



Annual meetings can be different

Ideas to experiment with

A20 Articles series: Structures

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This article seeks to provide ideas for how to breathe fresh life into what is often a turgid and predictable part of a church's calendar: the annual meeting.

It does not seek to cover the legal issues involved for any one denomination. So it does not address matters such as form of meeting, eligibility for attendance, methods of voting, notice and quorum.

Instead it suggests a total of 20 new approaches, divided into three areas, any of which you might like to consider and apply to your own church. Each is presented in a formula of 'new approach rather than traditional pattern'. How each new approach might work out in practice has to be in your hands. Your church may have already adopted some of them.

The three parts cover:

- 1 The big event (seven ideas)
- 2 The printed reports (seven ideas)
- 3 The administrative business (six ideas).

1: The big event

These first seven ideas are all designed to make an event of the annual meeting, to create an impression that this really is something worth attending. The meeting needs a more positive reputation than it has in many churches. In what follows much will depend on the size, style and history of the church in question.

1: **Church gathering rather than administrative meeting**

The problems with many annual meetings start with people's expectation of them. They are known as somewhat worthy but dull occasions

that have predictable reports, formal elections and votes of thanks. They may be tightly controlled to prevent them getting out of hand. The age profile for attenders is often higher up the scale than that for the congregation as a whole.

So, give the meeting an image makeover. Make it a whole-church event that no one wants to miss (follow the other points below to help achieve this). Talk it up in promotion, get it discussed in every church group, give it a special name, send out personally addressed invitations to everyone, enthuse about what will be included – provided you ensure that it then lives up to what you promise!

Include a major item that no one would want to miss: a home-made DVD of the previous year's highlights, a creative PowerPoint summary of where the church stands today, a drama presentation of the coming year's plans. You might even include an important announcement that has been cunningly trailed without giving away what it is.

Seek to change the image of the meeting from bureaucratic backwater to spiritual mainstream!

2: **Inclusive design rather than restricted access**

The event needs to be attractive to all in your congregation. Too many annual meetings draw in those who see it as a duty to go, but do not attract other, often younger, people who see it as low priority.

If you want both parents present, there needs to be a quality programme for children and a crèche (perhaps staffed by people from another church to avoid taking helpers out of the event). Might you even include children in the meeting itself in some creative way? A weeknight is probably best avoided for families. If you want older people to come, something finishing at 10 pm. or later is probably not a good idea.

Linking it to your main Sunday service may make sense for some – but not if it makes for too long a morning with everyone late for lunch. Perhaps it could *be* the main morning service....

3: **New time/place/layout rather than predictable patterns**

The annual meeting does not have to follow one pattern year by year: in fact the more variety the better.

On day and time consider other options from normal if you are in a rut. Many have moved from a weeknight to a Sunday (as part of the main service, after it, over lunch, or an early evening event). It might be part of a special church awayday or a church weekend away.

If you normally hold it in a draughty church hall, might there be a more comfortable alternative – even if it means hiring a room in a local hotel?

Or might you at least spruce the room up and add some decorations?

The layout of the room tells you much about underlying presuppositions. If the chairs are in straight rows facing a top table, that makes a statement. How about a café-style layout (with drinks and nibbles on each table)? It does not have to be a formal business setting.

If it is to be a big church event, consider having it over a meal: a Sunday lunch perhaps. Go one stage further and make it into a special party for both adults and children (with balloons, party food, the lot). If that is further than you want to go, at least ensure that you have quality refreshments instead of tea and biscuits!

4: **Future vision rather than past history (part 1)**

One of the best ways to transform an annual meeting that has become predictable is to shift the focus away from the past and on to the future. Other points below will make the same point about, for example, the accounts. But for now consider the whole tone of the meeting.

If the impression created from the promotion (and previous meetings) is a report of the past year, that will have less draw than an event at which future plans will be unveiled. It is no bad thing to create a certain amount of anticipation for this. The meeting, for example, will be the time when the leadership announces the new plans for the future life of the church, or the new proposals for future mission.

Don't ignore a review of the past as you need that to plan ahead. But check where the emphasis lies between the two tenses.

If future is to be a key focus, the event perhaps needs to include a significant amount of time in prayer, so that the future is centred on faith in Jesus and not on human plans.

See point 10 below for part 2 of this point.

5: **Active participation rather than passive listening**

If church members feel that their attendance is simply to be passive, some of your more lively members may stay away. Is it possible to give ownership of the meeting to everyone present, rather than to have a high table group with a pre-planned agenda?

This has its dangers, of course, especially in a church where power groups use an annual meeting to fight their causes and possibly criticise the leadership. But it might help if the

meeting itself could create an overview of the year past. This might be achieved by asking for suggestions of themes coming through all the reports and putting these up on flipcharts.

Many churches will include an 'open forum' within the meeting. If the atmosphere is positive and this has been planned well, this can be a time when people feel they have an opportunity to express views and hear answers to questions. If this is on the agenda but is then carefully orchestrated to take out any criticism, many will feel disenfranchised.

Break people into groups to list lessons to learn from the past and prayers for the future. Get people talking together rather than directing all to the front. Have a rule that anyone may voice unease but only if they provide a better alternative and give encouragement first.

6: **Honest assessment rather than bland comment**

Some churches act as though everything is wonderful. Weaknesses and failures are airbrushed out. This is understandable but does not give a true picture of the past year or the state of health of the church.

So why not try a more robust and honest approach for once? This needs care or it may look as though particular people are being singled out. But it might be worth asking a range of people for what they were less than satisfied about in the church's life past or present, or getting people to share what they would like to see changed for the better. You might even get an external perspective from someone tasked with checking up on your church year by year.

This may work better with a neutral (but capable) person in the chair, rather than the Minister. It

can be awkward when Ministers feel they have to defend a position while trying to chair the meeting at the same time.

7: **Jesus central rather than human focus**

Many church business meetings are just a fraction lacking in the spiritual realm. They might as well be the AGM of any secular club or charity. Even a hymn and prayer at the start together with the Grace at the end can give the impression that you have asked Jesus if he would mind leaving while the business takes place.

How about telling a story through the whole event about God's engagement with you: past, present and future? Make it into an account of disciples moving forward, rather than the club managing to keep its membership size viable. Interview people and ask them, 'In what ways have you learned something new in your Christian life this year?'. Or, 'Which was the sermon that spoke most clearly to you?'. This needs careful planning and an assurance that you are not going to pounce on anyone who is not ready for this.

One way to review the past year (for that is still a valuable element for an annual occasion in spite of point 4 above) would be to take the church's purpose statement (or whatever you have) and work through each element, or even each word. How has this been applied throughout the whole church over this time?

If this is to be a key focus, part of the event should be a time of praise (or even repentance?) for the year just past, or prayer that lessons will be learnt. Or include a major feature of prayer in the previous Sunday's service.

But beware adding a spiritual veneer to control a meeting – this does happen.

2: **The printed reports**

Once a year many churches produce an often lengthy document to give an account of church life. This is usually the printed input for the annual meeting.

I see a number of these in the course of my work. Occasionally one stands out as being different from the rest of the pack, but too often these worthy papers lack imagination and simply follow the format used the previous year.

It can be good to get an overview of all the various organisations, especially in a large church where it is not easy to have an overall picture. But often they consist of pages of solid print and take quite an effort to read. So here are seven more ideas to consider.

8: **People-stories rather than organisational reports**

Most documents take several pages to let the leader of each organisation tell everyone about the programme they've followed. Why stick to that every year? What people love is news of other people, especially if they are doing something unusual or have a story to tell.

So you might move away from leaders' reports and try instead anecdotes from members of each organisation. Better still, ditch the list of organisations and interview people (children, adults, newcomers, old hands) who, between them and their experience of the year, sum up the story of your church. That needs rather more creative preparation than a standard letter to all organisation leaders, but it produces something full of human interest that people want to read.

Photographs, of course, are a must (with permissions). They bring the document to life.

9: **Overall picture rather than disconnected snapshots**

If you say good-bye to the list of organisations, why not structure the report into main areas of church life instead. Categories might include:

- when we are all together for worship;
- when we meet in small groups;
- children and teens;
- the big events of the year;
- the main changes this year;
- witness to our networks;
- when we have fun together;
- joiners and leavers.

This is more than just grouping organisations under these headings. It is getting different people to write an overview of each of these main areas of life. Link it with point 8 and focus each item on people-stories.

If there has been one central theme for the year (a teaching series, a 'motto', a major project), centre the whole report round that. If the Minister wants to major on one specific issue in his or her report, draw everything together round that theme. You don't have to include everything each year.

10: **Future vision rather than past history (part 2)**

This carries on from point 4 above.

Try rethinking everything in the report away from 'What we've done this past year' to 'What we are aiming to achieve in the coming year'.

If you have to stick to the list of organisations, ask each one to write their piece round how they plan to work to the church's vision statement this next year. Or get them to answer the question, 'Where will our organisation be (or what will it look like) one year from now if all our prayers are answered?' Some, of course, may say, 'Exactly as now' but that's a risk you have to take! This works well if your church leaders have a vision for the future which they want to put across in a powerful way.

This point applies in particular to a Minister's report. Instead of a bland overview and list of people to thank (though both are important), try a focus on plans for the coming year to enable the church to move closer to its vision.

At some stage there needs to be a review of what has happened since the previous year's 'future ideas'.

11: **Creative writing rather than turgid detail**

Some reports are long, but most are very long! Many include detail that may interest some, but may well add to an overall verbosity that turns most people off. This is because I suspect the document lacks an editor who has permission to fashion all the contributions into a whole.

So why not produce a document written by just a few people and clearly edited by someone gifted in that field? An editor can produce something that holds together, that centres round a theme, that cuts out all the unhelpful detail while including those gems that bring it all alive, and which sparkles in its sentence and paragraph construction. Note-form and bullet points can bring a report to life.

If your report was half its normal length next year, might that not help people to read what is actually there, especially if it had some intriguing and attention-grabbing headlines and sub-heads? Why not try it in newspaper format with headlines, stories, features and editorial?

12: **Interview format rather than standard prose**

A write-up of an interview (in question and answer format) makes for variety and is usually more interesting to read than a standard report.

If different people are writing contributions for the report, ask them to answer ten standard questions. What was the high-spot of the year for you? Which one hymn or song means much to you and why? What do you eat for breakfast on Sundays? What is your first memory of this

church and when was it? What does the vision statement mean for you personally? And so on, but do include light-hearted ones.

You may want to range widely or you may link the questions tightly into one theme. You can also include live interviews in the meeting itself for a change (see also point 7).

13: Imaginative layout rather than common typing

But it is not just good content that turns your document into that must-read item. Most reports that I see consist of straight print with some headings. If you have someone skilled in design or print layout in your congregation, here is a chance to turn it into something rather more imaginative. At least move out of the standard typing across A4 pages to two or three-column work with some boxes, special features and plenty of visuals (especially photographs of people). If it looks interesting, it is much more likely to be read.

If you don't have the skills in the congregation, might it be worth paying to go to a print designer

and then getting it copied professionally? If this is a document you want people to read, to admire and to keep referring back to, it might be worth giving it a print budget that makes sense.

14: Prayer resource rather than meeting agenda

Most reports that I see are brought to the annual meeting and that's the end of their shelf-life. What if you designed your next report to be your main prayer focus for the whole year? Perhaps it could be divided into thirty sections and then be used by everyone as a daily prayer diary. Or have a summary to tear off and keep in Bibles.

As well as this it could become a profile of your church to use in different ways during the coming year, or part of welcome literature that you give newcomers (if you feel it is suitable for this).

If it takes time to produce a quality document, it would be worth giving it a much longer shelf-life than just to be input for one meeting. That probably means that it cannot be too lengthy and will need to look really good. The content will also need to be high in interest.

3: The administrative business

But annual meetings do have administrative business to cover, such as accounts and elections. These, seen in right context, have great importance and are not to be underplayed. Here are six final ideas that apply to this aspect.

15: Headline news rather than financial complexity

Here is an idea about the presentation of the accounts, although you will find more suggestions on this website in Article A18.

If you print your accounts with copies for everyone, do you really need to give the complete set with its consolidated balance sheet, designated and restricted funds, depreciation policy and sundry debtors? Hold all that back for those who want it (and the body that has to approve the finances) and produce some headline news on one side of A4 instead. Perhaps add some back-up notes on one other side.

Don't expect your Treasurer to produce this if communication is not their skill – get them to work with a communicator. Then you will have a congregation who can grasp the basic points about what is going on, rather than a group of

people who cannot make head or tail of pages of figures, but hope and pray that the Treasurer's family holiday in Barbados last year wasn't funded from members' giving.

16: Future budget rather than past accounts

Focus financial information more on the budget than the historic accounts. This is the same as points 4 and 10 but now in financial terms.

What has been planned for the coming year and what is it going to cost? So, what are the implications for my giving – and for all of us together? That is what people need to know.

Historic accounts are of course vitally necessary, but it is budgets that tell a story of faith in God and adventure for the future. Make them the

headline and back them up with a brief outline of last year's financial story, preferably based on last year's budget to show whether things went to plan or not.

But for this to work the setting of budgets has to be seen as a matter of strategic future planning, rather than adding a certain percentage onto each figure that was in the previous year.

17: Visual presentation rather than wordy explanations

When it comes to what is traditionally thought to be dull (such as presentation of accounts or reports from committees), you have a wonderful opportunity for innovation. All that is required is a spot of imagination from a group of creative thinkers, possibly some IT expertise and design skills, and a gifted communicator.

There are cases where the Treasurer or the Committee Secretary has these gifts and experience and can manage this themselves. But this is not the norm.

Annual meetings are often wordy occasions: the printed reports, the oral explanations, etc. So something that uses bright design and possibly humour is bound to stand out. And of course when it stands out, people can both understand and remember.

So persuade your Treasurer or Secretary to hand over their precious information to those who could get it across to others with skill and innovation.

18: Decisions taken rather than matters discussed

If you include news from your church's Council (or equivalent) and other decision-making bodies whether just in the meeting or in a report, avoid the risk of saying (as so many do): 'This year we held six meetings and discussed A, B and C'. There is little story-line in that.

Talk instead of what decisions, and therefore changes, have been made. If there is little to say on that count, disband the decision-making body forthwith! Move on to the decisions that you expect to have to take in the coming year. Paint a picture of how the church is different today from one year ago because of key decisions taken. Then encourage interest and prayer for what is going to be the big-picture agenda for the year to come.

Such stories, of course, should focus on people and together paint an overall picture.

19: Planned elections rather than instant voting

If the meeting includes voting for new members of the Church Council or other office-holders, this is an exercise to carry out with care. Some churches just thrust a voting paper out to everyone and ask them to add the necessary number of crosses. This makes the whole process something of a lottery.

A more careful approach would ensure nominations were strongly encouraged well before the meeting. Then, at the meeting itself, introduce each candidate. This might be done by some kind of printed listing with photographs and a brief introduction of each person. This could be backed up by asking each candidate to give a short statement about themselves or even asking someone to interview each one. In a large church where people may not know everyone (or even in a small church where relative newcomers or younger members are standing) this is especially important.

People need to have the voting process explained very carefully so that everyone can understand what they have to do.

Some churches leave time for quiet prayer and reflection before voting actually takes place.

There then needs to be proper systems in place for counting the votes, verifying them and announcing the result. Special care needs to be taken if voting for one more person than there are places on a Council.

20: Defined profiles rather than vague assumptions

Do people voting know both what they are voting people to do and what kind of people are required for this task? Few churches are bold enough to provide this information.

If the role of your church's Council or other body being voted for is not crystal clear not just to its members but to your electorate, how can they vote with integrity? It is rarely clear what the job of an elected body is unless specific advice is given in an appropriate way. Yet a Church Council that has no defined role has no yardstick against which to assess whether it is being effective or not. Its agendas will attract business that has no right to be there (and push out more strategic items).

But even more important is the need to define what kind of people are required to serve on this body. 1 Timothy chapter 3 gives detailed instructions for the person profiles of those Timothy was to appoint (elders and deacons in

that case). Most churches steer clear of making any such demands on its church officers and decision-makers, which may go a long way to explaining why many are spiritually ineffective

The first step to getting this right is to inform the church of role and person profile and so help people elect the right people (if that is the method in use).

So there are 20 ideas to consider. Many of them will not be right for your church but perhaps even these will give you other and more appropriate ideas. The annual meeting should be a major landmark in the church calendar. If yours has got tired and lost any zest it might have once had, perhaps now is the time for a rethink.

This article is available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles-index> then A20. See also Article A5, *How to chair meetings*, A18, *Administering church funds*, A24, *Mission-shaped Church Councils*, and Training Notes TN13, *A purpose statement for those who chair*, TN71, *Seatings for meetings*, TN97, *How to minute a meeting*, and TN118, *Why, exactly, are we meeting?*

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of consultancy or a training event on church business meetings of any kind.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A20 under Structures (with a link to Planning).

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