



Going deeper into meetings

1: Planning issues

A40 Articles series: Structures

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Meetings! For many people the idea of a church business meeting brings about a fair amount of despair. They are often not happy occasions: they can be dull, bad tempered or just plain frustrating.

Some waste time with trivial business, others are filled with trivial discussion on legitimate items. They often involve a great deal of people-time for surprisingly little output.

But good meetings, when they take place, can be a real joy with a sense of purpose, of working together and with positive outcomes.

Official gatherings of a Church Council, Kirk Session, Diaconate, Select Vestry, Trustees, Finance Team, or whatever should be positive, effective, Christ-centred, enjoyable occasions. It's worth studying the subject and seeking to make church business meetings work well.

The idea of this double-article (A40 and A41), though each part stands on its own, is to move beyond the basics of meetings, such as agendas, minutes and seating arrangements, to think about some new ways of creating effective business gatherings.

Part 1, this article, looks at three planning issues that may be new to you:

- 1 Plan the year
- 2 Think three tenses
- 3 Welcome review.

Part 2, in A41 which follows on and may be accessed [here](#), covers three people issues:

- 4 Keep it small
- 5 Watch the context
- 6 Play like a team.

If you already know the basics of good meetings, here are six ideas to stretch your mind.

1: Plan the year

We are used to the idea of an agenda for one meeting. But why not an agenda for the whole year (or whatever period makes sense for the group in question)? It's the same idea but in a longer time-frame and without too much detail.

This idea will help your group's business to flow rather more freely than if you only think about each meeting, one at a time.

A one-year agenda

A one-year agenda comes out as a list of main items, grouped and sorted in an appropriate way, with some idea of the time of year (or date of meeting) when each needs to be tackled. This list can be discussed and agreed by the whole group at its first meeting of the year – which in itself helps everyone to own what the group is seeking to achieve.

As well as main items it is helpful to include cyclical items of business that cannot afford to be forgotten: election of office-holders, review of the year, authorisation of annual accounts, and so on. The group may well have a legal responsibility or a clear expectation to cover several of these.

The idea is not to add in every detail. This is the big picture plan which you want everyone to stay focused on, rather than getting lost in a long list of items meeting by meeting. It would be good if you could fit it onto one side of A4.

It does not have to be a one-year period. A church staff team that meets weekly may want to think instead in terms of academic terms. There may be as many meetings for this group in the autumn as there will be for the church's council meeting monthly over one year.

A Trustee body meeting four times a year may feel that a three-year period would work better. That's fine. It's just that for most groups, one year will be sensible so I will assume that.

Why this idea is important

Here are ten advantages of this approach which should make the minimal extra time involvement look so worthwhile.

1: It gives purpose to the group

It helps members to think in big-picture mode and focus on the group's purpose. It provides coherence to the business so that everything can be seen to fit together. It therefore offers a more satisfying experience to group members.

2: It highlights priorities

It enables the important business to get the time and attention it deserves. At the same time it helps prevent business that belongs elsewhere grabbing precious time. Without a plan for the year there is much more chance of power groups pushing their own agendas.

3: It helps focus prayer

With clearer purpose and priorities and a view of themes over a whole year, it is more likely that people will appreciate that if meetings are to work well they need to be prayed over, both by those attending and by the wider congregation.

4: It emphasises the group's ongoing life

Many groups focus too much on the task of a meeting agenda and too little on the people-dynamics of those in the group. Meetings work better when the group seeks to become a team that exists 24/7, not just for two hours each month. The longer-term approach of a one-year agenda can help (see Article A41 section 6).

5: It lines up the group with the plan

Assuming the church has a real concept of its purpose (why God has placed it there) and vision (where it is praying God will lead it to), there needs to be a plan to achieve this. Some churches call this a Mission Action Plan. The one-year agenda is then the group's outworking of that plan during this time-scale instead of seeing it hidden in a filing cabinet.

6: It enables year-end review

Groups should regularly review both their effectiveness in tackling business and their teamwork. An agenda that is broader than just for one meeting provides an objective point against which the year's business can be checked out and plans made for the future. See section 3 in this article for more on this idea.

7: It enables everyone to be involved

In many groups the agenda is put together by a small group with the membership having little input. But if the year's agenda is created at the first meeting, everyone gets a chance to own the business for the year.

8: It helps canvass opinion

Because this agenda is on the table all year, the group can carry out necessary research and talk to church members (for items in the public domain) with time to spare. See the advice about trigger points below.

9: It helps put business in the right order

A meeting by meeting approach risks matters arising that would have been better tackled after a discussion of a related issue. Taking a longer-term approach enables the group to think about logical order.

10: It enables everyone to be prepared

First, it shows up any need for training in good time. Secondly, it helps members think through major topics well in advance, rather than the night before the meeting.

How is it done?**1: Main items**

The main purpose of a one-year agenda is to highlight main items and then put them into an appropriate order. But this also needs to show cyclical items that need major agenda time too. There is unlikely to be time to mix the two up such as a key strategic discussion in the same meeting as the annual budget approval. The outline shows the planned meeting dates and the main item(s) of business expected at each. These should be in a logical sequence with appropriate time devoted to them.

- **Involve the whole group**

Rather than a smaller group making the decision for approval, let the whole group start the process off at its first meeting. This may involve a blue-sky thinking exercise, but some items (don't have more than you can cope with) may be obvious or mandated from the previous year. The input for this has to be the church's vision and the plan for its achievement. Depending on the group's purpose, it has to serve that vision or an element of it.

- **Let one person firm it up**

Ask one person to put the plan for the year's meetings into print and circulate this, preferably within one week of the above discussion. Remember that this is a one-side of A4 paper – no major detail.

- **Refer to this paper at each meeting**

This is to check on progress, to spot any divergence and to amend the plan if a

higher priority has come to light (but only if really necessary). The person or group setting each meeting agenda works from this paper.

2: A diary of related dates

It is also helpful to show other actions that need to be taken at different points in the year: these can be referred to as triggers.

- **Diarise triggers for action**

Some items will need groups to do preliminary work, which therefore need to be set up far enough ahead of the main discussion. Or an action will need to be reviewed one year later. Diarise everything (this can be a second side of A4!) so nothing gets forgotten.

- **Add in other key events**

It will be helpful to include within this diary other church events that will impact this group's work. Examples include the date of another leadership body's meeting which your group will need to report to, or a key church weekend which will then provide input for a forthcoming discussion.

3: As the year proceeds

- **Allow some flexibility**

The aim is not to change the plan, but too wooden an approach can be dangerous if one item needs longer than planned or urgent, strategic business comes to light. For example, another group may ask you to tackle a particular issue you were not expecting. So don't panic if you find the plan gets adjusted during the year – but don't use that as an excuse to ignore it.

- **Don't try to achieve too much**

Most groups try to cover too much ground and end up frustrated. You are unlikely to be able to have more than one main item at any one meeting. Put this as early in the meeting agenda as makes sense, but don't then pad out the meeting with too much detail. On this approach some more minor business needs to be delegated to other groups or, often better, individuals.

- **Review it at the final meeting**

It's always a good idea for a group to review its work at the end of a year so that lessons can be learned. Add this to the plan itself. Agree and document these lessons afterwards. See section 3 later.

Example

A church leadership body decides that it needs to tackle three key matters before the end of the year:

- 1 Whether to start a new, weekly, all-age Sunday service.
- 2 How to add to and train members of the music team.
- 3 A review of the church's communication to its external networks and local area.

It is clear that:

- Both items 2 and 3 should come before 1 but all need to be tackled during the course of this year.
- Each needs major agenda time but May, November and February have regular business (elections, budget, annual reports) so should be avoided.

- Item 1 ideally needs to be opened up at one meeting and then given special time (perhaps on an extended Saturday meeting) at a second occasion.
- Item 2 would benefit from inviting a specialist in to advise – booked well in advance.
- Item 3 needs preliminary work by an ad hoc group, formed at least four months before the main team discussion.
- It would be helpful to devote one meeting to team training.

A plan of the year's meetings can then be drawn up so that these three priorities are given sufficient air-time. This may mean that some other items of business that arise are delegated to different groups.

You can then diarise all the actions that will be necessary to enable these main items to work well.

2: Think three tenses

The second idea starts from the concept that meetings and their business span past, present and future. Once you start to see your business through this particular lens, and then balance out the tenses so you are not ignoring any one of them, you have identified an important feature of a healthy decision-making group.

The idea of tenses

A good group in its meetings:

- understands the past so that members can learn lessons from it;
- analyses the present so everyone can see it from different angles;
- imagines the future so together you can plan properly for it.

The danger of focusing too much on the past is that it enslaves you and prevents you looking ahead – all too common in some local church groups. The danger of paying too much attention to the present is that you look too much at detail and fail to spot the big picture and the trends. The danger of a future-driven focus is that you ignore the present evidence and make unwise changes.

The points listed below, four for each of the three tenses, are only examples of how this kind of thinking might work out in practice. See what you make of them.

Past

You need to understand the past and learn lessons from it, but not to let it enslave you.

1: Recognise the importance of good minutes/reports

First, encourage skills in the documenting of your meetings. Some meetings need formal minutes, others need action lists, still others informal reports. But all need to be written well – and most minutes should be shorter than many churches are used to. The key points are to list decisions taken and actions arising from them with a brief explanation of how you reached them.

For more on this read Training Notes TN45, *Are you sure it's minutes you need?*, on this website.

Section 1 of this article showed the value of a year-long agenda. Extend that idea to a one-year report which summarises all the minutes for that year in a short document so that everyone can see the output. This can then form a history of your group's decisions to help everyone understand what has happened.

2: **Thoroughly induct new members to help them understand the past**

If an understanding of the past is important, it is vital to bring new members up to speed as quickly as possible.

The set of one-year reports just recommended will help, but these should be supplemented by an informal training session where others help the newbies to grasp what business has been tackled and, in particular, where the present business has come from. Beware one person's interpretation here, so this may be best done by a group of two or three.

If you fail to do this new members don't get up to speed for some time and their value on the group is wasted in the early weeks and months. Or they may simply misunderstand matters.

3: **Tell God's story of the church**

In the Old Testament the Children of Israel were often told to 'remember' their past history. If you serve on any church decision-making body you need a wholesome view of the church's story, of God's story of his dealings with the church (whether exciting or painful). This is the context in which you are to make decisions for the future. Beware history repeating itself!

Time lines can be a helpful tool, but make sure you ask the question as you list the history over past years: What would God see as the key points in your history?

The same principle applies on a specialist group from that church. So the Finance Team, for example, need to know the story of giving and financial stewardship over the past few years.

4: **Regularly review your group and its Output** (see also section 3 below)

At the end of every year, or other appropriate period, it is healthy to spend some time reviewing the group's meetings. In particular look at the decisions taken, the processes you used to take them and the relationships within the group. What went less well than it might have done and what can you do about this for the future?

Once you see things through the lens of the past, you will want to learn from not only what God has done within your church, but also where he has been at work in your meetings. There will be lessons to learn from both.

Present

You need to analyse the present from different angles but not to get so involved in detail that you lose sight of the big picture.

1: **Research people's views**

Unless dealing with confidential business, a wise group will research viewpoints outside their membership. It cannot be right for a church leadership group to take key decisions about children's work, for example, without hearing how children's group leaders, parents and the children themselves see the position. This may involve some carefully planned research or focus groups with the findings brought to the meeting.

In some cases it may be better to avoid bias by asking an external enabler to undertake such research. This has the advantage of offering people a safe place in which to express honest opinions. It may be helpful on some specific issues to widen the net to those outside the church too.

2: **Use the time outside meetings**

You make a mistake if you restrict all your speaking and discussion to the actual meetings. Why not ask someone to run a simple questionnaire around the group one month before the meeting asking some carefully chosen questions on the main topic, and then present the findings in a paper sent out in advance? You all need to understand how the group is thinking and praying and the time when members are physically together can then be used more effectively.

Again, if you have a problem to solve, be it a matter of worship, discipleship, buildings or structure, getting possible solutions down in advance of the meeting gives you all a flying start when you are together. Everyone needs to listen to other viewpoints and there is more chance of this outside the meeting.

3: **Enable every member to put their view**

I am horrified to discover church groups where certain members never say anything, often because one or two members intimidate them by having loud voices and strongly held views. A good Chairperson will bring everyone in and will allow all points to be heard.

The quieter the person the more wisdom they will often hold. It therefore follows that the meeting needs to hear more from the quieter members than from others. What is required for this is skilled chairing. There are means you can use to help: going round the circle, rules about only speaking once, the use of post-it notes to let everyone express views anonymously, and so on.

4: **Compile data on which to base decisions**

I sometimes find myself working with a church trying to make key decisions about the future without proper information available about the

present. For example, different options may not be costed, or a discussion about church growth with no available statistics about present congregational numbers other than people's guesswork.

It is important that you keep statistical data not for the sake of it but to inform your decision-making. This information then needs to be shared with the group in good time for thought and prayer prior to the meeting – and hence the value of short but informative papers available with the agenda. But if preparing data about the detail, don't lose sight of the big picture.

Future

You need to imagine what the future might be so that you can plan for it. But only if you have first understood the past and analysed the present.

1: Welcome visionaries and work to a church vision

These are not the same thing, but you cannot have the second without the first. Churches should identify and value their visionaries, those people who can see possibility, who are risk takers, who have faith in God for what might be. But visionaries are not easy to work with and rarely stand still, so with your visionary you need people of wisdom to assess the visions and leaders to focus them into one, agreed, church-wide direction of travel towards the future.

Church business meetings should allow agenda time for visionary thinking: when the restraint of limited resources is lifted, when people can express their longings, when everyone can dream dreams. If the church has an agreed vision, a point in the future towards which it is working, then this should shape the entire agenda.

2: Emphasise both prayer and faith

A vision is something you have the faith to believe God might do through you. It is a place you are praying you will reach in the future. If vision is so important, so is the group's faith in God and their prayers for his will to be done. This applies to a leadership team, but should apply just as much to a Finance Committee or Mission Weekend Organising Group.

And yet for many church groups prayer has become perfunctory and faith has left the meeting. Visions are scary and should throw you

back onto your Lord and Master. A vision is, after all, something he will achieve provided you are faithful to your purpose, and not something you can manage in your own strength.

3: Ensure your agenda is one that anticipates change

The Christian gospel is all about change: about bringing people from darkness to light, about transforming disciples into the likeness of Jesus Christ, about the coming to earth of the kingdom of heaven. Yet so many church groups see themselves as quite the opposite: as minimisers of risk and the guardians of the status quo. The Gospels give a very different impression.

So a future lens means you look for group members who are people of faith, who are prepared to take risks, who know that the future will not be the same as the present, who expect to see radical change, but who seek wisdom to ensure that the changes made are the right ones. This is a new attitude that all decision-making groups in churches need to have. It is so different from what many people expect.

4: Follow decisions with an action plan

Many church groups are poor at making decisions, but those who do are often poorer at taking action. This is often because once the decision is taken everyone heaves a sigh of relief and moves on to the next business, instead of preparing an action plan and allocating responsibility for each element of it.

Again, this is a responsibility for the one who chairs but the whole group needs to help. Action plans are more than someone's initials in the margin of the minutes. They are step-by-step movements into the future with different people responsible for each one, probably with one person holding overall responsibility, and dates allocated to each stage. Without this there is delay, frustration and a drop in faith and morale.

So there are four practical ideas for each of the three tenses. Reconsider your groups and their meetings through the lens of tense and see where that leads you to. Ensure that you have a right balance of all three tenses in your meetings and they have a better chance of being worthwhile events.

3: Welcome review

This third planning concept provides some practical ideas to review how your meetings go and so improve them. If you want to have better meetings you can do much by learning from your present ones. You may well find that it is more instructive to learn from what you are doing now than reading books (or too many articles like this one for that matter!) that cannot relate directly to your business and your people.

There are all sorts of ways in which you can review your group or your meetings, ranging from formal appraisals to quick checks, from whole group involvement to one person on their own. Here are five possible ideas:

- 1 The life of the group
- 2 Each meeting
- 3 One item of business
- 4 Chairing performance
- 5 One feature of your meetings.

In all these cases you are seeking to improve the way you run your meetings so that the group becomes more effective in achieving its purpose.

In each of the cases apart from No. 2, you may want to make this a special exercise (even a special meeting!), or a session just for a small executive sub-group, or the Chair with an appraiser.

1: Review the life of the group

You may want the whole group to do this at one of their meetings or at a special meeting or, if that is too awkward, it may be better done by an executive sub-group such as a Standing Committee. It is obviously something you don't need to do too often.

It will be helpful to have the challenge of an external facilitator. If you don't you will need to think carefully as to who leads the session. If you do this yourselves you need to ensure you don't sidestep uncomfortable issues or let one or two members dominate. It would be a pity if the exercise simply copied the short-comings of the group as a whole.

This will only be really helpful if you have settled on what the purposes of this group and its meetings are and whether you are trying to form the group into a team. Without foundations like these you have no criteria to enable you to review at all.

In this and all the samples that follow, the idea is to use the questions as a discussion framework. But you might instead want to have a multiple-choice pro forma so that people tick one option for each question and then have space for reasons or comments. That enables everyone to

have an equal say into the process but then needs someone to analyse the findings – and it can over-formalise the whole exercise.

- 1 To what extent are we fulfilling our agreed group purpose and are we all aware of what this is?
- 2 What changes do we need to make either in the way we go about our business or in stating and agreeing the purpose?
- 3 What are the features of this group (such as the way we relate to each other, how we role model Christian leadership if appropriate and the way we are led) and of our meetings that work really well?
- 4 What general features of this group's life and of our meetings would we like to improve?
- 5 What practical actions can we take to bring about such improvement?

The point here is to concentrate more on the group of people than your meetings. Some will not find this easy and will try to move the discussion onto aspects of the business. This is allowed for in the questions above but must not become the main point.

It would be possible, and should be profitable, to carry out the same exercise for the meetings. But so often it is issues to do with the group that impacts the effectiveness of the meetings and so what is described above is the more fundamental exercise.

2: Review each meeting

This may be a new idea, but it's worth taking five minutes at each meeting to do this. You can either make it the last item on the agenda (though people may simply be wanting to go home) or the first item of the next meeting (but people may have forgotten the last one). Or this quick review might be carried out by an executive group planning the next meeting.

This is designed as a quick exercise, not as a thorough appraisal. Assuming the whole group takes part this could be difficult if there are authority or relational problems or people are not

prepared to be honest. You could then have it as a paper exercise.

- 1 What were the really positive features of this meeting? This might be something to do with the business, or the way the group worked together, or the timing, or the seating layout, etc.
- 2 What did not work as well as it might have done? This might have involved any of the above list, or destructive conflict, people arriving late, lack of preparation, how a decision was agreed, etc.
- 3 What one change might we have made to make it a better meeting, and so what action do we now need to take for next time? Who will do this by when?

There will not be time for anything more thorough than this. What this is doing is to show the group that performance matters and that this is a group responsibility.

Note that there is also an informal, and more honest, review of each meeting which probably takes place for ten minutes or more on the street or in the car park outside the venue as people prepare to go home.

3: Review one item of business

You might want to do this either because the item in question had special features, or it was especially important, or it was difficult or controversial. Or it might simply be that you take one item as a case study for seeing how the group tackles business in general.

Here are some possible questions.

- 1 How clear was its agenda listing as to what the group was seeking to achieve with this item (for example, whether it was for information, discussion only or for decision)?
- 2 How well prepared were we to tackle this item with necessary understanding?
- 3 How well did we perform in dealing with this item? For example: Was the time used effectively? Were people listening to others well? Did we respect each other's views? Did we stick to the point? Was it chaired well? Were we clearly seeking God's will rather than individual preferences?
- 4 How clear a decision did we make, if that was expected? And how well did we ensure that that will now be actioned, by whom and on schedule?

- 5 What was the one main lesson we learn from how we tackled this item?
- 6 What practical changes do we now need to make to improve on any of the above points?

You could also take these questions and apply them to your business in general to provide a review of the way your group tackles its entire work.

4: Review the chairing

This is best done by the Chair themselves working with a mentor or appraiser. Better, it might be carried out with two or three people who have been asked to observe performance and provide helpful input. It might be done in a group of people who share out the role of Chair so that they can help each other.

In a close team everyone could do it together if the Chair could cope with this and people are prepared to be sensitively honest without playing power-games.

Chairing is a difficult task and anyone who does this regularly should be keen to improve their skills and grow into the best Chair they can be for this group.

- 1 How well defined is the role of Chair for this group, and what lies at the heart of this role?
- 2 How well do our meetings keep to time and cover the agenda business without people feeling that they have been unduly rushed or controlled?
- 3 How well does the Chair help every member to contribute to the business and prevent certain members saying too much or going off on tangents?
- 4 How well does the Chair help everyone to focus on the purpose and to come to a point at the right moment when a decision should be taken?
- 5 How well does the Chair manage difficult situations: when the meeting seems lost, when there is conflict? Does (s)he speak too much or too little?
- 6 What changes might the Chair need to make to improve on any of the above points?

You might carry out a similar exercise on other office-holders, such as the Secretary. But be careful – or you might then have no takers for key posts you need to fill!

5: Review one feature

The example taken here is the place of prayer and Bible study in the meetings, but you might choose instead methods used to come to a decision, actions taken as a result of the meetings, communication with the whole church, selecting/electing members of the group, etc.

- 1 To what extent are our meetings centred on gathering in Christ's presence and seeking his will, however we choose to demonstrate this?
- 2 If we have a time of Bible reading in our meetings, to what extent is this simply perfunctory or are we learning lessons for how we should meet from the passage?
- 3 How do we encourage the whole church to pray for our meetings (if we think they should) and what changes might we consider to make this more effective?

- 4 How do we encourage our members to pray before they come to our meetings, and then to pray at the meetings too?
- 5 Do we, or should we, have any means to encourage members to pray for each other (rather than just our business) if we are seeking to grow into a team?
- 6 Do we need to make any changes given our answers above?

So there are five examples of how a business group might review different aspects of its life and meetings. You may well want to simplify the examples given here to fit where you are at. To overdo the review might put people off. But for a group that is keen to improve the way it works together and meets together, the concept of review is vital.

We have now investigated three issues of planning when seeking to make meetings more effective. The second part focuses on people issues and this follows at Article A41 which you can access [here](#).

This article is available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles-index> then A40. See also Articles A4, *Twelve questions to help you plan*, and A24, *Mission-shaped Church Councils*, plus Training Notes TN61, *Mapping out a meeting*, TN97, *How to minute a meeting*, TN118, *Why, exactly, are we meeting?* and several other related items on this website.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of training on better use of meetings in churches.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A40 under Structures with a link to Planning.

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