

# Guest editorial: Want a healthier congregation? Start with better meetings

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Nearly every congregation has a hushed story about one. That “awful meeting” in which participants said terrible things, relationships shattered, and permanent scars resulted. In their 1999 study, [“Breakaway Organizations,”](#) Bruno Dyck and Frederick Stark discovered a “polarizing event”—usually a painful church meeting—almost always precipitated a congregational schism and the departure of members.

Any dispute regarding the “big three” issues in our social life together—money, sex and power—seems to spark anxiety, so both annual budget meetings and discussions about human sexuality can generate a fear-based response. In the face of this fear, congregational leaders often resort to either heavy-handed control (“We must follow strict parliamentary procedure.”) or to a variety of avoidance mechanisms (“That’s not something we talk about in this congregation.”). Such responses, however, only fuel anxiety in the system and make polarization more likely.

Fortunately, when it comes to holding better meetings, there is a middle path between the rock of ham-fisted control and the mushy place of avoidance. Whether the meeting involves a small team or the entire congregation, there are three necessary ingredients for healthy meetings. All that generally is required for better meetings is a commitment to incorporate these three simple ingredients in the meeting culture of the congregation. While they may seem obvious, we dare not take them for granted.

## **1. Prepare an agenda**

Meeting agendas serve a twofold purpose. First, they guide discussion through a discrete set of issues rather than encourage a rambling free-for-all. Second, they provide a sense of structure and flow to participants, who come into a meeting knowing the topics that will be discussed and thus are less likely to leave feeling blindsided.

Meeting agendas are most useful when the chair or facilitator sends them to participants ahead of the meeting and asks for feedback. This provides a sense of ownership to the participants, particularly if invited to “contribute items to the agenda” ahead of time. Participants are much more likely to respect a process they have helped shape, and sharing a preliminary agenda with all participants prior to a meeting encourages such respect.

If it is not possible to share a draft agenda prior to a meeting, the meeting organizer(s) should take 10 to 15 minutes at the start of the meeting to develop an agenda with the participants. This will save far more time in the course of the meeting than it will require at the front end.

## **2. Develop ground rules**

Even though most committee and congregational chairs know the importance of developing a meeting agenda, relatively few also take the time to develop ground rules with the group. Such ground rules often are assumed, reflected by comments such as, “Everyone here knows how to communicate.”

Shared ground rules, however, ensure everyone does indeed understand the norms expected during the meeting. For an ongoing group, such ground rules may take the form of a “behavioral covenant” the group develops and then revisits at subsequent meetings. Gilbert Rendle’s book [\*Behavioral Covenants in Congregations\*](#) is an excellent resource on this topic.

Whether called “ground rules,” “guidelines for discussion” or a “behavioral covenant,” such shared communication norms are best kept short and clear. Three that typically emerge in an ongoing group are (a) listen with respect, (b) “speak with respect” and (c) agree regarding information-sharing after the meeting, with appropriate specifics. Once a list is developed, it is important to test consensus on the ground rules to ensure all members commit to follow them.

### **3. Provide skilled facilitation**

Neither a prepared agenda nor shared ground rules are sufficient for a healthy meeting. The third and often most important ingredient for a healthy meeting is skilled facilitation. A trained facilitator guides the group through the agenda and ensures ground rules are followed. The mere existence of an agenda means little if it is not followed, and ground rules are useless if they are not respected.

Some committee and congregational leaders have developed facilitation skills through their professional work and training. Many, however, have not. Thus, congregations are well advised either to recruit leaders with facilitation experience and/or provide facilitation training to existing leaders. A variety of free resources is available on-line, such as the [Community Toolbox](#) from the University of Kansas, and facilitation training is available in nearly every medium-sized or larger community through local mediation centers and other nonprofit organizations.

The most important first step is to recognize healthy meetings are the lifeblood of a healthy congregation, and then commit to a culture of prepared agendas, shared ground rules and skilled facilitation.

Will these three simple ingredients guarantee all congregational meetings will be conflict-free? Hardly, but they dramatically improve the likelihood participants will look forward to—rather than dread—committee and

congregational meetings. Equally important, the healthy process these steps produce tends to lead to much higher-quality outcomes for the group or congregation. Whether those outcomes involve a strengthened community ministry or stronger relational bonds within the congregation, they will be noticed and appreciated by congregational and community members.

An “awful meeting” can leave lasting scars for the victims of the bad process. A series of healthy meetings, by contrast, produces greater commitment to the group or congregation and better outcomes for all concerned. While we never may achieve a perfect process in our meetings, most congregations certainly can do better. It starts with a commitment to do so.

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