Meetings That Work

Make Them Meaningful and Productive

New Congregation and Growth Resources
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> I do not go to a meeting merely to give my own ideas. If that were all, I might write my fellow members a letter. But neither do I go simply to learn other people's ideas. If that were all, I might ask each to write me a letter. I go to a meeting in order that all together we may create a group idea, an idea which will be better than all of our ideas added together. For this group idea will not be produced by any process of addition, but by the interpenetration of us all.
>
> —Mary Parker Follett

Meetings are a central activity in the life of any congregation, and in large measure the successes and failures of a congregation hinge upon the effectiveness of these meetings. As religious liberals, we meet because we are committed to the democratic process and want to draw out the diverse insights, experiences, and values from members and friends in our midst.

At their best, meetings provide opportunities to share ideas, discover new insights, connect with people, nurture community, reflect on one's faith, create new directions, and make innovative and responsible decisions. Meetings that matter enable participants to feel that their unique contributions will combine with the contributions of others to yield experiences, ideas, and decisions that are greater than the sum of their parts.

Even in the most healthy and vibrant congregations, there are times when meetings don't quite accomplish what was expected or hoped. In other, more challenged congregations, there may be an expectation among members that any meeting will be a bad one. Perhaps you have heard people say that they are willing to help out at church as long as it doesn't include going to meetings!

In church and in life outside of church, most of us have experienced poorly planned, ineffective meetings. At some of these meetings, no one is clear about the purpose, or one or two people monopolize the conversation. At other meetings, destructive conflict breaks out, or nothing seems to get decided. Some meetings start forty minutes late or challenge participants to simply endure one monotonous presentation after another.

Meetings need not be boring, frustrating, or meaningless. In fact, as religious leaders, we're called to help organize and facilitate meaningful, enjoyable, and effective gatherings—meetings that matter, and that bring out the best in one another.

Engaging Head, Heart, and Hand: Beyond Task-Only Meetings

At their core, most meetings focus on "getting things done"—making decisions and delegating responsibilities to try to ensure that the congregation runs smoothly. However, meetings that focus exclusively on institutional maintenance are usually tedious and uninspiring. Transformational meetings are ones that engage the head, the heart, and the hand; they promote growth and learning, nurture a sense of care and belonging, and invite individuals into meaningful service. They connect individuals with a wider sense of calling and purpose—they are more than task-only meetings.

One way to move beyond task-only meetings is to have the group establish a clear sense of identity and purpose. **(See page 10, "Establish Clear Objectives Connected to the Mission," for more details.)** Invite participants to reflect on the goals for the wider congregation and their own personal goals as participants in the meeting. Using intentional check-in questions is another way to invite participants to go deeper and make connections to the work of the group with a sense of personal and congregational mission. **(For examples of "Intentional Check-In Questions," see page 29.)**

Excellent meetings are ones in which the whole person is engaged. Such meetings offer participants work that matters to their lives and connects to the vision and mission of both the group and the congregation.

Meetings 101

Basic Concepts

The following is a list of some basic components and concepts pertaining to meetings, together with the definitions of these terms.

AGENDA: An itemized list of topics to be considered at a meeting. Try to send the agenda out in advance and encourage participants to submit agenda topics as appropriate. For all-congregation meetings, it is often a legal requirement that the agenda be sent out to all members in advance of the meeting. Check your congregation's bylaws to determine the time frame required. Agendas may include time allotments for each item. It is also helpful to identify the purpose of each agenda item—for example, whether it is for information or for giving feedback, or if a decision is required.

Common items on an agenda (for ongoing meetings) include the following actions:

- Welcoming and assigning or reviewing roles.
- Noting regrets of people not attending.
- Opening, chalice lighting, centering, and check-in.
- Adopting the agenda (making changes as required).
- Accepting the minutes from the last meeting.
- Accounting for actions taken since the last meeting, new business or both.
- Requesting that any special reports be given time.
- Noting any other business.
- Noting the date and time of the next meeting.
- Giving conclusions, evaluation, and faith reflections.

Agreement: A statement of fact (for example, "It was agreed that the fourth annual multifaith service Justice for All will be held on May 18, at 7 p.m., in our congregation." Agreeing to the minutes means accepting that the minutes to a previous meeting are accurate and complete.

Chair: The person who leads, runs, or facilitates a meeting.

Decision Making: Voting. A show of hands is usually the easiest way of voting. In larger meetings, such as congregational meetings, ensure that there are volunteers designated as "counters." In some situations—for example, with the call of a new minister or for contentious issues—you may want to have voting by written ballot.

Minutes: Written records of what occurred at a meeting. Types of minutes vary considerably, from an informal bulleted list of decisions made and actions taken to a verbatim transcription of who said what and to whom. Decide the level of detail required. Minutes should always include the following:

- The title of the meeting (for example, the committee name, the task force name, Congregational Meeting, or Annual Meeting).
- The date, time, and location of the meeting.
- Who was present or absent.
- The date for the next meeting.

When it comes to note taking, don't assume "we'll remember." Minutes are an important tool to help individuals who missed the meeting find out what happened and to allow other teams in the congregation to find out what is going on. At the end of the minutes, it is useful to summarize action points by listing the following:

- What was decided.
- Who is going to do it.
- When the activities are targeted for completion (the key deadlines).
- Who will oversee the project and keep us all moving.

Seeing what is planned and achieved can energize and motivate team members.

Motion or Proposal: A suggestion put forth by a participant (for example "Taleila Jackson proposed that an article be written for the congregation's newsletter about the upcoming Our Whole Lives teacher training").

Reports: In more formal and larger meetings, written reports may be presented to the gathered assembly. Encourage succinct, jargon-free, straightforward written reports. Avoid using acronyms; they usually set up a barrier for newer comers to the congregation, who don't know what the COM (Committee on Ministry), OWL (Our Whole Lives), and possibly even the UUA (Unitarian Universalist Association) stand for. The following are sample guidelines for reports:

- Describe your objective or what you are proposing, as well as the rationale for it.
- State the current situation, and give a recap of actions to date.
- Explain the financial implications, and describe how money is being raised or found.
- Describe the human implications (how people are affected).

- Give a time line for planned actions.

If the report is more than one page long, write an executive summary in point form at the top of the report. This is an enticement for busy participants to actually read the report!

We've all been at meetings where time is wasted with comments such as, "It's in the middle of page three, in the paragraph that starts. . . ." If the report is very long (which can be the case if it covers more complex issues), put it into numbered and/or lettered sections so that participants can easily refer to the exact location in the document. Also consider using appendixes to present dense, detailed information. Charts and diagrams can often offer enhanced readability in a detailed report.

RESOLUTION: A formal decision with legal implications (for example, "It was resolved that the terms for directors of the congregation's board be lengthened from two to three years").

RULES OF ORDER: Guidelines for meetings. In board meetings or whole congregational meetings, church bylaws may call for the use of Robert's Rules of Order (the most recent edition). If these rules are used, it is good to have someone fill the role of parliamentarian.

QUORUM: In formal meeting situations, such as a board of directors meeting or the annual meeting, a quorum is the number of eligible participants required to be present to make the decisions legally binding.

TABLE: To table is to set aside a matter for a period of time (for example, "The motion to have an accessibility ramp installed at the side door of the congregation is tabled until our next meeting on October 14").

Congregational Meetings

The practice of congregational polity dictates that the business of our congregations take place at congregational meetings. Most congregations hold an annual meeting to do the following:

- Hear reports from the minister or ministers, staff, and officers.
- Elect new officers and board members.
- Approve the annual budget.

Other business my also be scheduled at the annual meeting.

In addition, from time to time, congregations will hold special congregational meetings to consider significant issues in the life of the congregation. Typically, these meetings must be advertised well in advance (usually a period of time specified in the bylaws), and the meetings should be called whenever significant congregational business needs to be conducted.

The annual meeting is typically the only congregational meeting in the year that is open to any business that members wish to discuss.

The president (or the vice president) of the board usually presides as moderator of the meeting. The secretary of the board records the minutes. The bylaws of many congregations call for the use of Robert's Rules of Order (the most recent edition); therefore, it is advisable to have present a parliamentarian who is familiar with these rules and who can advise the moderator on questions of procedure. A few congregations have written rules for operating the meeting by consensus. These congregations need to be very familiar with, and committed to, the consensus process.

The president may also wish to use a timekeeper, process watcher, or both. The timekeeper's task is to keep the meeting on schedule and to time individuals' comments when needed. The process watcher is charged with observing how people interact in the meeting, whether one person or a few dominate the conversation, and whether the group functions smoothly or gets bogged down. Typically, the process watcher says nothing during the meeting but makes a report of her or his observations to all at the end of the meeting.

The board president should prepare a detailed agenda and assign a length of time to each item. The times may be written on the agenda or kept by the president and timekeeper. In either case, speakers should be notified in advance of the amount of time available to them and be asked to hold to those limits.

Congregational meetings should be advertised well in advance in accordance with the times stipulated in the bylaws. In the case of a special meeting, the agenda should be published with the advertisement. For the annual meeting, agendas known in advance should be publicized.

Written reports should be prepared in advance but handed out after the meeting unless the speaker or speakers plan to speak directly about the contents of the report (a proposed budget, for example).

Written ballots should be prepared in advance for any issues that will require a vote.

It is important to pay attention to the comfort of participants. Seats should be comfortable and accessible for attendees who are physically challenged. The room should be neither too hot nor too cold. Everyone should be able to see the speakers at the head table and the visual aids used in presentations. Amplification should be provided for participants who are hearing impaired. Large-type written materials should be available.

The board president and other officers responsible for conducting the meeting should be seated so that they are visible to those in attendance. The president should have a gavel or gong to gain the attention of participants (nonverbal signals work better than verbal ones). Begin with a centering exercise: a reading, song, or period of silence to remind everyone that this is a congregational meeting.

The most effective way to arrive at decisions is in small groups that allow for sufficient discussion and dialogue. In larger groups (over forty participants), it may not be possible to give everyone enough speaking time to achieve consensus unless the issue is significant enough to merit several meetings. Many congregations have one or more informational sessions several weeks prior to the congregational meeting, especially if major issues are to be voted on.

What follows are some suggestions for running large meetings using Robert's or Bourinot's Rules of Order while providing for a maximum of fairness and communal feeling. Robert's rules provide that any meeting may adopt its own rules, which supersede those presented in Robert's Rules of Order. The moderator can present such suggestions at the beginning of the meeting as methods of operation that he or she proposes to use in the absence of objections. Most groups will readily accept such suggestions.

1. No one will be called upon to speak for the second time before everyone wishing to speak has spoken once.

2. People are asked to speak for themselves, not for what they think others think. Also, people are asked to be mindful of the feelings of others in the way they phrase their remarks. (It may be necessary for the moderator to monitor this requirement.)

3. People are asked to limit their comments to a specified number of minutes, usually two or three. If the issue is likely to be difficult, the moderator may devise a method of warning the speaker when a minute remains.

4. The moderator will try to call on people with differing points of view alternately. (Appointing someone to note who wishes to speak and to write it down may help facilitate this process.)

5. If parliamentary maneuvering gets complicated through acts such as the use of amendments and substitute motions, the moderator can declare the meeting to be in a "committee of the whole." In this status, the issues can be discussed and a consensus reached without the need for motions. Then the moderator can declare the formal meeting resumed, and the appropriate motions to ratify the consensus can be made and voted upon.

6. The motion to "call to (or for) the question" is legitimate under Robert's rules, but it can often destroy a congregation's community. It requires immediate cessation of debate and a vote on whether to continue debate. The majority rules on such a vote. If the debate is terminated in this manner, people often leave the meeting feeling disenfranchised and angry. Instead, the moderator can announce before the meeting begins that she or he will not accept a call to the question. A request to consider whether to end debate would result in a show of hands of those wishing to continue the discussion. Then the moderator could do one of two things: (1) make a judgment as to whether sufficient interest exists to continue (even when such interest is in the minority) or, (2) allow each person whose hand is raised to make his or her statement and then end the debate. Experience shows that use of this adaptation of the rules generally avoids unhappiness about the procedure.

7. When routine business, such as the election of officers, is being conducted, such rules generally are not necessary. They are helpful when controversial issues must be discussed.

Meeting Preparation

Planning well in advance enables leaders to relax and be more present at the actual event, in addition to creating a comfortable environment for participants. The following are nine key areas to consider in preparing meetings:

1. Discern who needs to be part of the planning and carrying out of the meeting.
2. Establish clear objectives connected to the mission.
3. Determine who needs to attend.
4. Decide the length of the meeting.
5. Choose a time for the meeting.
6. Select a location for the meeting.
7. Figure out what materials are required.
8. Consider what food and beverages will be offered.
9. Communicate with participants in advance.

1. Discern Who Needs to Be Part of the Planning and Carrying Out of the Meeting

Although it may be most expedient to have one person (often the chair) on a committee or task force plan meetings, one must ponder how this reflects our underlying commitment to shared ministry. When planning a meeting, consider gathering a small team of two to four people to develop the meeting design and prepare well. Invite both people who are experienced and novices. Intentionally reach out to stakeholders and potential participants for input, and invite them to take on roles to make the meeting run well. (**Refer to "Assign Meeting Roles and Responsibilities" on page 18 for ways to involve participants in the meeting.)** Sharing the responsibility for planning and carrying out a meeting widens the sense of ownership for its success. Another method is to develop an agenda and circulate it in advance to participants so they can provide input, or ask participants in advance for agenda items. This last method is a good practice at the end of a meeting.

2. Establish Clear Objectives Connected to the Mission

Effective meetings are ones in which all participants have a clear sense of why they are present and know the specific objectives of the meeting. Is it to analyze a problem? To make decisions? To inform people of something? To coordinate? To teach something? Establish clear aims of the meeting—both rational (what needs to happen) and experiential (what you hope participants will experience). **(See Laura Spencer, Winning through Participation , page 78; refer to the References list on page 36).**

Using the lens of the congregation's mission, the group's mission, and each participant's personal mission, determine the rational and experiential objectives of the meeting. Some questions to consider include the following:

Rational Objectives

- What is the purpose of the meeting?
- What do we need to accomplish for the meeting to be a success?
- What result are we looking for from this meeting?

Experiential Objectives

- What mood or ambiance do we want to create at the meeting?

- How do we hope individuals and the group will be different at the end of our time together?
- What is the "take-home feeling" we hope to instill in participants?

Write these objectives down as a reminder of your goals. In a group that meets regularly, such as a committee or board, work with participants to develop a mission for the group.

3. Determine Who Needs to Attend

If the meeting is for an already existing group, such as an established committee, you may have a list of members of the committee who are expected to attend. If you are part of forming a new committee, recruiting new committee members, or inviting people to participate in a meeting, consider this an ideal chance to match the opportunities within the group with people's gifts and expressed areas of desired growth. In determining who to invite, consider the following:

- Who are the key stakeholders around the purpose of the meeting?
- Are potential participants sincerely interested in the topic or issue?
- Are the individuals available, and do they have the time to participate?
- Do they have previous volunteer or professional experience that would be relevant and beneficial?
- Is the group that you are hoping will attend diverse in terms of age, gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation, experience, theological perspective, and so on?
- Do people possess different traits (for example, both detail-oriented people and visionaries, and both people who are strong on building community and those who enjoy getting the job done)?
- Are the candidates good listeners and also willing to speak?
- What is a good number of people to attend the meeting? Consider what the optimal number of participants will be. If it is small, be attentive to ensuring that the group is not too homogeneous. If the group is large; be mindful that it may be more difficult to ensure that everyone is heard.

As communities of faith and justice, it is important that we be intentional about inviting people who have traditionally been unheard and underrepresented in our gatherings. When you have determined a tentative participants list, examine it closely and ask:

- Who's missing from this list?
- What barriers—visible and invisible—exist that might hinder the persons traditionally underrepresented from attending?
- How can we lessen these barriers?
- Who else should we invite?

4. Decide the Length of the Meeting

In deciding the length of the meeting, try to be realistic about what can be accomplished in the time allotted. Overwhelming a group with too many topics and tasks for the scheduled time may lead to a sense of failure. If time looks tight as you plan, you can choose to scale back some of the objectives, consider holding two shorter meetings, or lengthening the meeting time and providing a meal for participants. Underwhelming the group with too few tasks can leave participants feeling bored and frustrated, as if precious time was wasted. When determining the time required, be sure to plan for breaks.

5. Choose a Time for the Meeting

It is easiest to set a time for an upcoming meeting when everyone is in the room together and people can check their schedules. Phone calls can work in setting up smaller meetings, but they can be time-consuming with larger numbers of people. E-mailing people is also an option, but never assume that everyone is connected to the Internet or has convenient access to e-mail. Mailing invitations is also an option for more formal meetings.

Any time of the day or week has benefits and disadvantages; be aware of who may be excluded from attending a meeting because of the time it is held. For example, daytime meetings may be more convenient for retirees but impossible for most working people to attend. Evening meetings may work for some but may be more difficult for individuals with children, who may be participating in their own evening activities or require child care. Weekend meetings may be difficult for individuals with children to attend, as weekends may be the only real uninterrupted time available to be together as a family. Individuals with children may take years off from active involvement in a church because securing proper child care can be so difficult. Make it easier for parents to participate in the life of the congregation outside of Sunday mornings by offering high-quality child care at every church-related meeting.

Try to avoid scheduling meetings on or too close to major holidays. If the event you are planning is a public one or is open to the entire church community, you may want to check to see that the date doesn't conflict with a related event in the community or a major event in the congregation.

Sometimes ongoing meetings have fixed dates; for example, the religious education committee may meet on the third Thursday of the month from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. These dates may have existed for many years and been inherited from people who are no longer a part of the group. Thus, it is important periodically to check in to see if a given time still works for the group of current participants and those you'd like to invite to attend or to have as members.

6. Select a Location for the Meeting

The success of your meeting can be jeopardized by a poor location. Consider the following when trying to determine where the meeting will take place:

- Does the space comfortably hold all the people planning to attend (is it neither cramped nor cavernous)? If the room is too large for the number of participants but there are no other options, use lighting, room dividers, plants, and furniture to visually create a more contained space.
- Does the space match the purpose of the meeting (for example, an informal four-person meeting in a member's living room and a formal board meeting around a board table at church)?
- Do you have tables if you need to write?
- Can you arrange yourselves in a circle, if seeing everyone's reactions is important?
- Is the space in good repair and clean?
- Are there adequate breakout spaces if you'll be dividing people into smaller groups?

- Is the space wheelchair accessible, including the entrance, restrooms, and any rooms people will need to access?
- Can the temperature, lighting, and fresh air be controlled?
- Is the space easy to get to? Is it on a bus route? Is it in a safe, well-lit area? Is there adequate parking?
- Do you need a key or alarm code to enter?

If your congregation's building does not meet the needs of the gathered group, consider renting space.

7. Figure Out What Materials Are Required

What materials will you need to ensure the meeting's success? Here is a list of considerations:

- How many chairs and tables are required?
- Are a flip chart, paper, and masking tape required?
- Are markers available? (Take care in the type of markers used, as some people have environmental sensitivities to noxious-smelling markers; water-based, unscented markers are usually a safe bet.)
- Do we need an overhead projector? A plug-in for a computer? A screen?

8. Consider What Food and Beverages Will Be Offered

Regardless of the time you are meeting, it is good to offer some drinks (caffeinated and noncaffeinated beverages) and a light snack. Some participants who are running from work to make it to an evening meeting may not have had a chance to eat. In such cases, develop a culture that encourages people to bring brown-bagged meals.

If you are providing a meal or are holding a potluck, ask in advance if participants have any food limitations. Some of the more common food restrictions are lactose intolerance (no milk products), gluten intolerance (nothing containing wheat, oats, rye, or barley), nut allergies (often to peanuts, but some people have allergies to other nuts as well), vegetarian (no fish, fowl, or meat), and vegan (no fish, fowl, meat, dairy, or eggs). In the case of a potluck, notify all participants of any food limitations among group members, and invite people to label their food.

The following are some wholesome snack ideas that most anyone can eat:

- Sliced fruit and vegetables.
- Rice crackers, corn chips, and popcorn.
- Dips like salsa, hummus, and guacamole.

9. Communicate with Participants in Advance

Once the purpose, time, location, and other details for the meeting have been decided, send out a communication to participants stating the following information (via e-mail, postal mail, or phone):

- The date, time, and location (map and directions, if required) of the meeting. Provide information on transportation, including public transit and carpooling options.
- The draft agenda for the meeting, including the rational and experiential objectives. If appropriate, request that any additional agenda items be submitted by a certain date.

- Written reports for consideration at the meeting.
- Any materials or items the participants are expected to bring.
- Any preparation work required.

When sending out materials in advance of a meeting, be mindful not to barrage participants with information overload. If there are many materials to be sent out in advance, consider organizing a "master pack" with a front sheet listing all the contents (color coding can be helpful as well). If you are sending materials out via e-mail attachments, be aware that some people may not have the software to open them, and others may not be online. Have an alternative delivery system in place; for example, give materials to participants at church on Sunday morning, or deliver them via regular post.

Holding the Meeting

Setting Up the Space

Plan to have one or two people arrive early to prepare for the meeting. Their duties should include the following:

- Chairs should be set up in a way that is comfortable. If you know how many people are planning to attend, set out that number of chairs, plus one or two extras. If you aren't sure how many people are coming, make your best guess. Try not to put lots of extra chairs out; unfilled seats send a message that you were expecting a lot more people and could send the message that the meeting is a flop.
- If the location is unfamiliar to even one participant, put up signs so individuals can easily locate the meeting.
- If possible, try to avoid podiums and platforms, as both can deter participation. (An exception, of course, is a lecture or a meeting that includes a performance.)
- Prepare and lay out the beverages, food, cups, cutlery, and so on.
- The greeter **(see "Assign Meeting Roles and Responsibilities" on page 18)** and others should welcome people as they arrive.

Meeting Flow

You may wish to make a flip chart showing the meeting flow for all participants to see. A typical flow for a meeting can take the following form:

- Connecting and opening.
- Addressing quick items.
- Discussing major or complex items.
- Presenting minor or straightforward items.
- Recapping decisions and actions.
- Reflecting and evaluating.
- Closing.

Try to encourage a culture where people arrive and begin on time. Setting good boundaries preserves people's energy and shows them respect. However, if the meeting starts at 7:00 p.m. and only three of eight participants are present, consider—with the group's consent—waiting a few minutes before beginning.

Connecting and opening a meeting provides an important bridge from the day that was to the meeting that is. It offers an opportunity to release frustration or share successes of the day, and it sometimes can identify concerns and challenges the group may face together. In our congregations, connecting and opening often includes a chalice lighting and reading, and if the group is fewer than ten people, an individual check-in. The check-in could be a response to "Say something about your day," but it's great if your focus question for checking in relates to the topic or theme of the meeting. **(See "Intentional Check-In Questions" on page 29 for sample questions to start your gathering.)** If the group is large, you may use other check-in techniques, **(for example, the techniques in "Where Do You Stand?" on page 32)** or use exploring and intentional questioning in small groups. This is also a time to review the group's covenant of right relations or to develop some basic ground rules for gathering. **(See "Develop Guidelines for Interactions" on page 16 for information on developing covenants.)**

The flow of agenda items from quick to major to minor gives participants a chance to start by getting a few things sorted out quickly. The middle part then deals with the more complicated issues, and the meeting ends on an upbeat note by accomplishing some things. Although you may delay the beginning of a meeting by a few minutes, always try to end when you said you would.

Near the end of the meeting, **recap any actions and decisions** that were made. Clearly breaking down actions can help to ensure that they will be carried out. The recapping should include the following:

- What is the action or decision?
- Who will carry it out?
- Who else needs to be informed?
- When must the action be completed?
- How will progress be reported back?

The reflecting and evaluating time is an opportunity to intentionally ponder the meaning of the meeting: Did we achieve the rational and experiential objectives we had established at the outset? How did the meeting connect to our mission?

Include a brief evaluation process as part of each meeting. This reinforces that the congregation and this group are learning communities. This process can be as simple as asking two or three of the following questions at the end of a meeting:

- What are key accomplishments from today (or this evening)?
- What worked well?
- Where did we struggle, individually or as a group?
- What things did we do that helped us overcome challenges?
- How did our work connect to our group's mission?
- What improvements do you suggest for the next time we hold a meeting?

This is also the time when the faith reflectors can offer comments about how the meeting went from their perspective. **(See "Assign Meeting Roles and Responsibilities" on page 18 for details.)**

At an ongoing meeting, such as a standing committee meeting, you may want to have a more in-depth, formal evaluation once or twice a year.

Close the meeting with a reading or a song.

Meeting Follow-Up

After the meeting, send the minutes or notes from the meeting to each participant. It can be very useful if the chair of the meeting or other key person connects with participants between meetings. This action is an opportunity to follow up with anyone who is responsible for completing tasks before the next meeting. It also conveys that the members' participation is important and their contribution is valued. In touching bases, you can also determine if a person needs assistance, more information, or both in carrying out any tasks that were assigned to her or him.

Maximizing Participation

If meetings are to be truly meaningful and transformational, it is crucial to involve participants fully. Below are eleven ways to maximize participation in meetings:

1. Develop guidelines for interactions.
2. Celebrate unique gifts, passions, and needs.
3. Assign meeting roles and responsibilities.
4. Establish clear accountability.
5. Support growth through mentoring.
6. Invite creative interchange.
7. Ask the right kinds of questions.
8. Listen actively.
9. Keep people moving.
10. Break out into small groups, if necessary.
11. Use silent reflection.

1. Develop Guidelines for Interactions

A culture of participation can be encouraged (and much conflict avoided) by having a covenant of right relations that the group has committed to abide to. If the meeting is an ongoing one, develop a covenant together early in the life of the group. At the beginning of each meeting, remind one another of the commitments you've made and shared. If it is a one-time-only meeting, it is also helpful to agree on some ground rules as you start out. Ask, "As we begin this meeting, what guidelines for interacting can we agree upon?"

Guidelines for ongoing groups and one-time-only meetings may include variations of the following:

- We will commit to attend meetings and notify the chairperson if we are not able to come.
- We will arrive on time.
- We will recognize that everyone has wisdom and that we need everyone's wisdom for the wisest results.

- We will respect people who are speaking, and wait until they are finished before adding our contributions.
- We will seek to really hear others, and ask for clarification when needed.
- We will participate fully in the meeting.
- We will celebrate and seek diversity of opinion (and ensure that no one or two people dominate the discussion).
- We will follow through with commitments that we make.

Post the agreements at all meetings of the group, and review and revise them as necessary.

2. Celebrate Unique Gifts, Passions, and Needs

USE GIFTS-BASED MATCHING

Congregations (particularly smaller ones) tend to see newcomers as potential "new blood" for tired committees. Although your group's energy may be running low, resist the compulsion to "fill spots" on a committee, task force, or board. Newcomers can smell desperation a mile away. "People come to a church longing for, yearning for, hoping for . . . [a] sense of roots, place, belonging, sharing, and caring. People come to a church in our time with a search for community, not committee," Kennon Callahan says in his book Effective Church Leadership (page 106).

People usually excel at what they love doing. Ask individuals what they are passionate about around a particular gathering, and try to match tasks to passions. Church is also a wonderful place to take risks, explore new possibilities, and develop new skills; celebrate that a chartered accountant in your congregation wants to garden, or sing, or make coffee rather than serve on the finance committee.

USE PEOPLE'S NAMES

At meetings it is important to use people's names. When we call people by name, we recognize individuality and acknowledge each person's uniqueness and special contributions. As much as some people might dislike wearing name tags, if your meeting has even one newcomer or is larger than eight people, use them.

HONOR LEARNING STYLES

Educators have observed that people tend to learn in three distinctive ways: visual (by seeing), auditory (by hearing), and kinesthetic (through touch). Although people can learn through each of these modalities, individuals tend to have one preference in how they learn. Varying presentation styles and discussion techniques helps to communicate most effectively to people with different learning styles. A few suggestions follow.

VISUAL LEARNERS: Use flip charts, handouts, word pictures, and stories that evoke images. Display the results of meetings around the room on flip charts.

AUDITORY LEARNERS: Use breakout groups to allow for all people to speak and be heard. Ask questions and welcome people's contributions. Use background music to create ambiance, and sing songs related to the theme.

Kinesthetic Learners: Invite participants to bring objects that relate to the theme of the meeting, and pass them around. Consider how you might have an outing that connects to the purpose of your gathering. Invite people to physically move around.

Try to use a variety of techniques throughout a meeting. Even the keenest participant tires after an hour of intense whole-group experiences. Mix up the time to include individual reflection, paired activities, small-group work, and whole-group discussions.

3. Assign Meeting Roles and Responsibilities

If possible, give everyone a role at a meeting. People tend to involve themselves more fully when they are invited to take responsibility for some portion of the meeting. Not only are they there as a regular participant but they also have a responsibility for the smooth running of the meeting. People want to be involved in activities they are invested in, care about, and contribute to.

Various roles and responsibilities include the following:

Facilitator: Ensures that all members have an opportunity to speak, gently redirects participants who are monopolizing conversation to listening more intentionally, keeps conversation moving, and intersperses opportunities for silent reflection. In many congregational meetings, the facilitator or chairperson also acts as a full contributing participant in the process. Although you may choose not to rotate this role, if there are breakout groups, be sure to assign a small group facilitator in each group.

Note/Minute Taker: Records key information from the meeting and disseminates the minutes to all participants as soon after the meeting as possible.

Flip Chart Scribe: Records ideas and results on flip chart paper, when appropriate; checks periodically to ensure that he or she is capturing the essence of the conversation.

Presenter: In meetings with breakout groups, the person responsible for reporting back to the larger group the key insights from the small group conversation.

Timekeeper: Keeps track of the time and periodically tells the group how much time is left for a particular item or activity. The timekeeper also informs the group when the time limits are being approached, saying something like, "There are five minutes remaining for this topic."

Energizer: Is responsible for tracking the energy pulse of the group, noticing yawning and lethargy; suggests and leads brief energy or brain breaks to energize and relax the group, as required.

Greeter: If the meeting is a larger one, the person or persons designated to welcome people to the gathering, invite them to make a name tag, show them where the coat rack is, and so on.

One or More Faith Reflectors: Intentionally listens to the conversation through the lens of the question, How does what we are saying and how we are saying it connect to my sense of faith, theology, and values as a Unitarian Universalist? At the end of the meeting, the faith reflector offers a one- to two-minute reflection on how the meeting went (its process and content) based on how it didn't or did reflect shared values. Sometimes you may want to have more than one faith reflector; you could give one a copy of the Unitarian Universalist Association's principles and sources, one a copy of the mission statement for the congregation (or committee), and one a copy of the hymnbook. The person with the hymnbook selects a closing song for the entire group to sing together. Another alternative is given below in the role of **Closing Reading/Song** person.

Meeting Planner: Organizes and coordinates all aspects of behind-the-scenes meeting planning, including booking the location, setting up the room, ensuring that required materials (such as flip chart paper, markers, tape, and an overhead projector) are available, and cleaning up the room at the end of the meeting.

Hospitality: Organizes and coordinates food and beverages for the meeting, including setup and cleanup.

Closing Reading/Song: Has a hymnbook during the meeting and selects a closing reading and song to share that fits as a closing activity for the group.

Rites of Passage Coordinator: Keeps a list of members' birthdays and celebrates them in the group; writes cards on behalf of the group when a member marks a milestone or has suffered a loss.

Antiracism/Anti-oppression/Multicultural Process Observer: Is responsible for observing the meeting's process through an antiracism, anti-oppression, and multicultural lens.

You may be tempted to give one person the responsibility of hospitality for every meeting, but rotating roles among participants communicates that the group members trust one another's competence. It also ensures that people aren't typecast in certain roles, thus providing opportunities to develop skills, reveal hidden talents, and renew energy. Here are a few creative ways to rotate roles:

- Write the various roles on separate cards, and have people draw a card.
- List the various roles in alphabetical order on a flip chart, and assign them in order of people's height (shortest to tallest), birthday (January to December), or first name (alphabetical).
- Sticker the seats with different colors, each representing a task. After people have chosen their seats, invite them to see if their chair has a sticker, and inform them of their role.

Near the end of the meeting, occasionally give people an opportunity to reflect and evaluate how they carried out their roles (both their assigned roles and their roles as regular attendees at a meeting). Give each person five minutes to reflect silently on the following questions; take another five minutes of sharing in groups of two or three; and take a final five minutes to share any insights with the entire group. Resist telling people what you thought they did well or suggesting areas for improvement, but encourage individuals to self-assess their performance. The following are the questions to ponder:

- What did you plan to do in your role?

- What worked well?
- When you do this again, what will you do differently?
- In what areas could you use assistance, and where could you find it?

4. Establish Clear Accountability

Have clear lines of accountability, expectations, and methods for evaluation. People feel empowered when they know what they, along with everyone else, are responsible for. Clarity develops confidence, and confidence encourages participation. In meetings, consider the following:

- Clarifying expectations before engaging in an activity. Clear goals and doable jobs allow each person to sign up for what she or he is capable of doing.
- Breaking down more complicated tasks into manageable chunks. For most people, time and energy are limited, so don't ask people to take on huge tasks.
- Offering a variety of tasks with clear expectations. Variety includes aspects such as short-term and long-term tasks, creative and structured activities, smaller and larger tasks, and solo and group activities.
- Inviting reflection on how the practical tasks that are carried out connect to the vision and mission. People need to know how the pieces in which they have been involved contribute to the whole.

5. Support Growth through Mentoring

Effective meetings can produce profound changes in individuals and groups, especially when an individual's activity within meetings is connected to a sense of personal ministry and the congregation's mission. Meetings are opportunities to multiply the ministry—involving many in discernment, decision making, implementation, and reflection. While the bottom line in most corporate contexts is profit, the bottom line in congregations is greater wholeness, expanded justice, and personal and collective transformation.

In ongoing, regular meetings, the goal is not to attain perfection but to grow trust in one's own ability and in the team's capacity to work effectively. One important way to foster growth of this kind is to develop mentoring relationships, in which mentors equip and coach people throughout their involvement in the group.

Perhaps you've heard stories of leaders struggling in a new role at church, or perhaps you yourself have experienced a sense of isolation and lack of support in trying to carry out congregational responsibilities. All too often, new volunteers are given a pile of file folders and perhaps a little guidance, and then are expected to "figure it out on their own." In such cases, people may wonder:

- Who do I turn to for support?
- I've been handed this portfolio, but what if I'm not fully qualified to carry out the job?
- Does anyone have time to give me a hand?

In several places in our movement, a mentoring or coaching model seems to be rooted quite firmly. Inherent in intentional small group ministry is the idea that small group facilitators meet regularly with the minister or a lay leader and other facilitators to learn with, mentor, and coach one another. At some ministers' gatherings, individuals share case studies or preach for one another and receive feedback and guidance from their colleagues. Newly fellowshipped ministers are required to have a mentor for at least the first three years of their ministry. There are likely other examples as well. Regardless of the situation, mentoring supports an intentional learning community.

In Mentoring: The Tao of Giving and Receiving Wisdom, Chungliang Al Huany and Jerry Lynch write: "All good mentors (giving and teaching) are continually open to being mentored (receiving and learning). To be a good teacher, one must be a good student" (page 9). This connects with the concept of shared ministry, where we affirm that all who join together in our religious community are invited to both offer and receive ministry. As the song goes, "From you I receive, to you I give, together we share, and by this we live."

In ongoing meetings, reflect on the following questions:

- What structures already exist that support coaching or mentoring?
- How are leaders supported in an ongoing way to carry out their ministry?
- Where are the gaps?
- How can we build more mentoring and coaching into our structure?

Through intentional coaching and mentoring, members and friends can be better equipped and supported to share their unique and precious ministries more fully. To generate ideas that would work well in your congregation request an in-depth discussion with your district staff on how to establish mentoring and coaching structures in your congregation.

6. Invite Creative Interchange

"Where all think alike, then no one thinks very much," says Walter Lipperman (quoted in Judith Leigh's Organizing and Participating in Meetings, page 55).

Many of our congregations have a culture of advocacy and persuasion around important ideas. Rather than inviting a diversity of opinions and experiences, one or two perspectives are presented for debate and rebuttal. This approach is sometimes very useful, but at most congregational meetings it can lead to premature closure on topics and make some participants feel unheard and uninvolved. Congregational leaders are called to develop a community that invites people to "go deeper" rather than "win points."

In his book Transforming Liberal Congregations for the New Millennium, Roy Phillips introduces the ideas of Unitarian philosopher of religion Henry Nelson Wieman. Wieman asks, "What transforms us as we cannot transform ourselves, to save us from our self-destructive propensities and to bring us to the highest good of which we are capable? . . . It is found in a certain quality of communication between people" (page 62). Wieman called this certain kind of communication creative interchange. Creative interchange is a quality of relating in which we encounter one another with openness, respect, and a sense of wonder—not to "convince" another person of our point of view but to try to listen deeply and to hear the other's primary experience and perspective. Ultimately, creative interchange is about being open to being transformed and changed oneself. It is allowing another's experience to penetrate us and to respond from our own experience rather than reacting by jumping to our next point.

There are many ways to invite creative interchange in meetings, including the following:

- Use intentional check-in questions. **(See "Checking In Midway through a Meeting," page 31, for more details.)**
- Hold a yearly retreat for your group **(See UUA.org, Leaders' Library, and search "Retreats"* for a document on holding successful retreats.)**
- Invite small group sharing. **(See "Break Out into Small Groups, If Necessary" page 23, for more details.)**
- Listen actively. **(See "Listen Actively," page 22, below, for more details.)**
- Occasionally have participants offer "testimonies" of their experience in the group.

7. Ask the Right Kinds of Questions

Asking questions is one of the most important ways to promote conversation and participation. Using open-ended questions sets a tone during a meeting that this is a place where people's contributions really matter. Rather than asking "What do you think of us doing it this way?" ask "How might we get this done?"

The Institute for Cultural Affair's Art of Focused Conversation ORID method **(See Stanfield, in "References," page 36)** is a powerful tool to promote meaningful and productive conversations. The method uses questions at four different levels, from surface to deep:

OBJECTIVE-LEVEL QUESTIONS: GETTING THE FACTS

- What background information do we need?
- What happened at our last gathering?

REFLECTIVE-LEVEL QUESTIONS: HONORING FEELINGS, REACTIONS, AND ASSOCIATIONS

- How do you feel about this?
- What are your gut reactions to this proposal?
- What past experiences are triggered for you?

INTERPRETIVE-LEVEL QUESTIONS: EXPLORING MEANING

- How will this make a visible and meaningful difference in people's lives?
- What does this say about us as a religious community?
- How does it connect to your personal sense of faith?
- What images or metaphors come to you in the midst of this?

DECISIONAL-LEVEL QUESTIONS: MAKING DECISIONS

- What should we do next?
- How can we get this done?
- What are the "take-home messages" from this meeting?

This method can be used as a template for conversations and decision-making processes at most meetings. Often during meetings, we focus on the objective and decisional levels and may glide over the reflective and interpretive levels. For the best decisions to be made, people need to intentionally attend to each of these levels.

8. Listen Actively

Active listening encourages participation. In Bill Donahue's Willow Creek Guide to Leading Life-Changing Small Groups (page 112), the author suggests using ACTS to encourage active listening:

Acknowledge people as they speak in a discussion. Acknowledging can often be done nonverbally, for example, by orienting your body toward a person, maintaining eye contact, smiling, nodding, and uh-huhing.

Clarify what people say by saying, "Could you say more about that?" or "I'm not sure if I understand completely; could you give an example?"

Take it back to the group by saying something like "What do others think about what Kylie just said?"

Summarize a conversation, especially if it is a detailed or complicated contribution by one or more people. Try saying, "What I've heard so far is . . ." or "Could someone try to summarize what we've heard?"

9. Keep People Moving

Schedule regular breaks, and use energizers to liven people up during meetings. Don't expect people to sit down for more than an hour at a time. For people who suffer back problems or have other health-related issues, sitting for extended periods can be quite painful. Even the healthiest participants can get stiff and lethargic when asked to stay in one place for long stretches. Although we are trained as children to "hold it" when we need to go to the restroom and to eat at noon even though we're hungry at 10:30, noticing physical sensations and respecting our body's needs are profound spiritual practices.

In meetings longer than an hour, plan two-minute body stretches and brain breaks **(see "Energizers," page 33),** and offer longer nutritional breaks regularly. People perform better in a relaxed environment that goes at a reasonable pace and honors the fact that we are not simply talking heads, but whole bodies.

If you are meeting for a half day or a whole day, invite people to change where they sit and who they are sitting next to at least once. Changing places in this way can open people up to new ideas and connections. Move people around by inviting or assigning people to different small groups to encourage "cross-pollination."

10. Break Out into Small Groups, If Necessary

Use breakout groups frequently to generate more ideas and to get people talking with one another. If your meeting has ten or more people in attendance, it is easy for a significant portion of the participants not to speak for the entire meeting. Breaking into groups of two to four invites greater participation.

When using breakout groups, be clear about what you expect the group to do, how long the participants will have to meet together, and what kind of report you would like them to share with the larger group. Remind the breakout groups to choose a facilitator, a timekeeper, a scribe, a presenter or reporter, and a faith reflector. If appropriate, give the subgroups flip chart paper and markers to help them report back to the larger group.

11. Use Silent Reflection

Talkative people usually like the spontaneity of brainstorming at a meeting, but more introverted people can find it intimidating and frustrating. To honor the various styles of participants, use silence intentionally in your meetings. For example, rather than ask, "So what do people think of these three proposals?" with a free-for-all to follow, say, "Let's take a couple of minutes to reflect silently on what we think of each of these proposals." Then, after the silence, consider moving to smaller group sharing and then reporting back to the entire group.

Troubleshooting

Dealing with Conflict

Conflict happens. Most simply, it occurs when there are two contradictory ideas in a room at the same time. Authentic, in-depth relationships will inevitably include some conflict, as people are different and hold diverse experiences, ideas, and opinions.

Peter Steinke, in his book Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach, says that in healthy congregations, "conflict is normal, essential and managed" (page 45). Constructive conflict may be difficult, but it sends the message that everyone has an opportunity to speak and be heard, that there is the intention to develop win-win situations, and that there exists an underlying faith that new possibilities can emerge when different people and ideas interpenetrate.

Conflict, if not attended to, can become negative and destructive. Environments with the following characteristics may foster unhealthy conflict:

- Unstructured meetings.
- Unclear objectives.
- Uncertain responsibility and accountability.
- Lack of (or not using) a covenant of right relations.
- No facilitation, or a facilitator who is not sufficiently skilled or assertive.
- Early warning signs of conflict are ignored—such as a lack of participation, one or two people taking control, or people being disruptive or rude.
- Closed communication systems—those with a lack of feedback loops, a few people holding all the information, secrets being kept, and new ideas discouraged.

One of Steinke's chapters is titled "An Ounce of Prevention Is Worth a Pound of Intervention." To prevent destructive conflict in meetings, try to nurture a culture that promotes respectful communication and creative interchange; much of this section describes ways to promote this type of culture. Early intervention is better than later intervention. Some basic ways to manage conflict in meetings include the following:

- Clarify objectives.
- Review covenant.

- Review the decision process.
- Have the facilitator or chairperson engage in process while modeling a "nonanxious presence."
- Name the reality, and invite participants to come up with ways to deal with the situation. Use the focused conversation ORID method to structure conversation, as described below:

OBJECTIVE-LEVEL QUESTIONS: GETTING THE FACTS
- What are the main disagreements being expressed?
- What is being said that creates conflict?

REFLECTIVE-LEVEL QUESTIONS: HONORING FEELINGS, REACTIONS, AND ASSOCIATIONS
- What are your gut reactions to this conflict?
- What past experiences are triggered for you?

INTERPRETIVE-LEVEL QUESTIONS: EXPLORING MEANING
- What does this conflict say about us as a religious community?
- What images or metaphors come to you in the midst of this conflict?

DECISIONAL-LEVEL QUESTIONS: MAKING DECISIONS
- What should we do next?
- How might we navigate this conflict in a way that keeps everyone's dignity intact?

Usually the subtle precedes the obvious, so if you can pay attention for signs of tension early on and address them, destructive conflict can often be avoided. However, sometimes conflict festers quietly or escalates quickly to become negative, disruptive, and toxic. In these cases, ask for help from outside your group. This help could come from the minister, a congregational conflict team, or an external consultant. **(For more information, please see UUA.org , Leaders' Library, and search for "Dynamics and Conflict Management"* in order to read Congregational Life Dynamics and Conflict Management: An Application of Family Systems Theory, Part II, Conflict Management for a discussion on handling conflict.)**

Handling Difficult Behavior

People often play different roles during a meeting or in the life of a group. Some roles support the healthy functioning of the group, and others do not. Positive, supportive roles include seeking information, inviting other people's opinions, using gentle humor to relieve tension, or building on other people's ideas. Behavior that impairs the functioning of the group includes acting aggressively, always advocating one position, or dominating the conversation.

Destructive behavior is usually a symptom of some dissatisfaction or discomfort rather than a malicious intent to undermine the working of the meeting. Most people express behavior that is disruptive when they themselves are feeling unvalued, insecure, or frustrated with the process.

In her book On Track: Taking Meetings from Good to Great, Leslie Bendaly describes some common difficult behaviors and a few strategies to cope with them. Below is an adaptation of her work (pages 99–106).

MONOPOLIZING CONVERSATION

People who monopolize the conversation are the first to jump in with an opinion, don't leave space for others to participate, and dominate the discussion. These people may be very enthusiastic participants, so you don't want to dampen that. They may not be good listeners, so invite them to develop that virtue. Here are some other suggestions:

- Encourage everyone to speak once before anyone can speak twice.
- Vary the methods from personal reflection to breakout groups to whole-group discussion.
- Quickly summarize the monopolizer's comments; often these people want to be sure that their contributions are heard. Next, ask if others understand the point, and then ask, "What do others have to say about this issue?"
- Review the covenant, especially that we need to hear everyone's wisdom to come to the wisest results.
- Invite those who have not spoken to speak. Try saying, "Let's hear from those who haven't spoken yet on this issue."
- If no other strategies work, have a private conversation with the individual.

BEING SILENT OR WITHDRAWN

Some people rarely speak, may look sullen or disconnected, and can seem shy. These people may have very introverted tendencies. Some suggestions to draw them out follow:

- Remind people of the group's covenant with one another to participate fully in the meeting.
- Encourage everyone to speak once before anyone can speak twice.
- Intentionally use silence, and ask people write down their ideas. Then break out in small groups of two to three that will report back to the entire group.
- Invite silent individuals to contribute by saying something like "We haven't heard your thoughts on this yet, Darian. What are your ideas on this issue?"

USING INTIMIDATION

Some people tend to debate points, want to persuade others of their opinions, and may speak negatively of others. To avoid this problem,

- Review the group's covenant, especially about celebrating diversity of opinion.
- Acknowledge the person's strong feelings and opinions on a subject by summarizing his or her comments and then adding, "I imagine there are other perspectives on this. What do others think and feel?"
- Reinforce the belief that to come up with the best decisions, we want to have dialogue and creative interchange, not debate.
- If necessary, be direct about what you fear the impact of the person's behavior might be on the group. For example, say, "Christiana, when you are so forceful in your opinion and discount others' contributions, I worry that some people may stop participating. We need everyone's input in order to succeed."

ALWAYS BEING NICE

Some people seem to agree with everyone, and their opinion on an issue is difficult to pin down. Later, though, they may express discontent or disagreement. Try this:

- Speak directly to the person. You could say, "Kelsie, where do you personally stand on this issue?"

COMPLAINING

The complainer often sees the negative in things and says things like “This won’t work” and “Whose idea was this, anyway?” Here are suggestions for coping:

- Be intentional about who you invite to a meeting (if you have a choice), and avoid very negative people.
- Review the covenant, and focus on potentials rather than problems.
- Quickly summarize the complainer’s comments; often such people want to be sure that their contributions are heard. Next, ask if others understand his or her point, and then ask, “What do others have to say about this issue?”
- Give the person a role to ensure the smooth running of the meeting.
- Invite the complaining person to state her or his vision; say, for example, “Talia, you’ve described a lot of what you don’t like about this proposal. From your perspective, what are the top three things we could do to make it better?”

We don’t want to typecast people, and most people play a variety of roles in life. However, it is good to observe and notice who acts in what ways at a particular time and to invite people to look behind the roles they play. Meetings provide an opportunity to encourage participants to stretch and grow. You may preface meetings with a reading such as this one:

> Part of the gift of being involved in a religious community such as ours is that it invites us to stretch, grow, and risk.
> If it is your tendency to jump in and talk, risk sitting back and listening deeply.
> If it is your tendency to be silent, taking it all in, risk speaking out.
> If it is your tendency to see the glass half empty, anticipating all that might go wrong, risk seeing the positive—the possibility of what could turn out right.
> If it is your tendency to keep things smooth, take the risk of stirring the waters a bit.
> If it is your tendency to take the lead, risk trusting that others are also good stewards.

We’re Stuck

Sometimes you’ll reach an impasse in a meeting, and no matter how hard you work, you can’t seem to come through the other side to clarity and consensus. Here are some ways to cope when you’re spinning your wheels:

- Take a short break. Sometimes people are simply tired and need to rest a few brain cells.
- Break into small groups to engage in creative brainstorming.
- Do something fun. Try getting up and changing chairs, or stand up and continue the conversation while standing.
- Invite silent reflection: Give people one to five minutes to reflect in silence and write down their thoughts.
- Refocus on mission by exploring how this discussion and decision are connected to our ultimate purpose for being.
- Think in images. Ask participants to think what this reminds them of—what images and metaphors come to mind.
- Set a deadline. Give the group a defined amount of time to come up with a decision.
- Invite people who haven’t spoken much to add their contributions.

- Choose a subgroup to work on the issue, and propose some strategies at the next meeting.
- If the conversation had been adversarial, invite people to stop advocating a position but instead to speak and listen from the heart.
- Take a long break by tabling the topic until the next meeting.

How to Handle Absences

Establish a protocol for absences. It should include the following:

- Expect participants to let the chairperson know in advance if they are not coming to the meeting.
- Acknowledge the people who are absent.
- Match people who are present to follow up with people who are absent by saying, "Who can call Jacob, check in to see how he is, and let him know what happened at the meeting?"

If a person is absent more than occasionally, have the chairperson check in with the person and ask the following kinds of questions:

- I notice that you've missed several meetings over the last weeks, and I've been wondering what's up.
- What is getting in the way of your being able to come to meetings? (This question may reveal barriers such as the time of day, child care needs, and so on.)
- How does your involvement with the group connect to your current sense of personal ministry? (This question may reveal that it doesn't and that it may be a good time for the person to consider resigning from the group.)
- Your contribution to the group is really important and we've missed you. What can we do to make it easier for you to be involved?
- How do you want to proceed from here?

If there is a general lack of attendance to the meeting, consider the following:

- Check to ensure that the time, frequency, and location still work for people.
- Reflect collectively on the underlying purpose of these meetings, why they are important for the congregation, and how they connect to each individual's personal ministry.
- Evaluate how people experience the meetings and how to make them more effective.
- Give people roles for the meetings.
- Consider meeting less frequently for a more intensive time.

Innovative Tools and Methods

A wide assortment of tools and methods can enhance a meeting's productivity and enjoyment. (Yes, most meetings can be fun!) Below are a few suggestions. **(If you are looking for more ideas to create great meetings, refer to the References on page 36.)**

Starting and ending on time.	Time savers.
Intentional check-in questions	Taking time to appreciate one another.

Celebrating together.
Fun with flip charts.
Checking in midway through a meeting.
Sticker dots.
Who, what, when action flowchart.
Where do you stand?
Building relationships.
Energizers.

Starting and Ending On Time

Honor the time commitment of people volunteering to attend a meeting by beginning and ending on time. Using a bell or chime to let people know that the time is almost up (especially in breakout activities and during check-in) is a gentle way of encouraging people to wrap up. If it looks as if things aren't going to be completed in the time allotted, invite participants to help create solutions to the time crunch problem.

Intentional Check-In Questions

Using intentional check-in questions at the beginning of a meeting can really help the group go deeper by inviting creative interchange and making connections between the work of the congregation and personal growth. Allow a short period of silence for participants to reflect on the question. Then, in groups that contain less than ten people, give each person one minute to share his or her response. Following the silent reflection in groups of more than ten people, invite small group sharing, and then share any insights in the entire group. The following are some sample focus questions related to possible meeting themes:

MENTORING: Who has most helped you become the person you are? Why?

NEW PROGRAM OR ACTIVITY: If you had the nerve, what new thing would you like to do? Why?

JUSTICE ISSUES: If you had one minute on national TV to speak about this issue, what one or two key things would you say?

BUILDING-RELATED THEMES: What is your favorite part of your own home? Why?

MONEY AND STEWARDSHIP: When was a time you were more generous than you imagined you would be?

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN: When you were a child, which adult outside of your family had the most positive impact on you? Why?

ORGANIZING CELEBRATIONS: What is a memorable celebration in your life, and what made it wonderful?

Time Savers

Here are a few tips for keeping your meetings flowing and saving time:

- Start and end on time.

- Give clear instructions. If you are using breakout groups or individual reflection time, be clear at the outset what you want individuals or groups to do, how much time they have, and how you want them to report back to the larger group.
- Distribute materials in advance of the meeting whenever possible. If not possible, distribute all materials at the beginning of the meeting.
- Prepare visuals in advance.
- Establish a "parking lot" for ideas that aren't relevant to the topic at hand but are important to follow up.

Taking Time to Appreciate One Another

Congregations operate by voluntary association and a lot of sweat equity. Help nurture a culture of appreciation in your congregation by

- Recognizing people's efforts often and in different contexts. You can do this one on one, within meetings, or as part of ritual with the entire congregation. Recognition can be tangible (such as a prize, reduction of registration costs, or a certificate), intangible (such as a thank-you or a pat on the back), or both kinds.
- Acknowledging contributions when a major task is accomplished.
- Honoring those who have completed their involvement with a group.

Celebrating Together

When you experience a success, take time to celebrate. If something is worth doing, it is worth celebrating our love, our commitment, and our efforts. A crucial part of meetings is taking time to pause, look backward, and mark the time that was. Celebrating sends the message to participants that what was accomplished really matters and that people's hard work is truly appreciated. Celebrating honors individuals, encourages growth, and builds team spirit. It also invites reflection to learn from the past and to chart new directions for the future.

Celebrating can be spontaneous or planned, elaborate or simple. Whatever form it takes, it is important that celebrating happens! Without it, church meetings can feel like a moral obligation. Celebrations can include special food, a fun activity, giving gifts, saying good-bye to those leaving the team, and welcoming newcomers to the team. Some special activities include going to a movie, making art to display the accomplishment, and team members' writing one thing they appreciate about a team member on a sheet on his or her back.

1. **JOB DONE, YEAH!**
   When your group or entire congregation accomplishes a difficult task, take the time to celebrate its completion. Relive the surprises (good and bad); invite people to talk about what the key learnings were throughout the process.

2. **MIDWAY AND ANNUAL REVIEW**
   If the group meets monthly, consider having a semiyearly celebration and review. A conversation could use the following ORID structure:

   So we're halfway through (or have just completed) the church year.

OBJECTIVE-LEVEL QUESTIONS: GETTING THE FACTS

- What were our key accomplishments so far this year?
- What have your major roles been?

REFLECTIVE-LEVEL QUESTIONS: HONORING FEELINGS, REACTIONS, AND ASSOCIATIONS

- What are you personally most proud of?
- What's been the most disappointing, or the most challenging?

INTERPRETIVE-LEVEL QUESTIONS: EXPLORING MEANING

- What are key learnings that helped us navigate difficulties?
- How are we fulfilling our own and the congregation's mission?

DECISIONAL-LEVEL QUESTIONS: MAKING DECISIONS

- What are some changes or new directions we want to consider for the new year?

Fun with Flip Charts

Keep the shared work in front of participants by recording results on flip charts and posting them for the entire group to see. Having a visual representation of activities is encouraging and motivating. Be sure that your writing is large and clear enough for all to see.

FAIL-SAFE FLIP CHART REMOVAL

Do you know how to remove a flip chart from the pad without ripping the paper in half? Here's the simple solution: Make a three-inch tear, parallel to the ground at the top left corner of the sheet. Firmly hold the bottom right corner of the sheet with one hand, and quickly pull the page down and to the right. Ta da!

STICKEES IN ADVANCE

Use sticky tack or masking tape to affix paper to walls. Have masking tape torn in advance for ease of use, or assemble the sticky tack in "ready to go" small balls.

MARKERS

Take care in the type of markers you use, as some people have environmental sensitivities to the scents. Water-based, unscented markers are usually a safe bet.

JAZZY FLIP CHARTS

Entire books have been written on how to create engaging flip charts. Here are a couple of ideas: Use lots of white space. Write in letters that are big enough so the writing is legible for the people seated the farthest away. Use different colors for contrast. Use simple symbols to set sections apart (for example, ☺, ☹, *, !!, ??, →, and ♬).

Checking In Midway through a Meeting

Leslie Bendaly, in her book On Track: Taking Meetings from Good to Great, suggests four types of performance checks that can be used in a meeting to ensure that important issues are not being missed (pages 83–91):

- **GENERAL PROCESS CHECK:** "How effectively are we working as a team right now?"
- **LOGIC CHECK:** "Have we missed anything?"

- **Feelings check:** "Let's stop and touch base right now. How are people feeling about the direction we're moving in?"
- **Creativity check:** "What are ways we could be more innovative in our approach just now?"

Sticker Dots

If you want to get a reading of the mind of a group, try the sticker dot method. Say your Social Action Committee is trying to determine some specific strategies on how to address poverty in your community. Together you've come up with seven possible actions to take in the next year; however, you don't have the people power to implement all seven of them. To get a sense of the whole group's interests, give each participant three dots and say, "Each dot represents your personal interest and passion. You can place a dot on any one of the options; in fact, you can place two or three of your dots on any one option." After people have placed the dots, have a brief ORID conversation:

Objective-Level Questions: Getting the Facts

- What do you notice about the results?

Reflective-Level Questions: Honoring Feelings, Reactions, and Associations

- What surprises you about the results?

Interpretive-Level Questions: Exploring Meaning

- What do the results say about the group's thinking at this time?

Decisional-Level Questions: Making Decisions

- What are our next steps?

This method can be used with a large number of people as well—with entire congregations, if you have a separate voting station for every fifty people or so. It is an interactive and visual way to take the pulse of an entire group.

Who, What, When Action Flowchart

When working on more complicated tasks involving a variety of people, consider creating a who, what, when action flowchart. This visual aid enables team members to see where their individual actions fit into the big picture and indicates when the tangible products will be delivered.

Where Do You Stand?

A fun way to check in with larger groups is to use physical movement and get to know one another quickly. Ask a series of questions, and invite people to move to a separate location of the room, depending on their answers. When they have arrived at the location, you may ask what they notice about what they see. Are there patterns emerging from this exercise that are of interest to the group? Are they surprised about what people have indicated by voting with their feet?

The following are some sample polling questions for the above physical movement exercise:

- **Years you've been a UU.** Were you: Born UU? UU since a child? UU only as an adult? 25 years or more? 10–24 years? 5–10 years? 2–5 years? 1 year or less?
- **Your prayer life.** Do you: Pray daily? Pray weekly? Pray occasionally? Never pray?

- **YOUR THEOLOGICAL IDENTITY.** Are you a: Theist? Agnostic? Atheist? Christian? Pagan? Other?
- **HAVE YOU BEEN/ARE YOU: ON THE BOARD** of the church: Yes? No?
- **DO YOU TEACH/HAVE YOU TAUGHT** religious education: Yes? No?
- **HAVE YOU LED A SUNDAY SERVICE**: Yes? No?
- **DO YOU INVITE AT LEAST ONE NEW PERSON TO CHURCH** each month: Yes? No?
- **NUMBER OF COMMITTEES YOU CURRENTLY SIT ON:** 0? 1? 2? 3? or more?
- **DO YOU PARTICIPATE IN AT LEAST ONE PROGRAM** that nurtures the spirit: 1/month? 1/season? 1/year? Rarely? Never?
- **MAIN REASON WHY YOU JOINED THE UU CHURCH:** Love? Learn? Serve? Congregational maintenance (to keep the place going)?

Building Relationships

The following are a few exercises to build relationships and make connections with one another in meetings.

REMEMBER WHEN: Invite group members to reflect on the past. Say, for example, "Remember when you first joined the congregation and how it's had an impact on your life since," or "Remember when you first joined this group and how things are different now."

TESTIMONY: At each meeting regularly invite one group member to give his or her testimony. Over the course of the year's meetings rotate among all willing group members until each has had a turn. Give the person five minutes to speak, and ask him or her to address questions such as "What brought me here?" "What keeps me here?" and "What is my growing edge?" or "What do I find challenging?" Invite questions and conversation following the individual's sharing.

LIFE LINE: Give each person a piece of blank paper and a pen. Have each one draw a line of her or his life, indicating a few major life events (three or more, depending on how much time you have). Each person then should describe the key events. Alternatively, the events and descriptions may focus on the topic of the meeting. For example, a prompt at a meeting on mentoring could be, "Describe three times when you were guided by someone else." At an anti-oppression meeting, you might say, "Describe three times when race became an issue in your life." At a meeting focusing on canvassing, you could begin with "Describe three times when abundance prevailed in your life."

TWO TRUTHS/ONE LIE: Invite each person to write down two true things and one lie about himself or herself. Tell the participants to answer in any order and to make their writing large enough for others in the room to see. Each person takes a turn while others try to guess which things are true and which is the lie. After all have guessed, the person tells which are true and which is the lie.

Energizers

If your meeting is longer than one hour, be sure to take brain and body breaks to reenergize participants. A few ideas for fun energizers follow:

UP AND DOWN: Sing a song and, on a certain word, stand up or put arms up; on other words, sit down or put arms down. You could try "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean," changing positions on every word with a b. Or use "Spirit of Life," and change positions on every word with an s sound in it.

SING A FAVORITE SONG FROM THE HYMN BOOK: A few songs that participants probably won't need words for are "This Little Light of Mine," "Spirit of Life," "There Is More Love Somewhere," and "Peace Like a River."

STRETCH AND YAWN: Invite people to spend an entire minute stretching and yawning. This is surprisingly energizing!

Conclusion

Creating effective congregational meetings is more intricate than it may first appear. In a good meeting, people feel that they are respected, that their unique gifts are valued and put to good use, and that their involvement matters. They are able to see how their efforts, in cooperation with others, achieve important results for the congregation and community. Throughout their involvement are chances to make friends, grow deeper in their faith, and build community. At the end of a great church meeting, members leave feeling grateful for the people they are ministering with and hopeful about the future of their congregation.

***Important note for searching UUA.org:** All the UUA resources mentioned are available in the Leaders section of the web site, in the Leaders' Library. Please use quotation marks around the title when you search in order to bring up the resource or item you seek.

Useful Web Pages

Important note for searching UUA.org: All UUA resources mentioned are available in the Leaders section of the web site, in the Leaders' Library. Please use quotes around the title when you search to bring up the resource or item you seek.

"All the Documents Needed by a Membership Committee," at
UUA.org >Leaders' Library> search "Membership Committee Documents"

"Beyond Casseroles: Caring Committees That Work," at
UUA.org >Leaders' Library> search "Beyond Casseroles"

"Church Can Be Perilous for Those with Allergies," at
UUA.org >Leaders' Library> search "Allergies"

"Handling Disruptive People: Policies That Ease the Strain," at
UUA.org >Leaders' Library> search "Handling Disruptive People"

"Leadership Starts before Board Meetings Begin," at
UUA.org>Leaders' Library> search "Leadership Starts"

"The Nominating Committee: Making It Work for You," at
UUA.org >Leaders' Library> search "Nominating Committee"

"A Three-Person Membership Committee for Small Congregations," at
UUA.org >Leaders' Library> search "Three-Person"

"To Keep Committees Filled, Make Church Meaningful ," at
UUA.org >Leaders' Library> search "Keep Committees Filled"

"Ways to Get Board Meetings to Go Faster and Work Better," at
UUA.org >Leaders' Library> search "Go Faster and Work Better"

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