequately considered on its merits because the decision makers will focus most of their attention on the financial aspects, perhaps competitively, the budget is best presented as a separate document. The budget may be considered after the proposal is evaluated, or even by a separate set of decision makers.

Elements

The champions should research all the questions that the decision makers may need to answer to approve their proposal. They may choose key information to present but should be prepared for any questions that arise from the decision-making discussion. For convenience, the proposal elements below mainly concern program

initiatives. The format may be adapted by church leaders to propose a broader range of initiatives, from practical, as in a facility improvement, to conceptual, as in a review of a traditional church practice.

1. Heading

The proposal begins with a heading that names the initiative, the decision-making body it has been prepared for, the date submitted, and the contact person(s) for the proposal. An abbreviated heading that includes the page number may be set up for each page.

2. Executive Summary

The executive summary is a brief overview of the key sections of the detailed proposal. It highlights the basic information from these sections. Key sections include the description, advancement of mission and strategic planning, objectives, resources required, and implementation date. Champions may decide to include some additional sections from the detailed proposal in the executive summary, to draw the decision makers into consulting the fuller explanations. The summary should not leave the impression that the detailed proposal is unnecessary.

3. Detailed Proposal

Description

In a maximum of three sentences, the proposal describes the initiative that is being proposed. Brevity is preferred over details because the details are provided in the rest of the proposal.

Example: It is proposed that the Church Board approve the introduction of art classes by the library, in order to strengthen the library's ability to provide curriculum for the children's and youth programs.

Advancement of Mission and Strategic Planning

All initiatives that the decision makers support must contribute to the advancement of the mission and values of the specific church. How does the initiative complement the church's philosophical approach to ministry? How will the church's vision of the future be enhanced by the implementation of the proposal?

If the church engages in strategic planning, the champions should take the plan into consideration. While they likely can find the mission on the church's web or social media site, the forward planning may not be evident. To be able to place their

proposal in the context of the church's strategy, they may need to obtain a copy of the church's plan and/or meet with a member of the church staff.

Example: Mission - The proposed art classes will facilitate the sharing of Jesus's love to children and youth and increase the possibility that their lives will be changed.

Strategic Planning - The proposed art classes will contribute to the church plan by improving the Christian Education curriculum.

Program Objectives

The decision makers will want to know that the art classes are worthwhile not only for how they will augment the mission of the church but also for what they will accomplish. The champions should prepare a list of no more than five objectives for the art classes. The list will be short because a longer list tends to become less meaningful and the attention of the decision makers may dissipate. The objectives should be measurable.

Example: The art classes will: 1) deliver curriculum-focused art instruction to volunteers; 2) develop a pool of artists to participate in curriculum enhancement; 3) spiritually encourage and support its participants.

Program Activities

The proposal details in general terms the activities of the new program. The decision makers do not need to know the art class schedule or curriculum, but they need to know the outlines of the program through which the objectives will be accomplished.

Example: Art class activities will include: 1) recruitment of a qualified instructor; 2) recruitment of students; 3) weekly classes for specified periods; 4) ongoing consultation with leaders responsible for Christian education curriculum; 5) integration of art instruction and curriculum development.

How the Activities Achieve the Objectives

The activities of the program derive from the objectives of the program. Therefore, the relation of the proposed activities to the purposes of the program should be thought through and articulated. The resulting clarity will help the champions make the intended contribution to the ministry of the church and provide the church staff with a basis for evaluating whether the intended contribution is being made.

Example: The art class activities achieve the objectives by: 1) providing an instructor with the necessary skills and experience to provide students with art instruction relevant to curriculum development; 2) recruiting students with an interest and aptitude for this instruction; 3) establishing the working relationships that will ensure

that the needs of the church Christian educators are known and understood on an ongoing basis; 4) providing the Christian educators with art work they need to communicate curricular concepts.

Benefit to Participants

A program proposal will be more convincing if it can demonstrate the benefit to the participants. What new understandings and skills will the participants derive from the program??

Example: The art classes will benefit the participants by affirming their art talent as a gift from God, connecting their art talent to Christian service, developing their art skills in relation to Christian education, and giving them a faith-based community of support and encouragement.

Delivery

The program may be delivered face-to-face or electronically. It may involve a team of leaders or a single instructor. It may be formal, with a set format and expectations or informal, with goals realized through interpersonal relationships. A variety of settings may be required, to facilitate field trips or community service. A description of the proposed delivery is necessary because important questions arise from it, particularly concerning the risks involved and the resources required.

Example: The art classes will be delivered in the library workroom by a qualified instructor. The librarian will orient the instructor to the purpose of the classes and act as a liaison between the instructor and the needs of the Christian education ministry of the church.

Risk

Evaluation of risk must not be neglected. It is a necessary step for all proposals of any significance. Risks often are not included in proposals; however, the initiative may put the church in danger of incurring liability. There are many resources on the internet to familiarize church leaders and champions with risk assessment.

Champions should carefully consider liability matters and commonly recommended solutions so they can address them at the proposal stage. If the church has a risk checklist, a copy of the checklist may be included as an appendix to the proposal.

Questions that may be asked of a program proposal may include the following. Does the church have a child protection plan in place to ensure that each child can participate in the initiative safely? Are there enough volunteers who have passed criminal checks to ensure that the child protection plan is practical? Will a leader

with basic first aid credentials always be present? If there are safety issues with furniture or equipment, how will they be handled? Are fire exit directions posted in every room and drills conducted? Does the church have a policy to promote secure transport beyond the church property? Does the initiative contain financial pitfalls, such as the possibility that promised donations may not materialize or fundraising may not cover costs?

Example: A survey of possible risk issues has determined that the potential for liability arising from the art classes is low.

Special Considerations

The Special Considerations section is both important and optional. The champions should consider sensitivities that may arise from the introduction of the program. Are there issues that may come to the fore if this proposal is accepted by the decision makers? For example, are the champions aware that a similar program has or is being offered in the church? If so, there is a potential for misunderstandings, competition, and confusion among leaders and participants that may linger if not addressed at the proposal stage. The champions should not submit a proposal before they have met with the leader(s) of the prior initiative and worked out any differences that stand in the way of their support for the proposal. If a potential for discord exists, the champions should mention under Special Considerations that the other program supports the proposal and why. If no such potential exists, the champions may state this or leave out the Special Considerations section.

Example: Because no previous art classes have been offered by the church, the champions decided not to include this section in the proposal.

Resources

Personnel

The proposal should list the number of qualified volunteer (or paid) personnel required by the initiative, referring to an appendix in which the position names and qualifications are described. It may be noted that the potential leaders are present and known, but names are an unnecessary detail. The actual leadership of the proposed program may not be clear at this stage in its genesis. In addition, the church may require its volunteers to apply for their positions.

The champions must be realistic about current work loads of staff and volunteers in the church. If the staff and volunteers already are heavily extended, resentment may occur and the drive to succeed may be diminished.

Example: The art classes will require an instructor who can fulfill the responsibilities of the position. Because the classes will be held during the library staff weekly work time, the librarian will be present.

Facilities

Where do the champions propose to deliver the program? Is church space required? Will it accommodate the program? Is the space accessible and safe for all who may desire to participate? If not, what modifications are needed to make it accessible and safe?

If the initiative involves off-campus facilities, as for a community outreach, the site(s) should be stated. The champions should analyze every aspect of the proposal to ascertain how it would be affected by a regular activity off the church grounds.

Example: The church library workspace is large enough to accommodate the activities of the library staff and the art classes. The space is physically accessible because there is a ramp at the main entrance to the church and there are no barriers to mobility inside the church. There are no safety issues connected with this space.

Equipment

The proposal will indicate if the initiative requires equipment that the church currently does not possess. The champions may propose a method of acquiring the equipment, such as a donor or a fee, or the church may be asked to acquire it. The champions may recommend that the decision makers approve the program and delay its implementation until the necessary equipment is on hand. They also may assure the decision makers that church policy regarding competitive estimates will be followed. If the equipment is desirable but not essential, they may suggest that the purchase be delayed until the church or a donor provides the funds.

If the equipment will need to be upgraded on a regular basis, is this known and understood as a church responsibility? Equipment replacement could become a contentious issue if it is not spelled out in the proposal. Also, the champions should be aware that many churches have a policy that equipment purchased with church funds belongs to the church. They could note the ongoing value of the equipment for the activities of the church.

Example: No new equipment is required for the delivery of the art classes.

Supplies

Supplies may range from sports equipment to curriculum materials. In most cases,

initiatives will utilize supplies paid for from the church budget. The proposal budget will indicate the impact. There may be exceptional expenses, such as study guides, that can be recovered from the participants. This should be noted in the proposal.

Example: The art class students will purchase their own materials as specified by the instructor.

Services

Some needs may be delivered in the form of a service. Even if services may be supplied at no cost, they should be included in the proposal budget. For example, trips to off-site locations require transportation. Churches may follow the example of many school districts in hiring transportation rather than asking for parental volunteers. They may arrange for a bus so that professional drivers are involved and company insurance is responsible in case of an unforeseen road incident. The proposal should estimate how many trips will be planned on an annual basis. If the activity is frequent, perhaps the need for services could be obviated by the expectation that participants will arrive at and depart from the off-site location on their own.

Some service expenses may be missed because they tend to be hidden. These service expenses include equipment maintenance and replacement. Required equipment maintenance such as an annual service check for warranty purposes should be noted. Implicit in the acceptance of the proposal is the obligation of the church to accept possible expenses arising from service calls.

Example: No new services will be required by the art classes.

Sustainability of Resources

Once the resources have been identified, the champions should review them for sustainability. Is the key leader planning to move to another city shortly after the initiative is implemented? Are the facilities about to undergo an extensive renovation? Does the initiative rely on a temperamental piece of equipment? Is the intended curriculum seriously backordered? Will the services be available when needed? Potential sustainability issues should not be ignored or left for the decision makers to raise. They should be identified, carefully weighed, and addressed in the proposal.

Example: A member of the library staff has volunteered to fill the position of art instructor. There are sufficient candidates for the position in the church membership to sustain the art classes.

Participation

Need and Demand

Because “if you build it, they will come,” may not be realistic, the champions need to develop evidence that there is a need and demand for the initiative. Church goers are privy to a multitude of choices. If an activity is not compelling to them, they are unlikely to participate. What will excite them? Perhaps the initiative has something novel about it; perhaps it uses an approach that attracts people because another approach feels worn to them. Perhaps the initiative recognizes life challenges they are experiencing. Perhaps the need that is compelling to them is not their own but the issue being addressed, such as loving children to Christ or giving homeless people shelter on cold nights. Perhaps the need has been seen and church people have begun to think, “We should...”. In that case, demand is present and should be relatively easy to quantify. The champions might also consider whether participation in the initiative is likely to grow, stagnate, or decline after the initial excitement has waned.

Online surveys and focus groups can provide evidence that champions, and subsequently decision makers, can use to evaluate the support that exists for the initiative. The surveys should be blind and conducted and analyzed by a third party. The focus groups could be conducted by the champions, with an observer taking notes and writing a report. Decision makers should insist that the proposal provides evidence of need and demand.

Example: The curriculum support activities of the library demonstrated a need and demand for the development of a group of artists capable of assisting the library to recycle and generate Christian education curriculum.

Promotion

The proposal should indicate if the initiative will serve a target group of participants, for example, a specific age group, and how the group will learn about the initiative. The champions should review the church’s communication mechanisms and choose the most effective means of recruiting for the initiative. In a smaller church, this may be less challenging than in a larger church. The champions also may evaluate community mechanisms for promoting the initiative.

Example: The art classes will be promoted through the church bulletin and Facebook.

Accountability

The administrative line of the initiative should be spelled out. What leadership position is responsible for the implementation and success of the initiative? To whom do they report?

Example: The art instructor will be responsible to the church librarian. The church librarian is responsible to the deacon for Christian education.

Assessment

Assessment includes routine evaluations of the initiative. How assessment will occur should be detailed in the proposal. Will the leader be responsible to make an annual report to the church staff overseeing the initiative? If so, after consultation with church staff, a format for the report may be included in the proposal. The report may restate the mission and goals (and any changes), provide a brief critical assessment of outcomes, relate encouraging stories, and recommend continuation or cessation. At the discretion of the church board, a summary may be included in the annual meeting compendium for the information of the congregation. A list of anticipated expenses for the next year may be submitted with the report for the use of the church budget managers.

Example: The church librarian will include the art classes in the annual report to the deacon for Christian education two months before each annual meeting. The report will be accompanied by a summary of anticipated expenses arising from the art classes for the coming year, if any.

Escape Clauses

The proposal may state the conditions for bringing the initiative to a close due to unforeseen circumstances. It may include a sunset clause for automatically bringing the initiative to a close if the conditions for continuance are no longer present. The leaders may find they are unable to fulfil the terms of the initiative for health or other reasons and new volunteers are not extant. Enrolment may not be as high as anticipated or the initiative may prove too risky or expensive. The leaders and the decision makers may desire to discontinue the initiative without waiting for the annual report. The process for this eventuality may be clarified in the proposal.

Example: At the request of either party, the appropriate church administrator and the librarian will meet to determine the continuance of the art classes if the proposal conditions cannot be delivered, or for cause.

Approvals Required

The proposal should list all the decision-making bodies that must approve the initiative. Approvals within the church decision-making structure are both necessary and prudent. If the initiative would benefit from cross-congregational buy-in or might raise a negative response because it has not been tried by the church before, the availability of a proposal will be helpful to both the decision makers and the members.

If community partners or government regulations are involved, there also may be external decision makers. In the case of a proposal developed jointly with a community partner, such as a food bank or an immigrant transitional centre, the proposal will identify the community partner decision makers. In the case of external regulatory requirements, as for church-sponsored early learning programs, the proposal will identify the approval bodies, summarize the approval processes, and guide the decision makers to the regulations.

Example: The church library art classes to support curriculum development require the approval of the church board.

Timeline for Launch and Implementation

The proposal should state the target launch date for the initiative, outline the necessary actions that must be undertaken before the launch can occur, and provide a realistic approximate timeline. It also will specify any conditions that must be in place before the initiative will be implemented.

Example: The target launch date for the initiative is the first workday in September (year) of the library staff. The art classes will not commence until at least four students have enrolled.

4. Appendices

The appendices provide evidence for assertions made in the detailed proposal. Lengthy information that would interfere with the smooth reading of the detailed proposal also may be relegated to an appendix. The proposal alerts the decision makers to the relevant appendices in parentheses; for example, (Appendix A: Position Descriptions).

Position Descriptions

The proposal should provide a position description for each paid and volunteer leader required, depending on the initiative. The position description should name

the position, state the qualifications and experience sought, and list the responsibilities of the position.

Potential Participation

The proposal should include a summary of surveys and focus groups that provide evidence of need and demand for the initiative. It also may provide a survey of similar programs offered by churches in the community to demonstrate need and demand. The use of graphs and charts is pertinent here because many decision makers prefer “snapshots” that allow them to quickly absorb the evidence.

Consultants

From idea to submission, champions should consult with appropriate decision makers and experts. A list of the stakeholders consulted, noting their relevance to the proposal, will help to persuade the decision makers that the information and arguments presented are reliable.

Endorsements

Brief endorsements for the initiative from key stakeholders and potential participants will assure the decision makers that broad support for approval exists. For example, if church members who hope to be in the art classes write endorsements for the proposal, the decision makers will have further evidence that the initiative will be successful.

5. Budget

Developing the budget may require consultation with church officers or staff members who possess financial expertise. The budget should show the anticipated annual expenses of preparation and implementation for approximately three years, including non-routine expenses that may be necessary for implementation. Once the proposal is approved by the decision makers, the church financial managers will incorporate its budget into the church budget. Unless the champions propose satisfactory alternative arrangements, approval of the proposal budget means that the church will assume the costs of the initiative,

Presentation

The presentation of the proposal will make a difference in how it is received. Whether fair or not, strangers tend to treat people they meet more seriously if they look as though they have taken some care with their appearance. A sloppy appearance can be accepted but, for many audiences, it becomes a factor to be overcome. The degree of formality, the clarity and cleanness, the sensibilities

displayed, and the format are all issues in presentation. They are largely decided by the audience for the proposal.

Presentation need not be fancy. Expensive folders, thick paper and photos are not required. The printed sheets can be stapled together and submitted without a cover. The important consideration is that the proposal has substance. Because it is not oral, it cannot be ignored. Something must be done with it.

The proposal should be highly readable. Jargon should be avoided, the wording and sentence structure should be clear, and the spelling and grammar should not become an obstacle to recipients. Prior to presentation, spelling and grammar errors that escape automatic computer checks can be avoided by giving the proposal to readers skilled in the language of the proposal.

A factor in presentation is sensitivity to how the decision makers will respond to the proposal. Does the proposal convey assumptions that hinder them for being able to judge the initiative objectively? Will a decision maker aware of his origins sense a paternalistic tone toward a program proposed for newcomers? Will a female decision maker resist a proposal that assumes that women will be able to attend a proposed program during the day or for an extended period on Saturdays? Will a parent decision maker trust that a proposed activity for children will be sufficiently safeguarded for physical and other risks? Previous to presentation, proposals should be evaluated for issues that require cultural awareness because they can raise deep-seated resistance.

Finally, champions should consider the format of the proposal. For convenience, the format this article discusses is a paper presentation. A paper presentation is useful to have on hand because it is a ready resource for decision making. Normally, it will be in narrative form with only necessary illustrations. Point form may be acceptable, if consistent. Because check-off charts limit the amount of necessary information that can be presented, they risk delays or rejection.

Champions should consider their own technical expertise and the presentation they suspect will be most effective with their decision makers. A creative and informative video presentation, perhaps backed by the availability of a written proposal, would be attention getting and, if done well, could be persuasive.

Conclusion

Currently, the world has not quite overcome the onslaught of an international pandemic. A year has passed in which church leaders have sought to meet the needs

of their congregations remotely. In varying degrees, congregants have followed their churches through the internet and sampled a wide range of services. When congregations gather face-to-face once more, what will be their church's priorities? How will a new normalcy be established for an uncertain future? Leaders and congregants may use the basic guidance provided in this article to both evaluate and think freshly about the ongoing accomplishment of the mission of their church.

Appendix 1: Proposal Elements Template

PROPOSED INITIATIVE:

Submitted to:

Date Submitted:

Contact Person(s):

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Description

Advancement of Mission and Strategic Planning

Objectives

Resources Required

Implementation Date

DETAILED PROPOSAL

Description

Advancement of Mission and Strategic Planning

Objectives

Activities

How the Activities Achieve the Objectives

Benefit to Participants

Delivery

Risk

Special Considerations

Resources

1. Personnel

2. Facilities
3. Equipment
4. Supplies
5. Services
6. Sustainability

Potential Participation

1. Need and Demand
2. Promotion

Assessment

Escape Clauses

Approvals Required

Timeline for Launch and Implementation

APPENDICES

Position Descriptions

Potential Participation

Consultants

Endorsements

BUDGET

Three-year anticipated expenses of preparation and implementation

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Elsie Froment is part-time Director of Research at Northwest Baptist Seminary. As Director of Academic Initiatives and Dean of Research at Trinity Western University, she co-wrote program and other proposals with academic champions for 17 years and administered grant proposals with academic researchers for seven years. Because most proposal writing literature is related to grant and project proposals, she hopes that this article will make proposal writing accessible to church leaders.

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