

# Church meetings

There are so many questions surrounding church meetings: perspectives, experiences and passions; that it is not really possible to steer a satisfying passage through this subject's density without becoming either very pragmatic or very ideological. Ultimately where each church ends up is a mix: of influences, roughly acceptably proven practices and a lean towards calm, if boring waters rather than boats rocking on a sea of conflict and excitement.

Some of the key questions are:

- How do we enable every member to participate in discerning the mind of Christ?
- Is everything pneumatic in a particular space and at a particular time, or does the Spirit also work through gifting, knowledge, experience and maturity?
- What are the forums in which we discern the word of Christ among us?
- How does the small voice of the usually-excluded get heard and weighed?
- How does the small voice of the expert get heard and weighed?
- Is leadership anathema to Baptist church life?
- How can we tell whether a public meeting mechanism or tradition is culturally limited?
- Why are church meetings often boring or off-puttingly adversarial?
- What do fewer younger people (under 50s!) attend church meetings?
- Why do so few church members attend church meetings – and how is it that these attendees may not be representative of where the church is moving and growing?

A joy of church members gathering together is the broad inclusion of those who within the church or in other circumstances are neglected or overlooked for whatever reason. For everyone to be able to hear, discern and speak out the word of Christ is a mark of the Spirit-filled church. As is everyone being able to participate in serving, using their gifts, worshipping and witnessing.

Gathering some people in a room does not always lead to these outcomes. Mechanisms of public meetings such as chairperson, rules and ballots can enable participation but can as often silence people or put them off. Such procedures lend themselves to being used well by those accustomed to public speaking or working in meetings. A good orator can easily persuade those in attendance to a point of view. Unspoken boldness and courage can seep away during a meeting. Other life concerns, tiredness and a general disconnection from the Holy Spirit can mean that participants are really just attenders. A clash of views between those who do have the courage or belligerence to speak up can cause fear, frustration and further estrangements.

Disagreements, articulated viewpoints and procedures to gather and weigh information will hopefully be in evidence in every church but the way they are handled and the culture and context in which they are expressed is surely open to review. And to review these typical church meeting practices there needs to be a review of the thinking and intention that has led to them.

## Gifts and the body of Christ

Democracy allows people's opinions to be properly recognised. This is not a bad thing – it is one of the good things about a society like ours, but it is not what is meant by congregational governance. The church meeting can end up being the place where opinions are sought and shared – which is a great use of time – but making decisions on these opinions, particularly in the same meeting, is not necessarily a good way to guide a church. There is a difference between an opinion, valid as it is, and a discerning of the Holy Spirit's activity and purpose. Such a discerning is a product of the believer

developing an intimacy with Christ through prayer, the Word, obedient faith, and receiving and exercising the gifts of the Holy Spirit, along with brothers and sisters in Christ.

Although the gifts of the Spirit are given sovereignly, so too are they exercised, developed and recognised in their expression over time by other believers. Therefore, discernment comes not through counting individual contributions but also giving weight to those who exercise a prophetic ministry or have developed a gift of wisdom. Ballots do not allow for this kind of distribution of gifts. (Unless a Top Trumps style system were created, which could be fun...)

There are also natural gifts and a wealth of expertise, experience and knowledge that are found in a church membership. Ironically this is often ignored because it may appear too worldly. Such an ignoring may result in decisions being made by well-meaning and even prayerful people that are unreasonable. And reason should not be rejected because it is somehow opposed to the will of Christ. Sometimes such expertise is ignored because the lean towards everyone having an equal ability to influence through the church meeting also plays into the British love of the amateur and dislike of the professional. In church life we all like to consider ourselves a bit expert in lots of things from the meaning of Romans 8, to how to tarmac the car-park, to what church ministry in which to invest the year's surplus. Increasingly professionalised ministry of course can squeeze out every member ministry but identifying and releasing gifting across the church means that people play to their strengths - without stopping the opportunity to invite God to play into their weaknesses.

The gift that is most side-lined is that of leadership. There is a fear of leadership and a belief that leading and serving are at odds with one another. Ego and the seduction of power mean that this is a reality. Leaders may replicate the nature of the powerful priest, a dynamic that European church movements of the mid last millennium were repudiating. But if the nature of eldership in the bible is actually best described as shepherding, then imitating the example of the Good Shepherd is a good thing. To go ahead and lead to green pastures and still waters is what a leader can do as they see over and oversee. Jesus is the Great Shepherd but the verb 'to shepherd' is used so often of those who are called to lead in the New Testament that the danger of bad shepherding should not be avoided by not having any shepherding, but rather by having those who shepherd doing so with kindness and courage.

Whether leaders are appointed and recognised or not, there are always those who influence. This can be done politically in all kinds of ways in any church but the church meeting is a forum that can easily be hijacked by people who appear more confident, intellectually brighter or who hold power through fear. The nature of the meeting does not prevent such people from leading but may actually encourage it. Leadership is influence. It is ironic that some of those who oppose the idea of leadership in church are actually exercising strong leadership in their erudite, well argued and often theologically professionalised way.

Because church as the body of Christ is a community, it is no surprise that humble, Spirit-led leadership also stems from relationship and community. At every level or facet of church life there should be groups of believers who are submitting to Jesus together and alongside one another. The gift of leadership is not a magical or specialised identity, but a way of thinking and acting that is forged in company with others. A church that honours relationships must have leaders who are themselves in honouring relationship together. The practice of leading is a product of the sharing of wisdom and personal spiritual journeys. There is built in accountability and an openness to correction. A New Testament emphasis on plurality of elders, on couples and partnerships and teams reveals that relationships centred round Jesus are where the heaven and earth connections are made. Leadership brings coherence and direction but does not have to do that at the expense of community living.

The worry about a top down, autocratic leadership is understandable. The prophetic gifting given to all believers and the variety of gifts across the body need to be given room for expression and action. In New Zealand Baptist churches have found a way to harness and honour those who are able to lead and at the same time de-centralise the power to engage in ministry. Such a ministry-led model means that it is the members who are responding to the call of God and directing and doing the work. The leadership in these churches is given the task of encouragement and oversight, rather than bottlenecking all decision-making or cherry-picking the seemingly most rewarding activities. The members are encouraged to hear from the Spirit and respond in the power of the Spirit. This is not facilitated by a type of democratic system, or by those in attendance in a certain place at a certain time, but through the leading of the Spirit in relationships, communications and across structures in the church.

## **Meeting, gathering, listening and deciding**

Hearing and discerning the mind of Christ is something every believer can do, having the Spirit of God dwelling within them. But the process of this does not necessarily happen magically in a certain place and at a certain time somehow hermetically sealed from the rest of life. At the same time, there is a desire for holiness and trust that would seem to need covenant and exclusivity if views are to be shared and decisions made.

The great thing about being able to discuss smaller, more business-oriented details is that everyone feels they can have an opinion and even a sense of God's will because these are familiar areas that are already dealt with in home and personal life. Unfortunately then meetings become clogged with business and detail that is actually unsatisfying and boring. What felt like an attractive draw ends up putting people off from attending. Those who do attend don't necessarily represent the whole church or the activity of God in the body. They are often a subset of the church who are those most concerned about the difficulties that arise from change. Their more natural conservatism leads to courageous decisions being harder to make or being easier to unmake over time. It is always wonderful when such a group of people take a course of action that is humanly untypical in obedient response to hearing from the Spirit. But having a forum that, for various reasons, makes such a prospect harder is not necessarily a sign of God-fearing humility.

The typical democratic systems that have evolved (usefully and understandably) are not that helpful as the church grows in size. This does not mean that churches cannot be congregational if they are large but that the present systems that enable such congregational participation tend to exclude individuals in a bigger church. Therefore seeking the mind of Christ as the church grows in complexity requires creative thought and practice.

The low level, more accessible issues that are discussed and weighed are added to with issues of belief and values, with new pressures of legal governance obligations, with the direction of outreach and social action, local church partnerships and tricky moral and ethical situations in personal lives. There are only so many meetings that people can attend. Some people will have to re-craft agendas. Visionary elements are very easily subsumed by pressing urgencies.

It is interesting how early Baptist Church members meetings concerned themselves with issues of discipleship rather than decisions about buildings, money and programmes or church calendars. It is ever so important for churches to re-discover what these early Baptist congregations practised in terms of spiritual accountability. Such openness certainly requires a strong and trustworthy covenant between members. It is in such a culture of faithfulness and honesty that we really can confess sins, receive helpful discipline and openly face temptations and pressures. Such mutual

discipling is possible in small groups, mid-size groups, fresh expressions. And where two or three are gathered so too is the voice of Jesus heard.

The importance of close covenantal relationships cannot be underestimated if we are to truly make disciples. A by-product of this will be the discerning the will of Christ in such forums and groups. Similarly, as certain members may be given responsibility to think through legal details, or administrative issues so, too will they hear from the Spirit as they pray and work together. As other members, as in New Zealand, pursue new ministries and gather to pray and worship, they too will hear the Holy Spirit speak.

In this way, it is probable (especially as a church grows in size and complexity) that there will be lots of spirit filled meetings. The challenge then is to bring coherence and mutuality across the whole body. A church meeting then becomes the place where we all can hear what is already being heard. It does not have to be the place of lots of minuted decisions but rather a gathering where that which is being decided by members across the church is shared and a wider strategy of the Spirit uncovered and acknowledged.

The discerning of the mind of Christ in the church happens in all kinds of meetings and gatherings. Contributions made on Sundays and at prayer meetings, at worship times and by letter or email can be recorded and shared. The leading of the Spirit - across church life in its many forms - is hopefully listened to, shared and followed. The advantage of one meeting where all the members are in attendance is that what is heard is 'heard' (although even at such times people interpret very differently). The challenge in a more dynamic system is around communication and trust.

Communication is always important but within a covenantal relationship is vital for every partner to have equal access to information. Redundant communication is essential: where what is being considered and thought through – by any kind of group – is communicated as it is being shaped; and where there is invitation for contribution and feedback made available. This should not mean slowing down processes once again in that classic Baptist way. Those choosing to be involved should be given the freedom to pray, plan and shape ministry and not be deliberately held back by scrutiny committees. The appearance of secrecy is usually a by-product of busyness not intentional deceit but even a few headlines being communicated regularly means that members are informed and invited to join in.

Trust in these processes is also important. It is easier to trust those who are transparent and communicative. Diligent shepherding overseers have a role to play here, but this is dependent on trust and authority being given them by the members so that they can fulfil their leading, feeding, protecting and watching role. Their attitude has to be one of service where their motivation is to give time and energy to the whole church in order that they can help with conflict and bring discernment. (Remembering of course that these qualities are not exclusive to leaders but to be practiced by all)

It is a lovely thing to have people who are looking out for your best interests and are committed to seeing you develop, flourish and prosper in faith and life. Such leaders enable all that is being heard and expressed as the Lord's guiding to then be communicated and weighed so that it can be put into practice by the whole church. They will have to rely on the Lord's wisdom in order to set some priorities and choose a direction. Such people are not the ones with all the prophetic words, or the gifts of evangelism or administration or finance or mercy. As servants they can see where the Spirit is giving these gifts, make room for them in an excitable, jostling, energetic body and then go ahead and call that body to action.

## Values

Over time, a church community will create a shared story. Certain values are revealed as being important. These then form a culture with shared vocabulary. It could be said, then, that most decisions are implicitly made, not by leaders or at meetings, but through the shared values that are already held by the community. There will be more and more issues that do not need debating or someone deciding in behalf of others, because the history and agreed approach makes direction and choice straightforward.

Articulating values and reinforcing them in traditions, language, the arts and in teaching helps a church community know who they are, what they have been called to and why they do things a certain way. It is not the practices that are sacrosanct, but the underlying reason for those practices.

Values bind people together. Shared ethos means that people do not need to check every detail of what they are doing with one another for approval. Being driven by values rather than democratic or autocratic fear is at once releasing and binding. Dee Hock, founder of VISA, wrote in his book 'Birth of the Chaordic Age, "Purpose and principles clearly understood and articulated and commonly shared, are the genetic code of any healthy organisation. To the degree that you hold purpose and principles in common among you, you can dispense with command and control, people will know how to behave in accordance with them, and they'll do it in thousands of unimaginable and creative ways. The organization will become a vital, living set of beliefs." Although this comment is not about the unique and beautiful church of Jesus, it certainly resonates with our experience that knowing Jesus and sharing his Spirit brings unity and energy for mission across cultures and spaces.

## In practice

In our own experience, attendance at our church gatherings (as we now call our meetings for members and attended by those who are committed) has risen hugely as we have emphasised worship, prayer, vision, and ministry of the word and prayer.

- Various members share their vision for different ministries of the church. Room is given for words of prophecy. Members are prayed for.
- These are times when we might invite someone with a particular prophetic or teaching ministry to come and equip the body of Christ.
- There is opportunity for personal response, prayer ministry without having to explain everything to guests and those unused to church, or finish early for the sake of children's workers.
- Prayerful discussions may be held in groups and then recorded and fed back.

There are other gatherings where members pray together and trust that the Spirit will lead them in forming a direction for ministry and mission. There are now plenty more communications – email bulletins, magazine documents, reports where what is being thought about, considered, done, finished is communicated.

The shared history of the church has formulated values that are firmly held and serve as a natural guide as to what direction to go in and what good choices might be.

There are so many gatherings where two or three are together seeking the will of God which although they appear small and informal are often life changing. For instance a whole year's theme that led to the planting of a church, as well as other new initiatives, came from the prayerful contributions of members over a number of months in a series of church contexts. The elders saw that a pattern was emerging, with certain scriptures being emphasised regularly and repeatedly. This formed the basis of a year's worth of Sunday teaching, prayer meetings, artistic expression and

content for a member's midweek church gatherings. Poetry from Isaiah 54 has now entered the shared vocabulary of the church. These scriptures and words of wisdom combined with our shared values and inevitably led to mini explosions of life and purpose. Members of the church were the priests and prophets in this season. The elders' role was simply to harness and articulate to the whole church what was being spoken by the Spirit across the membership and then shepherd effectively in order that the promises of the Lord would be appropriated and lived in. The Church Gatherings (our Church meetings) were exciting in this time as we journeyed together and recognised that the Lord was raising up individuals in our midst to serve and lead.

Honesty, confession and accountability are still very important but not always appropriate where there is a big crowd of people. We have sought to help people face life controlling issues privately but also enable them to be part of a smaller group where they can be open and honest and experience loving discipline with brothers and sisters. This is incredibly powerful and may at times lead to an individual wanting to share more widely.

Our midweek church gatherings are now the best times we have as a church, accompanied as they are by cake and coffee. We certainly don't get everyone attending and we are still having to work hard at communication, involvement and (the right kind of) ownership. Our desire is that the church should be influenced by the values from the bible that we are holding to, open to the surprising voice of the Holy Spirit from a variety of sources and served and led by people who are enjoying using their gifts for the sake of the church and its mission.

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