

Parish Meetings: An Encounter with Jesus

"God so loved the world that he didn't send a committee," reads the plaque in the parish secretary's office. And on a bad day, most of us would agree. So how can we experience committee and ministry meetings as more energizing sources of growth and evangelization?

Let us begin with the firm belief that every parish meeting is an opportunity to encounter Jesus Christ, to build the community of disciples and to empower each other to evangelize. As members of parish staffs, finance, evangelization or stewardship committees, parish pastoral councils, and other parish ministries and committees, we have a sacred trust. Jesus calls and sends us as missionaries—this is the deepest reality of parish activities. Money, buildings, and programs are important only because Christ gives them to us as tools to engage in the "New Evangelization."

"A new evangelization is synonymous with mission, requiring the capacity to set out anew, go beyond boundaries and broaden horizons. The new evangelization is the opposite of self-sufficiency, a withdrawal into oneself, a *status quo* mentality and an idea that pastoral programmers are simply to proceed as they did in the past. Today, a 'business as usual' attitude can no longer be the case." (Synod of Bishops, XIII Ordinary General Assembly, "The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith," Lineamenta, no. 10, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20110202_lineament_a-xiii-assembly_en.html.)

Through more effective use of time spent at meetings, we can help one another turn away from other "gods." We can see more clearly the connections between the Lord Jesus and everyday life. We can join Pope Benedict XVI who speaks of our "need to rediscover the journey of faith so as to shed ever clearer light on the joy and renewed enthusiasm of the encounter with Christ." ("Apostolic Letter on the Year of Faith," no. 2)

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20111011_porta-fidei_en.html. Parish meetings can become new evangelizing experiences, new Pentecosts (see Acts 1-4), for us and for all who live in our parish boundaries.

The structure of our parish meetings can help us keep evangelization as THE PRIORITY of priorities. Try the following approach for a one-and-a-half-hour meeting which can produce many long-term 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. It is in and for Jesus Christ that our group exists. We must be willing 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, and all subgroups of the parish, are invited to come before the Holy One and gather as God's people. When we gather we need to work at cultivating a 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 [those 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 on 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, video, PowerPoint slides, meditations, the Jesus Prayer, morning or evening prayer, and other prayer forms can be used effectively. And any prayer can be read slowly, followed by the fullness of listening in silence and the question, "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, to listen to or view a CD/DVD, online video, or a short teaching about some aspect of 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, slows us down and helps us 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 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 will ultimately influence our whole parishes. Members of teams and groups that are faithful to regular study often become real advocates for evangelization and adult faith formation on the parish level. And they often become more intent on pursuing their own life-long conversion and spiritual growth.

Faith-Sharing (10 to 15 minutes)

A third component of the first half hour of the meeting is sharing life and/or faith experiences. Catching up on personal relationships may happen naturally before and after meetings, but it is also important to bring these relationships into Christ's presence during the meeting. Asking what has been the best or most challenging parts of the past day, week, or month might be a good place to start sharing. Or we might ask, "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, not just a task oriented group. Just ten to fifteen minutes of life-sharing in groups of four or five people can make meetings a joy, rather than a burden.

"Faith-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 be offered is, "How did what we studied comfort you or challenge you?" Another good beginning question is, "How has what we studied connected with a memory, feeling, or experience from your past life?"

We can also 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 praying 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, e-mail or text message. If we spend time listening to and supporting one another, we face the issues of the business of ministry with much more unity.

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 our visioning and planning for the future. If we have joined as one people in Jesus Christ through prayer, study, and faith-sharing, we still have an hour of productive time left for business. Over time (9-12 months), we begin to see everything through the eyes and mission of Jesus. We have found that using this simple outline for our meetings actually seems to multiply 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. The leader moves 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.

(A helpful treatment of how to run a staff, ministry, parish pastoral council or committee business portion of a meeting can be found in Jean Marie Hiesberger, *Fostering Leadership Skills in Ministry: A Parish Handbook*, Liguori Publications, 2008).

Staff, ministry and committee meetings do not have to be a "problem." They can become a "holy passion!" If we take the time to make each gathering a meeting with Jesus Christ, that includes mutual support through sharing, we will experience more the joys of serving together as members of the Body of Christ. We will be evangelized and called to deeper conversion. These components, coupled with confidentiality, 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 come to us as a community of loving persons in the Trinity. Theirs is the new life we are invited to embrace in the "New Evangelization."

For Small Group Sharing—25-30 minutes:

1. What are parish or ministry meetings **most like** in your parish? (Check only one)
 Bright sunlight
 Blazing fires
 Candles in the dark
 Smoldering coals
 (Other: be specific) _____
2. Which of the four suggested parts of parish or ministry meetings (prayer, study, sharing, or business) are already being done well in your parish?
3. Which part of parish or ministry meetings is **most life-giving** for you—prayer, study, sharing, or business—brings you closer to Jesus? Why?
4. Which part of a meeting is most suitable for using the gifts you have to offer?
5. What can we do to make our parish or ministry meetings more of a “passion” instead of a “problem?”

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