Parish Meetings: An Encounter with Jesus

by John J. Boucher

"God so loved the world that he didn't send a committee," reads the plaque in the parish secretary's office. Committee and ministry meetings can often be a problem in parish life when they should be energizing sources of growth.

Consider the parish pastoral council (PPC) meetings at St. Ophelia Parish, for example. Every third Friday of the month the eight members of the PPC stampede into the rectory at 7:00 PM. Father Cantor barely sounds an opening "Our Father" before participants lunge into the ring, each with their own perfect plans to enrich and perfect the parish and school. All too often, someone’s feelings are wounded and a cloud of broken relationships rises over the rectory as the meeting draws to a close at 11:00 PM. Some parishioners wryly refer to the sessions as the Catholic version of the "WWF Smack-Down!" (World Wrestling Federation) Father Cantor deeply appreciates the quality and competence of each PPC member, but he struggles to help them work together as a team.

What can be done in such a situation? Let us begin with the firm belief that every parish meeting is an opportunity to encounter Jesus Christ and to build community. As members of parish staffs, finance committees, parish pastoral councils, and other parish ministries and committees, we have a sacred trust. We are called to serve Jesus and our parishioners—this is the deepest reality of parish activities. Money, buildings, and programs are our business only because Christ comes first. When we make this commitment explicit through the use of our time at meetings, we can help one another turn away from other "gods." We are then able to see more clearly the connections between the Lord Jesus and everyday life. Parish meetings can be transformed into an evangelizing experience of a “new Pentecost” (see Acts 1-4) for participants and all who live in our parish boundaries.

The format of our parish meetings can, in itself, help us to keep our priorities straight. Try the following approach for a one-and-a-half-hour meeting which, while it is no magic cure-all for problems, has produced positive results. The format that we suggest has four parts: 1) prayer, 2) study, 3) sharing, 4) business.

Prayer (5 to 10 minutes)

First is prayer. Many of us, disenchanted by the past experience of a quickly mumbled "Our Father," may revolt at the idea of opening prayer. Yet, it is in and for Jesus Christ that each group exists. We must be willing to take the time to understand and be aware of Lord’s presence. He has promised to be among us as we serve him and one another. For this reason lectors, ushers, the parish pastoral council, and the finance council, etc., are gatherings of God's people invited to come before the Holy One. We meet on holy ground. When we gather we need to work at cultivating this sense of the sacred. How
different our meetings would be if we approached them as Moses did the burning bush (Exodus 3:4-10)!

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
And only [they who see take off their] shoes.
The rest sit round it
And pluck blackberries.

E.B. Browning (Adapted)

As we listen to and talk to Jesus, we gain a divine perspective of ourselves and our activities. A good five to ten minutes is not too much time to "waste" on prayer as an introduction to a one-and-a-half-hour meeting. This prayer must be carefully planned in order to be effective. Responsibility for this planning can be rotated among members. Music, PowerPoint slides, meditations, the Jesus Prayer, morning or evening prayer, and other prayer methods can be used effectively. Even a simple form prayer that is read slowly, followed by the fullness of listening in silence, is appropriate. We might then ask, “What word, image, phrase, or sound caught your attention in what we read, heard, or viewed?”

Study (10 minutes)

The second component is study or learning. Ten minutes can be used to read or listen to scripture (with commentary), a church document, an article or short chapter from a book, a CD/DVD, an audio tape, or a short teaching about our ministry. Some groups set their study themes for an entire year at a time; others for the next 3 to 4 months.

Study is the bridge between prayer and the sharing of faith that follows. It provides much needed adult faith formation. We need it in order to slow down and appreciate others, who are at varying levels of understanding and practice of the Catholic Faith. We are called to become a fruitful community “of one heart and mind” centered in Jesus Christ (Acts 4:32). Learning something together puts everyone on our staff, ministry or committee on a common footing. Coupled with some good faith-sharing questions, such learning has the power to transform, not only our ministry, but also our relationships with one another, and ultimately will trickle down to influence our parishes as a whole. Members of various groups that stay faithful to regular study together frequently become more interested in promoting evangelization and adult faith formation on the parish level. They take more seriously the need to continue their own life-long spiritual growth.

Faith-Sharing (10 to 15 minutes)

A third component of the first half hour of the meeting is sharing life experiences. Catching up on personal relationships may happen naturally before and after meetings, but it is important to also bring these relationships into Christ’s presence during the meeting as well. Asking what we liked best
or least about the past day, week, or month might be a good place to start sharing. Or we might ask occasionally, “What do we most enjoy about coming together?” Designating time for sharing also helps us build relationships with the people in our group that we don't know well. We have the potential of becoming a community of brothers and sisters in Jesus, not just a group with particular tasks to do. Just ten to fifteen minutes of life-sharing in groups of four or five people can make meetings a joy, rather than a burden.

"Sharing" questions often arise out of the prayer and study that we have chosen, or out of the human issues underlying the business at hand. We have found that designing good faith-sharing questions is as important as choosing balanced materials to study. One possible question for faith-sharing that might always be offered is, “How did what we studied comfort you or challenge you?” Another good beginning question is to explore, “How has what we studied connected with a memory, feeling, or experience from your past life?” A parish catechetical leadership committee, charged with choosing a new Coordinator of Religious Education (CRE), might first study together about what makes a good religious education administrator. In their sharing, they might ask each person to recall the qualities of a favorite school teacher or religious educator from his or her youth. Then they might recall their own personal successes or failures in trying to proclaim Jesus or to teach the Catholic Faith to others. From there they can move on to “thinking questions” like, “What qualities, education, and experience does the new Coordinator of Religious Education need to have? How do any of the current candidates come close to having these?”

If someone among us is hurting badly, our meetings may be poisoned unless we become aware of that hurt. Experience shows that persons who are extremely critical or angry during business meetings in parish groups are often experiencing some kind of pain in their personal lives. Their attitudes may have nothing to do with the material under consideration. "If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it. If one member is honored, all the members share its joy" (1 Corinthians 12:26 NAB).

We can respond to someone at our meetings who is in pain. The designated time of sharing allows this to happen in simple ways like a hand on the shoulder, a hug, or to stop and pray for the person's needs. After the meeting, it is also helpful to reach out to serve the wounded person in some way: a simple cup of coffee, concrete help on a project, or even just a phone call or e-mail. If we have spent time listening to and supporting one another, we face the issues of the business of ministry with much more unity.

Once there was a single mother on our human services committee who was finding fault with every suggestion the group would make to provide help for homeless wandering the streets of the parish. When we changed our format to include faith and life-sharing, she began telling us about her deep frustration at being under-employed. She had a deep fear that her family would end up homeless, begging on the streets, with only a few belongings in a giant green garbage bag. As we supported her struggles, the change in her attitude was dramatic. In time, she even found a better position with a larger company closer to her home.
Business

A fourth component of a parish ministry or committee meeting is, of course, the business at hand: the reports, the finances, the programs, the problems that need to be solved and the visioning and plans for the future. If we have joined as one people through prayer, study, and faith-sharing, we still have one hour of productive time left for business. In one sense we have multiplied our time together.

Consider the following suggestions for making the most of business time:

1. Mail out the agenda beforehand so that all may prepare their thoughts.
2. Start and end the meeting on time.
3. Have the leader move the meeting along through questions.
4. Make decisions either by consensus or majority vote, according to group preference.
5. If extra time is needed, take a vote to extend the meeting by fifteen to thirty minutes.
6. Delegate left-over items to sub-committees or transfer them to the next agenda.


It is a constant challenge for us to make clear and definite decisions without violating persons. At Our Lady of the Way parish we faced a decision concerning the repair of a leaky roof. Just before our finance council meeting, Tom and Bill had an angry confrontation about the contractors we were considering. Bill's brother-in-law owned R & D roofing. Bill was convinced that the company would give good service at a low price. Tom was convinced that awarding the contract to R & D would be a form of favoritism. Accusations flew back and forth between the two men.

Father Xavier and Jill (the chairperson) arrived shortly thereafter. Tom and Bill glared at one another icily across the table. Bids by R & D and Acme Roofing were outlined for the group. A few members asked questions, but not Tom or Bill. Jill asked if Acme builders would be a good choice. A few heads nodded accompanied by silence from the rest of us. No one objected. Jill concluded aloud, "Acme Roofing it is. Meeting adjourned." Bill stormed out of the room in a huff. Fr. Xavier received his resignation from the finance council the next day.

The chairperson of the council might have chosen a better process for deciding about contractors. The nodding of a few heads does not always allow for personal reservations, or the creative interplay of different opinions. The chairperson might have listed pros and cons for each choice, asking each member in turn to contribute to the list. Then she could have asked each person what choice he or she favored and why. Then both Tom and Bill would have been heard. After any further discussion, Jill could have called for a vote. Though Bill's choice might have lost anyway, he would not have felt so hurt as to resign.
As Christians it is important that we show respect to one another. **How we decide may be eternally more important than what we decide.** It is helpful during heated discussions to stop and call the group into God's love through a short time of prayer together, before resuming the business at hand. The experience can be like readjusting a boat's course during a high wind.

Parish staff, ministry and committee meetings do not have to be a “problem” in our Christian lives. They can become a “holy passion!” If we take the time to make each gathering a meeting with Jesus Christ, and an occasion of mutual support through sharing, we will experience more and more the joys of fruitful service in the Body of Christ. These components, coupled with management that values and respects persons, can bring us closer to accomplishing God's will with love and compassion. "God so loved the world that he didn't send a committee," but the Father, Son, and Spirit came to us as a community of persons in the Trinity. This is the model we are invited to embrace.