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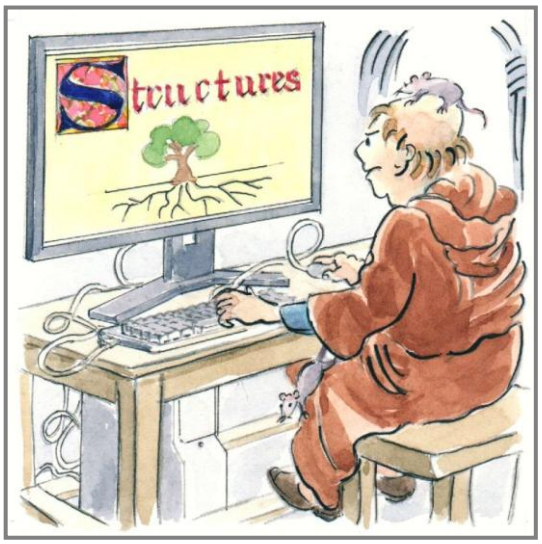

Why, exactly, are we meeting?

TN118 Training Notes series: Structures

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Churches, like other people-groups, have business meetings – rather too many of them. But why meet? When a council, committee or group get together, what exactly are they trying to do – and does each member realise this? These notes are designed to clarify a setting that is often confusing.

First, five vital questions.

1 Do you need to meet at all?

This first point sounds so obvious but churches that meet on the second Tuesday evening of the month will always find something to talk about. They are either on auto-pilot or would have a deep sense of shame if they did not meet on schedule.

If there is no good reason for getting together, cancel the meeting and free up a lot of time. Talking of which .....

2 Are you aware of your time footprint?

Take any church meeting of 15 people, meeting for two hours plus 30 minutes travel time. That works out at 37½ hours of people time, or one full week for someone in employment.

Add in the time for preparing beforehand, reading minutes later, plus the time spent by office holders in fixing the agenda, and getting the papers out and you can double that.

Meetings are greedy for people's time – let alone their emotional energy. Ensure the quality of output justifies this investment.

So beware the needless meeting, the badly organised meeting, or the meeting with too many people in the group. What time wasters these can be!

3 Does this group have a clear purpose?

Before you determine the reason for this next meeting, you need to all have a clear view on the role of the group. That sounds obvious too, but often you assume everyone knows.

Take an Anglican Parochial Church Council. Ask each member what the Council is there for and you will usually have a confused set of answers. But it can be just as vague for a diaconate, a leadership team or any committee.

If you don't all know and agree the clear purpose and the powers of the group concerned you cannot determine clearly the purpose for its next meeting.

4 What's likely to go wrong?

If you are unsure just why you are meeting, or what you are trying to do with each agenda item, other issues push themselves forward and you end up with ineffectiveness. Typical problems you may have noticed include:

- the Chair does not know to where he or she is guiding the meeting;
- red herrings thrive when there is no clear direction;
- personal agendas push themselves to the fore;
- the discussion meanders all over the place;
- people have not been given the necessary information or background;
- a key 'expert' has not been invited;
- lack of decision when the purpose seems to be just discussion;
- lack of action when a decision does get made;
- your best people can see it will be a waste of their time and stay away.

5 Is it worth it?

Perhaps you now feel you should abandon all meetings, but there can be real benefits when you get people together to seek a problem's solution. The dangers listed above are no reason for abandoning the idea of a meeting. For example, in a good meeting (among many other points):

- you have and hear the combined wisdom of those present;
- you have and hear the combined experience of those present;
- you end up with a broader perspective on the issue than any one person could have;
- there can be great power in a mixed group coming eventually to a common mind;
- there can be ownership of the decision by all who took part in the process of getting there.

So there are five preliminary questions to ask. But what exactly are the overall purposes of any Christian business meeting? I hold that there are three.

See these in the context of these verses:

We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father…

Colossians 1:9-12 (NIV)

P1 To seek God's will

For a Christian business meeting you cannot afford to leave Jesus Christ outside the door, waiting in the corridor. I have said elsewhere that we so like to invite him in for prayers at the start, then ask him to leave because this is a business meeting and no place for the Son of God, and then he can come back in at the end for the Grace.

Worship services often include words to welcome Jesus. Why not business meetings too? That includes the Finance Committee, by the way, not just the leadership team.

There are of course decisions that you just need to take: the colour of the new door mats hardly needs a night of prayer to precede the vote. But why is a major group taking a decision like that anyway? That should be two people putting their heads together after church on a Sunday.

You pray in the Lord's prayer, 'Your will be done'. How much you need that prayer when taking an important decision for your church! Members too easily want to get their own way, rather than discovering God's way. Big difference. Many come into a church meeting with the wrong attitude.

The key difference between a church business meeting and something similar at most people's workplace is simply that you are trying to find and fit in to God's will. Many Christians need to *unlearn* some business stuff when they come to a church meeting.

P2 To work together

This will come as news to many but the purpose of a meeting is to come to a common mind, not to aim to fight and win an argument over those who disagree with you. In Parliament there is a Government and an Opposition (actually, His Majesty's Most Loyal Opposition), and they sit facing each other. That is not a good model for a church business meeting (so sitting in the medieval choir stalls is probably unwise!).

Yes, you are (or should be) all different in personality, experience, age and Christian maturity. But in a meeting you are working together to discover God's will, not fighting each other to see who wins. From this it is clear that the Chair's role is crucial. Just like a conductor blends all the different instruments of the orchestra into a harmonious whole, so it is the Chair's job to help everyone speak well, listen carefully and seek consensus.

This is not to say you cannot disagree with each other. You would expect that. But in the disagreement there needs to be a listening and a passion for finding a way forward.

P1 is about working with God and P2 about working with each other. You need both. While a group is pursuing their own ends, not listening to other viewpoints, not admitting they might be wrong, you will never have a corporate view.

P3 **To take action for the future**

The third and final purpose is all about change. Keep the two words 'action' and 'future' at the top of the agenda and you will be pointing the meeting in the right direction.

Many people join a committee to ensure that someone keen on changing things does not get their way. But your church's main change agents should be your council and committee members. Meetings should be prepared to enable action for change in the future.

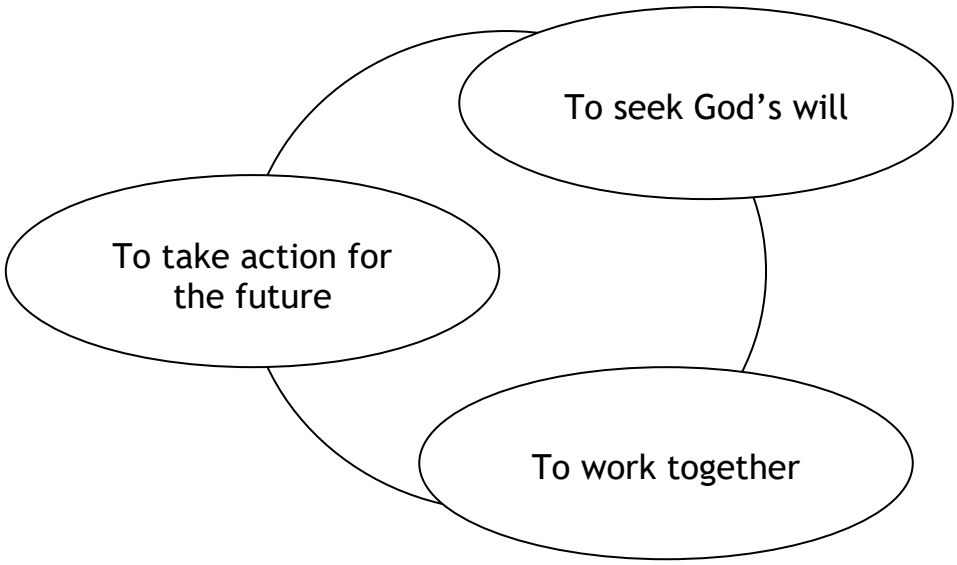
Meetings may well listen to a report from the past. Telling the stories of your church is an essential part of business meetings so everyone can understand where God has taken you up until now. The Children of Israel were constantly told to remember the Exodus. But you are to learn from, not to live in, the past.

An analysis of the present is also essential. Examine statistical information that explains where you are, discover how people feel on an issue, ensure you are working on facts not hunches.

You study the past and present, however, to plan for the future. Everything in a church business meeting should have a future dimension: how you are going to develop as a church, where you pray you will be a few years from now, how you need to react to external forces in the society you inhabit. Make meetings future orientated and they become more purposeful and even exciting. Scary too, of course – and that is what action for the future is all about.

P1-3 **All three together**

You need to hold all these three together to create a meeting with purpose. Ensure the whole group signs up to them and then works to them. Without agreement on these three your group meetings will never be what they could be.



P4 **A purpose for each item**

But if that is the purpose of any meeting in general, what is the purpose of next Tuesday's meeting? This probably means what is the purpose of each of the main items of business you have on the agenda.

It is essential to prepare everyone for each item. This might be with an explanatory paper, with a discussion at the previous meeting, or an agenda that breaks the item down into specific parts.

Here is an example of a helpful agenda item listed (taken from Training Notes TN61, *Mapping out a meeting,* on how to write good agendas).

Item 7 ***Proposed Omega course***

1 *Report from those who have visited other Omega courses (for information)*

2 *Discuss and decide on three main proposals (paper enclosed)*

3 *Agree budget in the light of this (Appendix A in the paper)*

4 *Formal appointment of leaders (Alex and Amy are happy to undertake this role)*

Here the agenda seeks to explain the purpose of each part of this one item. The first part is for information, the second to discuss and then decide, the third is also for decision and the fourth too by way of an appointment. But the item explains all this in a way that the heading alone cannot do.

Seven specific purposes

Finally, here are seven possible purposes for any one part of an agenda item:

- to ***enquire*** (such as, 'Is this a topic we should look at next time?');
- to ***inform*** (such as a report from the Treasurer on how things stand, or a theological slant to help everyone understand an issue);
- to ***discuss*** (to open up possible ways of looking at this, to listen to each other's viewpoints, to bring us all up to speed on this item);
- to ***define*** the real problem and to list possible solutions (to get to the real issue and raise a number of possible options for the way ahead);
- to ***decide*** (to come to a common mind on the way ahead);
- to ***action*** (to agree what needs doing, by whom, by when);
- to ***review*** a previous discussion or decision (to learn lessons).

If everyone knows and is agreed on which one of these bullets you are trying to achieve at any one point, you can work effectively together. Too often different people are at different points on this list. So let the agenda declare the purpose of each element.

These notes are available at https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index then TN118. See also Articles A24, *Mission-shaped Church Councils,* and A40/41, *Going deeper into meetings,* plus Training Notes TN13, *A purpose statement for those who chair,* TN61, *Mapping out a meeting,* TN128, *Effective staff meetings,* and TN147, *The role of the PCC* (for Church of England churches).

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN118 under Structures.

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