

Decision Making and Decision Rights Guide

A practical example for churches

Purpose

This sample is designed to help churches create clear, usable leadership and governance resources. It should be adapted to fit the church constitution, bylaws, doctrinal commitments, polity, size, staffing model, and applicable law.

Use Note

This document is a sample resource, not legal advice. Church leaders should review all final language with qualified legal counsel and ensure it matches the church’s governing documents.

How to Use This Sample

Decision making breaks down when people are unclear about who has authority, who needs input, who makes recommendations, and who gives final approval. This guide helps churches clarify decision rights before discussion begins.

1. Why Decision Rights Matter

- They reduce confusion and frustration.
- They protect congregational authority where the bylaws require congregational action.
- They allow staff and ministry leaders to act without unnecessary delay.
- They help committees know when they are deciding, recommending, or giving input.
- They encourage trust because the process is clear before the outcome is debated.

2. Decision Rights Spectrum

Not every decision needs the same amount of time, input, or buy in. The more significant the decision, the more input and alignment may be needed. The more routine the decision, the more it can usually be delegated.

Level	Decision Right	Best Used When	Example
1	Leader decides	The matter is routine, low risk, and clearly within the leader’s role.	A ministry leader chooses the order of activities for a regular event.
2	Leader decides with input	The leader has authority, but others have helpful knowledge or will be affected.	A pastor selects curriculum after receiving input from teachers.
3	Subgroup decides	A smaller team has been assigned a defined area of responsibility.	A decoration team chooses table layouts within an approved event plan.
4	Subgroup decides with input	The subgroup has authority but should listen to stakeholders first.	A facilities team chooses paint colors after receiving staff input.
5	Committee majority vote	The committee has authority and a clear vote is appropriate.	A committee approves minutes or a delegated minor expenditure.
6	Supermajority vote	The decision is significant and needs stronger agreement.	A committee recommends a major policy change to church leadership.

Level	Decision Right	Best Used When	Example
7	Consensus	The issue requires broad ownership, trust, and shared support.	A long range ministry plan or major recommendation.
8	Full alignment	The decision is highly significant and should not move forward without unified leadership.	A major capital campaign recommendation or pastoral transition process.

3. Decision Rights Matrix

Decision Area	Input From	Recommends	Approves or Decides	Notes
Routine ministry programming	Volunteers, staff, participants	Ministry leader	Ministry leader or staff supervisor	Stay within budget and church policy.
New ministry proposal	Affected ministries, staff, finance if needed	Pastor or ministry leader	Church Council, elder board, or appropriate body	Clarify budget, space, leadership, and mission fit.
Annual budget	Staff, committees, ministry leaders	Finance or Stewardship Committee	Church body or authorized board	Follow bylaws and financial policies.
Unbudgeted expense	Staff, finance team	Finance or Stewardship Committee	Authorized person or group based on amount	Use spending thresholds.
Personnel policy	Staff, Personnel Committee, legal counsel if needed	Personnel Committee	Authorized body under bylaws	Maintain consistency with employment law and church doctrine.
Ministerial staff hire	Search team, staff, Personnel Committee	Search team or Personnel Committee	Church body or authorized body	Follow bylaws carefully.
Facility improvement	Facilities team, staff, finance, users	Facilities Committee or staff	Authorized body based on cost and scope	Distinguish maintenance from capital projects.
Bylaw amendment	Church leadership, legal counsel, congregation as required	Authorized committee or council	Church body	Follow notice and voting requirements exactly.

4. Decision Preparation Worksheet

Question	Response
What decision needs to be made?	
Why is this decision needed now?	
Who has authority under the bylaws, policies, or approved budget?	
Who needs to provide input before a decision is made?	
Is this a decision, recommendation, or input discussion?	
What information is needed?	
What financial, facility, personnel, legal, or ministry implications should be considered?	
How will the decision be communicated?	
Who is responsible for follow up?	

5. Example Decision: Facility Improvement

Step	Example
Issue Identified	A ministry classroom is too small and needs renovation.

Step	Example
Input Needed	Ministry leader, facilities staff, affected teachers, finance team, and safety considerations.
Decision Right	Facilities Committee recommends. Finance or Stewardship Committee reviews funding. Church Council or church approves if the cost or scope requires it.
Key Questions	Is this maintenance, renovation, or a capital project? Is it in the budget? Does it affect other ministries? Does it require permits or outside contractors?
Decision Record	Record the recommendation, estimated cost, funding source, approval path, and responsible person.

6. Example Decision: New Ministry Proposal

Step	Example
Proposal	Launch a weekday outreach ministry for families in the community.
Input Needed	Pastoral staff, ministry leaders, facilities, childcare, finance, security, and communications.
Decision Right	Staff develops proposal. Appropriate committee reviews. Church Council or authorized leadership body approves if policy, budget, or facility commitments are significant.
Key Questions	Does this fit the mission? Who leads it? What is the cost? What space is needed? Are child protection policies involved? How will success be evaluated?
Decision Record	Record approval, conditions, budget, launch date, review date, and responsible leader.

7. Decision Record Template

Field	Record
Decision Title	
Date	
Person or Group Making Decision	
Decision Right Used	
Summary of Input Received	
Decision or Recommendation	
Rationale	
Budget or Resource Impact	
Communication Plan	
Assigned Follow Up	
Review Date	

8. Suggested Spending Threshold Example

The following thresholds are only examples. Each church should align thresholds with its bylaws, budget process, policies, and internal controls.

Amount or Scope	Sample Approval Path
Within approved budget and routine	Ministry leader or staff supervisor
Minor unbudgeted expense	Staff supervisor and finance leader
Moderate unbudgeted expense	Finance or Stewardship Committee
Major unbudgeted expense or policy implication	Church Council, elders, board, or authorized governing body
Property purchase, major renovation, debt, or bylaw matter	Congregational approval if required by bylaws

