



Mapping out a meeting

TN61 Training Notes series: Structures

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Success in business meetings – and churches are no different from other groups here – depends on good teamwork, skilful chairing and appropriate preparation. All three need an effective agenda. But designing an agenda needs rather more skill than many people realise. Here are nine suggestions to help you do it well.

1 **Think MAP not LIST**

Most people see an agenda as a list of things to be discussed: a numbered sequence of headings. But if you think MAP not LIST you move towards a better concept.

The agenda (the correct title is the 'agenda paper') is your guide to the meeting. As a map it shows you the path to follow through the business. But just as an Ordnance Survey map gives you extra detail to help you recognise the route (contours, areas of woodland, pylons, etc.), a good agenda will show you:

- an overview of the whole;
- a logical ordering and grouping of the items to guide you;
- the background to each item;
- the action required on each item;
- any necessary supporting explanation.

So, before anything else, aim to draw a MAP to show a clear way ahead.

2 **Follow the rules**

If the group is reasonably formal, there will probably be rules set out somewhere (so ask) as to how much 'notice' you need to give of meetings and in what form. But whether rules or not, always aim to get the agenda out in good time so that everyone has it at least a full week in advance for most meetings. (The minutes or report of the last meeting should have gone out soon after that was held, not now.)

The rules may specify in what form the 'notice' is to be given (eg. sent to people's addresses or displayed in public for some meetings). It is important to know and abide by these rules. They probably make good sense and, even if not, a meeting can be declared invalid by someone wanting to cause trouble if any details have been overlooked.

Check that the notice is headed with the name of the church or organisation and of the group that is meeting, together with the date, time and precise place of the meeting. It should be sent out over someone's name and dated.

A formal notice might start "A meeting of the (group) will be held on (date/time) at (location) to conduct the following business...". But for most church gatherings a less formal approach is recommended with, after the heading, something like "We are meeting on (date/time) at (location)..." In general, avoid being too stuffy – the culture today is more relaxed than a few years ago. But still stick to the rules!

Note that, apart from some formal occasions, the notice will simply form the first part of the agenda. So that automatically gives the agenda a proper heading and opening sentence.

3 **Make it feel good**

If you want the agenda to be studied in advance as a map of the meeting, it is worth spending some time and trouble to make it look good. This means laying out the items with plenty of space between them and appropriate use of bold headings and sub-headings.

If the culture of your group is more visual than wordy, there is no reason why your agenda should not include pictures. Use informal language, avoid the word 'agenda' completely and keep it all simple.

Ensure the sheet is headed properly (as 2 above). If you are preparing papers in hard copy as opposed to the now normal digital format, it may be worth colour coding the sheets (so all agendas are on yellow, or one colour signifies a specific group).

Number the items clearly so people can refer to them in this way. If one or two are particularly strategic, ensure they stand out (tag them 'MAIN ITEM(S)' if necessary) so people can differentiate them from more routine business.

In the introduction it is helpful to underline the purpose of the group and/or the purpose of the meeting and/or the vision of the church or organisation. Setting the context in ways like this helps put the meeting in its correct setting and can make a helpful theological statement.

4 **Group and order items to help the meeting flow**

You do not have to follow a traditional order of items. It is fine to put the most important one first of all and to leave routine business until nearer the end. But make sure the order is logical. If one item depends on a decision about another, there is only one way round they can go!

You don't have to include AOB (Any Other Business) if you have clear guidelines on how to tackle emergency items. 'Matters arising' (from last time's minutes) should have sub-points to list what needs covering rather than just left vague.

It is much better to have eight items in a meeting with a number of sub-items under each than to have a list of 24 with no real idea as to how they fit together. So try to group items under just a few main headings. For example if you have three different issues relating to your buildings, it may be better to show

6 Building maintenance

- 1 *Annual report on maintenance contracts from Andy (see enclosed paper) – to confirm recommendations*
- 2 *The recent vandalism to the main doors – Karen to report on likely estimates*
- 3 *Decision on letter from insurers (see previous minutes)*

than to have these as separate items on a long list. Such headings and sub-points give a shape to the agenda that people can understand.

If there is any one item which needs different actions performed, show these as sub-items rather like the example above. So:

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)*

This splits a detailed item into four sections, making it clear what action is required from each, and helps the person chairing as well as everyone else see where they are going. This is what is meant by 'map' rather than 'list'.

5 Clarify each action required

As shown in the above examples, it is worth listing what action is expected of each sub-point. Possible actions include:

- for information (so no decision necessary at this point);
- for discussion (a chance to air viewpoints and listen to others);
- for decision (the eventual point here is to decide and act).

But consider too:

- for team-building (an exercise to enable those at the meeting to work together better);
- for research (to decide what should be investigated and by whom);
- for reporting back (a variation on 'for information' – eg. a group who went to an event);
- for review (a chance to rethink a decision taken, perhaps, a year ago);
- for blue-sky thinking (a creative session to come up with innovative ideas).

When taking decisions it is worth adding to the agenda the need to decide who will do what by when, as this can easily be overlooked in the rush to the next item. And why not include a list of actions at the head of the agenda for what people need to do before they come to the meeting (such as read the papers, discuss items with other members, pray)?

6 Provide sufficient background information

You may need a supporting paper for some items, but be aware that if you put out too much solid print some will ignore it. What many fail to realise, however, is that a few notes on most items on the agenda itself can make an enormous difference to understanding and so the conduct of the meeting.

Here is a simple example of how a single agenda item might look with this kind of support.

6 ***Next year's awayday (Saturday 25th June)** – Victoria to present
We've booked the St Pancras Centre near London Bridge and have Walter Loo as our speaker. We Used to need* children's helpers but is this adding unnecessary Padding to* the day? The theme is The King's Cross. Mary Lebone, our Treasurer, suggests a budget of £600.
* sorry about forcing these in!*

This would then be followed by a short list of decisions to make such as children's helpers, budget and the appointment of a planning group, as in 5 above.

If it needs more than this use a supplementary paper instead. In this case ensure that the paper is clearly referenced from the agenda, and has a heading that links it to the relevant agenda item.

7 Beware timed agendas

Some people put out agendas with a time listed against each item – in an effort to show what is necessary for the meeting to close on time. Be careful about this practice for a number of reasons.

- Most meetings fail to keep to anything like these precise times.
- The person deciding on the times is unhelpfully putting his or her value on that item.
- It may mean you rush over something which needs further thought and prayer.

But the basic idea is good. So try this instead.

- The person chairing the meeting has a timed agenda.
- The printed agenda paper shows the planned end time (“We aim to finish by...”) and, perhaps, one other time about half way through (“We are hoping to have reached this item by 9 pm.”)

There is no point in just adding item after item to an agenda and hoping the meeting will finish on time. It won't. Better to put fewer items on and deal with others through other groups or in other ways. The shorter the agenda, the more time there is to think, to pray and to listen.

8 Let the agenda speak of Jesus Christ

Some church groups have what might be called a 'nod to God' approach, inviting the Almighty to join them for the opening of the meeting, then asking politely if he would mind waiting outside while they do the business, and then allowing him back in for the Grace at the end.

But groups that spend half an hour in prayer at the start of a business meeting are not necessarily more Spirit-filled than those where people have prayed in some depth before

coming to the meeting. This is a bigger issue than can be discussed here, but here is an idea to use for an early item on the agenda:

Prayer – led by Pippa – and at any other point in the meeting as we feel necessary, especially before taking major decisions.

Examine recent agendas of whatever groups you belong to in your church and, seeing them as theological statements about the group in question, ask what they tell you about your church and this group. Do the agenda items display the spiritual heart of your church (even for a Finance Committee!)? Are your business meetings different from the equivalent in the local sports clubs or charities? Should they be?

9 **Decide who prepares the agenda**

This comes last because only when you can see what a good agenda really is can you decide who should prepare it. This can be

- the team leader for the group that are meeting;
- the person who will chair the meeting if different from the above (or both together);
- the official Secretary of the group;
- a leadership group or Standing Committee of some kind.

You need to be clear as to who decides what goes on and what goes to other bodies, otherwise a request you turn down from a member for a pet subject can lead to trouble.

And of course there are some informal meetings that don't need an agenda at all (such as a weekly team meeting where everyone knows the pattern and what any unusual items will be). Though even here a sketch map may prove valuable, if not an Ordnance Survey sheet.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN61. See also Article A5, *How to chair meetings*, A24, *Mission-shaped Church Councils*, A40/41, *Going deeper into meetings*, plus Training Notes TN13, *A purpose statement for those who chair*, TN45, *Are you sure it's minutes you need?*, TN58, *Beware committees*, TN97, *How to minute a meeting*, and TN118, *Why, exactly, are we meeting?*

Contact John if you would like to enquire about training in any aspect of church business meetings.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN61 under Structures (with a link to Communication).

John Truscott, 69 Sandridge Road, St Albans, AL1 4AG

Tel: 01727 832176 Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>