How to Get More Out of Committee Meetings in Your Church
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Can you relate to the following scenario? Two friends meet one evening in the church parking lot and one says, “I have just come out of a mind-numbing budget committee meeting at the church. I can only stare at lines of numbers on spreadsheets for so long before my eyes glaze over.”

Most of us can remember committee meetings in our churches that, if not exactly “mind numbing,” have left us tired and frustrated, with the feeling that all the talk and discussion and debate had not accomplished as much as we would have hoped. Perhaps we find it difficult to rest well that night, our minds still running with the unresolved issues and tensions of the meeting. Many of us spend a lot of time in our church or other Christian organization going to meetings. Does Scripture give us any hints as to how committee meetings in the church can be more satisfying and productive? The good news is that the answer is a definite “Yes!” Let’s consider briefly a number of key passages that can take our meetings to a whole new level of satisfaction and fruitfulness.

Before looking at the first passage – Exodus 4:2 – we can stop to observe that typically, church committee meetings follow a pattern like this: 1) open with a sincere (but somewhat token) prayer for God’s guidance; 2) individuals on the committee share their ideas and have discussion and debate; 3) a plan of action is adopted; 4) the meeting is closed in prayer, asking God to bless the plans that we have made. As we shall see, a more biblical pattern would look something like this: 1) united prayer, seeking a common mind; 2) corporately listening for the voice and plan of God in the midst of the discussion; 3) being energized by the Spirit of God to execute God’s ideas (cf. Acts 13:1,2, the church at Antioch, energized and united for mission).

Principle One: Relinquishing Our Agendas to God: “What Is That In Your Hand?”

In the call of Moses God meets Moses at the burning bush, and later in the conversation asks Moses the question, “What is that in your hand?” (Ex.4:2). Moses answers, “a staff.” God tells Moses to throw the staff on the ground, and it becomes a serpent. God commands Moses to pick it up again, and it becomes a staff – which later God uses, in the hands of Moses, to part the Red Sea waters. The “staff” can be a symbol for those things that we bring to the meeting: our ideas, our agendas, our knowledge, expertise, training, and hopes for the church. God asks us to throw our staffs on the ground – to relinquish and surrender our ideas and agendas to him, so that he can return them in a form that has been transformed and energized by God’s own power. This conscious and intentional act of each committee member being willing to relinquish control and surrender his or her “staff” to God is the first step for having God’s empowerment for the committee’s work.
Principle Two: Seeking a Common Mind: the Principle of Spiritual Alignment

Another beautiful picture of extraordinarily fruitful “committee work” in the church is found in Acts 1:14: “They all joined together constantly in prayer” (Acts 1:14). Jesus had commanded the disciples to wait in Jerusalem until the Father sent the gift of the Holy Spirit to energize them for mission (Acts 1:4, 8). In 1:14 Luke uses the relatively infrequent word in New Testament Greek, *homothumadon*, which means “of one mind” or “of one purpose.” Luke also uses the same word to describe the unity of the early Jerusalem church in worship and fellowship (Acts 2:46) and in the praise of God (Acts 4:24). This significant word *homothumadon* signifies that the disciples in Acts 1 were “on the same page” – not only being in the same place physically and geographically (in the upper room), but in the “same place” mentally and consciously, with shared understanding and purpose. This could be called the principle of spiritual alignment: when the disciples were united, with their minds aligned with the purpose and plan of God, the Spirit powerfully energized their mission (Acts 2), and the church expanded in effective mission (Acts 3 - 28). The key here is to see the critical order of the process: 1) achieving unity of mind; 2) being empowered by the Spirit; 3) engaging in fruitful mission. All too often, “conventional” work in the church tries to accomplish step #3 without first achieving steps #1 and #2. The powerful transition from Acts 1 (“common mind”; “alignment”) to Acts 2 (empowerment by the Spirit) is reflective of the fact that the “Acts 1” unity is an answer to Jesus’ Jn.17 prayer for Christian unity – and of the fact that Jesus blesses richly those who obediently align themselves as answers to his prayer!

This crucial principle of *alignment* can be illustrated as follows: an ordinary bar of iron has countless iron molecules each of which is a tiny magnet (“dipole”), but the bar of iron as a whole has no magnetic force, because the individual iron molecules are oriented in random directions, and the little individual molecular magnets cancel one another out. If you take a powerful magnet and stroke the iron bar repeatedly, the molecules in the bar become aligned, the little magnets are working in the same direction, and an ordinary bar itself has become a powerful magnet that can do some “heavy lifting.”

Or consider the advice that the coach of the legendary hockey team – TeamUSA – that upset the Russians in the 1980 Winter Olympics – gave to his players: “Forget the name on the back of your jersey – your name – the only name that matters is the name on the front of the jersey: TeamUSA.” The being-of-one-mind alignment of TeamUSA lifted a talented collection of individual hockey players to an extraordinary level of team effectiveness.

Principle Three: Lectio Divina Committee Listening: Listening as Body of Christ

A third principle of effective committee meetings in the church could be called “lectio divina committee listening.” Most of us are familiar with the lectio divina method of scriptural prayer and meditation: a quiet, unhurried, contemplative and meditative listening to a passage of Scripture read perhaps several times, with a view to hearing the voice of God speaking to us through the biblical word. The same posture and attitude can inform how we listen to one another during the meeting. All too often, in the typical meeting, after the opening prayer we revert to our individualistic mode of relating, not really acting as though we really believed that we were connected as Body of Christ; not listening to one another intently and empathically, but being preoccupied with preparing our own statements so that we can voice our own ideas when we “get the microphone.” In the lectio divina model of committee listening, the committee members bring an awareness that as they meet, they are
an expression of the Body of Christ, not autonomous individuals. They patiently try to hear what God might be wanting to say through the other members of the body.

This lectio divina style of committee listening can in itself be a small answer to Jesus’ High Priestly prayer for Christian unity (Jn.17:21) that the disciples would be one as he was one with the Father. Christian unity is not just about the “macro” issues of interdenominational relations – but can start at the “micro” level of a church committee meeting.

This type of listening was modeled by Jesus himself: “I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me … what I have heard from him I tell to the world” (Jn.8:28;26). These principles of having a “common mind” and “listening” are so powerful because they reflect the very inner life of the Triune God, manifested in the life and ministry of Jesus, and in Jesus’ relation to the Father: Jesus first listens to the Father; then aligns his mind with the Father’s mind; relinquishes his will to the Father’s will; and is then empowered by the Spirit for effective and fruitful ministry (cf. Lk.3:21, at the baptism: “as he was praying”; 4:1-13: listening to God/testing in the desert; 4:14: “Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit”).

In the plan of salvation, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit always work as a team – not as independent individuals. A church committee that patterns its methods of work on the model of the Trinity and on Jesus’ relationship to the Father will discover that God will bless the work in extraordinary ways.

A Concluding Summary: Some Suggestion on “How To”:

To conclude, how could these principles be applied in practice? Here are some suggestions: First, the leader of the meeting could recount the story of Moses (“What is that in your hand?”), and invite the members to “throw their staffs on the ground” at the outset of the meeting. Second, the committee spends some time in quiet prayer, asking for Christ to bring about a common mind, and asking the Holy Spirit to be present, and to help in attentive listening for hearing and discerning the Father’s ideas as the members speak with one another. Third, the committee then engages in its discussions and agenda items, but with a consciousness that “We are ‘Body of Christ’ as we meet as a committee – not separate and autonomous individuals.”

Fourth, and finally, before the close of the meeting, the committee again spends some time in quiet, silent reflection, asking God to “push forward” the ideas and action items that he wants to go forward. At the close of the time of silent reflection, the leader attempts to articulate any consensus that seems to have emerged, or items about which consensus has not been achieved.

It’s not rocket science; it is really quite simple. Try it in your next church committee meeting, and see if God turns what could be just another meeting into a surprisingly fruitful event in the life of the parish. Believe me – it really worked for Jesus – and it can work for us as well!

For Further Reading:

Roy Oswald & Robert E. Friedrich, Jr. Discerning Your Congregation’s Future (Alban Institute, 1996), pp.5; 145-146; “Centering Prayer”.
Charles M. Olsen, Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders (Alban Institute, 1995).