

Prayer at church business meetings

TN150 Training Notes series: Structures

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You would expect most church business meetings to open with some form of prayer and to close with the Grace or something similar. But for many people the section in between opening and close is seen as merely a business meeting, not a prayer gathering nor a worship service.

These guidance notes take a more carefully considered view and look at what should be happening in a church business meeting and, so, what part prayer might play in council or committee proceedings or a whole church gathering. Apply what follows to your PCC (for Church of England churches), Church Council (Methodists), deacons' meeting (Baptists), or trustee sessions, committees or whole church meetings (everyone).

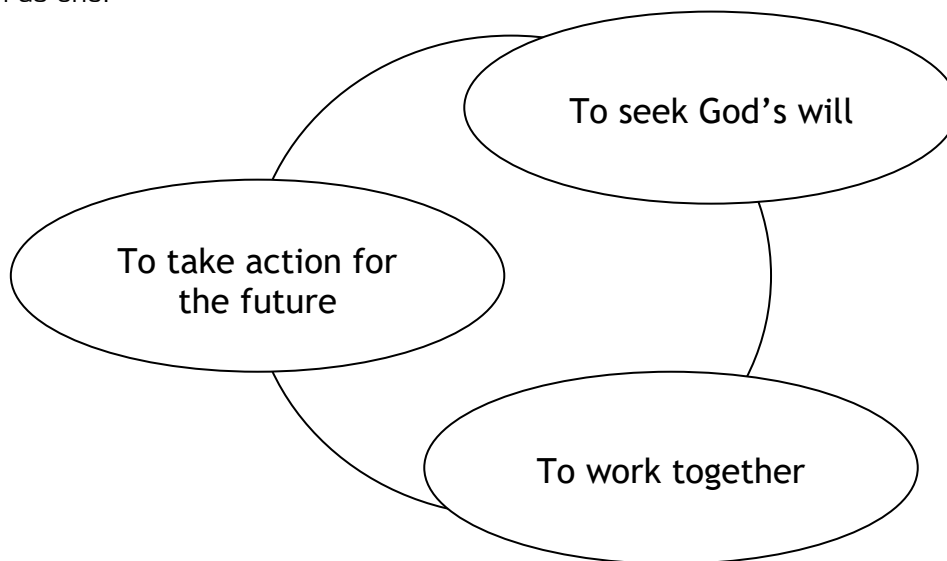
What is a church business meeting?

It is no use trying to encourage prayer for business until you have demonstrated that what your Council, committee, Trustees or whole church is doing needs prayer for God's guidance. So the first point to make is to ensure your church's **thinking** is correct. Once you have achieved that, you have a reason for enthusing everyone to pray.

In Training Notes TN118 on this website, *Why, exactly, are we meeting?*, I give three key reasons why Christians need to meet together for business. These are:

- 1 **To seek God's will** – the heart of what it is all about if we follow the Lord's Prayer as we welcome Jesus Christ to our meeting together.
- 2 **To work together** – we should meet not to fight battles but together to come to a common mind.
- 3 **To take action for the future** – the meeting should be tilted towards the future even if based on our experience of the past and our understanding of the present.

The diagram below shows these three key purposes linked up together by a circle that holds them as one.



If you are seeking God's will so that you can follow it, you need divine help through prayer. If some very different kinds of people are members of your group, you need prayer to enable all to work together in rich harmony. And if you are planning change for the future, you need wisdom and guidance to get it right.

So any business meeting needs prayer – when you open yourselves up to God, praise him for who he is, and tell him you want to do his will. But you need his help to discover what that might be and how, together, you might go forward into his future for your church.

Possible wording for the agenda item at the start might look something like this which shows the part that prayer will play in the meeting.

Opening time of prayer for wisdom (and at any other point in the meeting as necessary).

When might you pray?

It sounds pretty basic but there are a number of options. It's not that one is right and others are wrong, but that all are possible so perhaps you need either to ring the changes or to follow all of them. Here are some obvious options.

1 Before the meeting

You can encourage every member of the group to spend time praying for the meeting before they come. You might like to think this is going to happen anyway, but also suspect that many people will fail to do this. Perhaps you might have a prayer card for each member listing those on the group and some obvious and general topics for prayer, most especially for wisdom and discernment. Then ask every member to use this for each meeting and each week of the year.

2 At the start of the meeting

Most people will expect this. But you have all kinds of options for the form of prayer to use – see below. Whatever you do, this must not become routine, getting the 'holy bit'

out of the way. It may become this as late-comers arrive and people open their laptops or shuffle their papers.

3 **At key points within the meeting**

This is less common but vital. Why not stop for prayer for five minutes before a key decision is taken, or to give thanks when a long discussion ends up with a general agreement on how to go forward? Or pause for reflection when a discussion seems to be getting nowhere?

What you must not do, though, is to turn prayer into a political tool. Perhaps the one praying without much subtlety points out that the way forward is obviously Plan C. Or someone suggests prayer because they cannot stand the disagreement between two groups and want to close down the debate.

4 **At the end of the meeting**

Again most people will expect this – and it is often more perfunctory than a formal prayer at the start. Everyone is wanting to rush off to get home. But to pause with a minute for silence and time for a list of praise or prayer for each action to be taken may prove positive.

5 **After people get home**

Well, yes, why not? You want to encourage every member to be a pray-er.

Who else should pray for the meeting?

It is often church members who have elected the group if it is a council (such as a PCC). But church members often have little if any idea of what a council or committee are dealing with unless it is a major issue.

If the election process means anything at all, church members need to be taking an interest in what their elected members are getting up to. That means a headline report of what is coming up at this week's meeting and a snappy report the following Sunday (no later – and not by way of minutes, please, as they are not the appropriate medium for a news item).

But you can turn both these reports into intercession. Whoever is leading the intercessions at the previous Sunday should be advised to pray for the group members as they consider (list the top two or three issues assuming these are not confidential). And the following Sunday the person leading the intercessions then ought to come on just after the snappy one-minute report to give thanks for what has been achieved and pray for actions now to follow, once again highlighting just two or three topics. Have these reports as 'live' in the church service and also relayed in any email or printed bulletin.

The same principles apply for a whole-church meeting because there will be plenty of people in the congregation who were not present. They need news within days of what was decided, not just printed notes a few weeks later.

So the whole church ought to be praying with some basic understanding for the key items coming up this week or decided about this last week. Such an approach has a number of benefits.

- It keeps the church's key business in the public eye of the congregation.

- It means that council and committee members can be seen to have some accountability to the congregation who elected them (even if there did not need to be an actual vote taken).
- It demonstrates that the church's business needs prayer as much as any other aspect of church life.
- It might well lead to council agendas that tackle major mission items rather than just administrative detail.

But you don't need to stop there. Why not encourage prayer through any church prayer chain that you have? Make the next (and last) meeting a key element at any church prayer gathering. Encourage home groups to pray for the council and committees through regular information to leaders. Have a small group of intercessors in a nearby room praying all the time the group are meeting. And so on.

In all this you do not have to wait for the next meeting to pray for its members and business. A council / the Trustees will normally exist 24/7 so prayer for the group ought to be a regular feature of public intercessions and home group prayer times. If a council has a mission agenda, if its chief business is to work to enable the church's vision to be achieved, it ought to be seen as a key element in the church's structure and a focus for big-picture prayer.

What forms of prayer might you use?

Back to the meetings now. Much will depend here on your tradition and what people are comfortable with. For some it will be formal pre-written prayers, perhaps with some liturgy added in: a collect, some responses, Evening Prayer. CPAS have a resource with a whole liturgy for a PCC meeting – well worth checking out (Search for 'Liturgy for a PCC meeting' as part of their 'PCC Tonight' free resources). <https://www.cpas.org.uk/>

Rather than give one or two examples here, Google 'Prayers for church meetings' or something similar and see what comes up that you might be able to use (careful on copyright if you are making copies for everyone).

For others it will be a time of open prayer but ring the changes. Not everyone finds this easy so break into groups of three or four, ask people to come having written out their prayers, or use other aids.

A good way forward is to base your prayers on a Bible passage. Some churches start with a short explanation of a verse or passage to focus minds on Jesus Christ. One possibility is Colossians 1:9-14 which presents a challenge to any PCC member. But there are many other possibilities. Consider any appropriate Psalm, any part of Proverbs 3, part of John chapters 14-17, Acts 6:1-7, a section of Acts 15, Paul's prayers such as Philippians 1:3-11, and so on.

Still others have a time of silence to enable everyone to focus on God. For this you might use a picture on screen, an object of some kind, or a Bible verse to meditate on. Some find just silence threatening and difficult to cope with so an additional aid can be helpful.

Some churches will start with a shortened Communion service, whether formally in church or in a more relaxed setting where you meet. Others with worship songs. If you do either of these be sure to include a time of prayer for the meeting, for wisdom and knowledge of God's will.

But whatever you do, focus on Jesus and avoid getting into a rut. Choose a different means each time, perhaps.

If we believe that the purpose of any business meeting is to seek God's will, to work together and to take action for the future, we should be on our knees to acknowledge our own inability to fulfil such a major agenda, but conscious that divine help is available ... if we seek it. Then Jesus Christ can be seen as Lord of the group and of the church, not just of its members who meet in his name.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN150. They are based on an original paper written at the request of the Diocese of Ely. See also Articles A5, *How to chair meetings*, and A24, *Mission-shaped Church Councils*, plus Training Notes TN88, *Advice to a new committee member*, TN141, *A church council 'Code of Conduct'*, and TN147, *The role of the PCC*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN150 under Structures.

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