

CHURCH MEETINGS THAT WORK

Some thoughts presented by David Brown
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What do you want to achieve at your Church Meetings? Get them over as soon as possible....have everyone agree with the leadership....keep a few people quiet....not have it end in a riot....or hold a meeting where the local church can meet to discuss the life and ministry of the church in a way that seeks to discern the mind of Christ?

Of course, it's hard not to agree with the last point, but to some it sounds too religious, out of touch with reality. As NSW and ACT Baptists I believe it is time we held a high view of the Church Meeting and hold it in a way which allows for spiritual discernment and gives a clearer expression to our theology which affirms Jesus as the head of the Church and our fellow Christians as brothers and sisters in Christ.

While a number of aspects contribute to the Church Meeting fulfilling what as Baptists we say the meeting is for, the one I want to focus on here is the meeting format. For many years now Baptists (and other groups) have followed Robert's Rules of Debate with motions and seconds and all that goes with this method. The problem is these were drawn up in 1863 by a General Henry Robert who was frustrated with how Church groups made decisions and drew up a set of rules based on the American Congress. "They are designed" says Morris and Olsen (*Discerning God's Will Together*, Alban Inst, 1997) "as rules of combat useful in any arbitration."

What does "rules of combat" have to do with brothers and sisters in Christ meeting together to discern the mind of Christ? There has to be a better way.

A BETTER WAY

1. Preparation:

Things that help a meeting go well include:

- Promoted well in advance
- Agenda known in advance (or at least the main matters.)
- The more information that can be distributed beforehand the better.
- Meeting held in comfort – preferably not church pews where people sit in rows.
- Tea and coffee available as people arrive is always a good idea – preferably good quality tea and coffee!
- The chairperson needs to be someone who is comfortable with the role, has a grasp of the agenda and is trusted by the people.
- Specific prayer points shared before the meeting.

2. The meeting itself:

- a) This meeting is more than a "Business Meeting". In gathering together to discuss the life and ministry of Christ's Church this must be done in the context of worship and fellowship. As the meeting begins and through the meeting take time to reflect theologically, pray for each other and intentionally acknowledge Jesus as having

control. An observation is that a short prayer and a Bible reading at the beginning can be a formal way of beginning before the “real” business takes place.

- b) Having a record of people present and apologies is helpful to be aware of those present and those who would like to be there but can't make it. A simple way of doing this is to pass a notepad around the group so people can record their attendance and list any apologies. This list need not be passed or agreed to but can go in the minute book.
- c) There is no need to read the minutes of the last meeting – distribute these prior to the meeting with the agenda. Some churches simply distribute a summary of the last meeting and the chair asks if people are happy for the minutes to be signed as true and correct. Anyone can ask for a matter to be read if needs be.
- d) The Church leadership needs to be sensitive as to how a matter needs to be processed at the Meeting. At times it is appropriate for the leadership to have worked on a topic, discussed it thoroughly and brought a recommendation to the meeting. However, where the issue affects a cross section of the church, or where it is known there are differences of opinion it is best for the leadership to engage the wider church in the process. It is not healthy leadership to exclude people from something which they should be involved in.

If we take the matter facing many of our churches at present, that of Baptism and Church Membership, it would not be helpful for the leadership to bring a recommendation to a Church Meeting without having informed and involved the whole church in a process of discernment. (A suggested process for looking at this can be found in Appendix 2 – Church Conferences of the *Baptist and Church Membership* documents on the Baptist Union website.

(web-reference <http://baptistnsw.asn.au/ministry/pastor>)

- e) In arranging the agenda for the meeting it is suggested you:
 - Look at more important matters early. There is no need to look at business arising from the last meeting if there is something more important to discuss. Agendas will vary from one meeting to the next.
 - Have a set time for the meeting eg 7.30 – 10.00pm. If the meeting has not finished then hold things over to next time, people are too tired to go any later.
 - Where there are a variety of views, use mapping exercises (see below) or small groups.
 - In a small church, where the matter is important, give everyone a chance of having a say before going to a vote.
 - Stop often for prayer and fellowship. A coffee break is always good.
- f) Use a variety of methods when making decisions. It is still appropriate to ask those in favour to say “yes” or “ai” and those against to say “no”. But please give people a chance to say no! However, other methods can be more helpful:

- Mapping Exercises. This is a way of letting everyone have his/her say without saying anything. This empowers those who find it difficult to speak at Church Meetings, which is usually the majority.

In mapping you could use a continuum of 1 to 10 and have people stand on the appropriate number eg level of trust in the leadership; how we are going in outreach; how well are our Church services going.

In mapping where there are a number of options you can ask people to stand on the options eg concerning vision in our church – there is no vision, there is a vision but I don't know it, I know the vision but not strategies, I know the vision and am committed to it.

In mapping, decades can be placed on the floor and people stand on the appropriate decade eg when I joined this church; when something significant happened; when Jesus became real.

- Small Groups can be used as part of the meeting to let people discuss a matter in an open and honest way and have their views shared with the whole.
- “High Five” can be used when you are discussing something and want to know whether people are agreeing or not, whether it is time to move on. The chair can ask for a “high five” and people raise the appropriate numbers of fingers –
 - 5:** I agree let's move on
 - 4:** I have a question to ask
 - 3:** We need to discuss this further
 - 2:** I tend to think no
 - 1:** I will vote no

A closed fist: Over my dead body!

- Not everything needs to be done at a Church Meeting. When an important matter is before the church, then a Church Conference or Congregational Gathering can be held where information can be shared, issues discussed, butchers paper written on, mapping exercises take place and nothing is decided.

Where Churches are using these and other alternate methods of decision making, people are becoming more involved and meetings are not bogged down in procedures. These are best done where there is a high level of trust between the church and leadership and a key to trust is honesty and openness.

The changes to a Robert's Rules of Debate type meeting as suggested in this paper do not mean we throw everything out. Minutes will need to be kept of the meeting, but these will record topics discussed and the result of those discussions – sometimes by way of a vote, at other times saying “it was agreed that...”. It is also appropriate to have a quorum for a meeting, though the percentage of the church community will be lower the larger the church becomes. The Treasurer will report on finances, pastors will give reports and the like. The aim of the changes is to give a clearer expression as to who is meeting (the Church) and what we are about.

It is my hope and prayer that these thoughts will free your Church Meeting to become a place where God speaks to His body and He leads you into vital and nurturing worship; loving fellowship; teaching where the Bible is not only understood, but applied and where your community and the world is more intentionally impacted with the good news of Jesus. You see, these are the outcomes of healthy Church Meetings!