Effective committee meetings: a guide for congregations

Barry Oliver

We have all heard and shared humorous stories and anecdotes about committees. Quips such as "committees keep minutes but waste hours" and "what else can you do but get bored at a board meeting" are well known to most of us. Committees have come in for some bad press.

But it does not have to be that way. The information shared in this article will help those who have been selected as members of church committees make their participation effective and efficient. We do not govern by autocratic dictate, but we do govern on the basis of broad-based participation and representation. We depend on groups of people who take part in the decision-making process. These groups of people that have been empowered by the church body to make appropriate decisions, we call committees.



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Types and functions of committees

The executive committees of the church at large are, of necessity, larger committees generally conducted in a more formal manner, following well-prescribed rules of order. The committees of the local church tend to be smaller and generally conducted with less formality. Nevertheless, if the principles that are discussed here are applied and used, especially in the local church, local church committees will work much better.

Broadly speaking, committees are established for one or more of three purposes:

A committee may be set up to study or investigate a matter. In this case the work of the committee includes bringing back to the body that established it a report of its findings and can be considered complete when it has fulfilled a specific assignment.

A committee may be asked to investigate and make a recommendation with respect to an issue. This will be particularly so when more than one viable alternative exists. A nominating committee established to nominate or recommend persons for office in the local church represents this type of committee.

A committee may be established to take specific actions. Most long-standing committees in the church are empowered to take actions. Committees should recognize the importance of this prerogative in accordance with guidelines set out in the *Church Manual* or in the terms of reference that were articulated at the time when the committee was established.

Whatever purposes they serve, committees are answerable to the bodies that established them. No committee has the right to extend its functions beyond those that were determined when established. The body that establishes a committee should agree on terms of reference that describe in simple point form the aims, objectives, and functions of a committee. When a committee has been clearly told what to do, the members are then able to work more effectively and efficiently. When clear terms of reference have not been provided, the committee is less likely to get the job done to the satisfaction of the parent body because it simply does not understand the expectations.

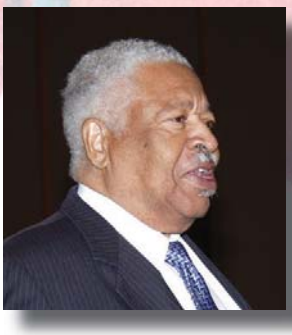
The mission of the church

Because we are speaking about processes in the church as they relate to the committee structure, we cannot simply take principles that may apply in committees that transact business in secular organizations and assume these can be transported into the church. We are to be about our Father's business. Therefore, for every meeting conducted in the church, the agenda should first deal with items that specifically focus on the mission of the church. Unless our committees contribute in some way to the fulfilling of the mission of the church, they should not meet, for this represents a waste of time. Churches and church members everywhere need to focus on the most essential items. In every committee we should find ways to express, discuss, and make decisions with reference to matters that specifically enhance our capacity to fulfill our commission. Committee members need to be apprised of how their actions and decisions

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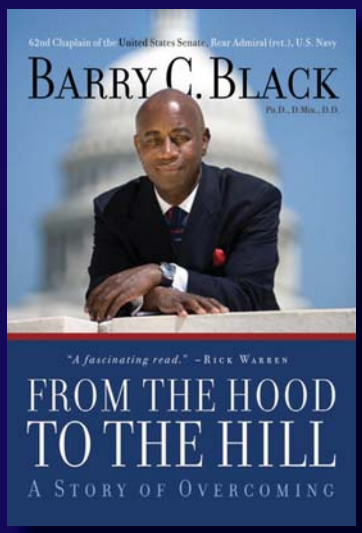
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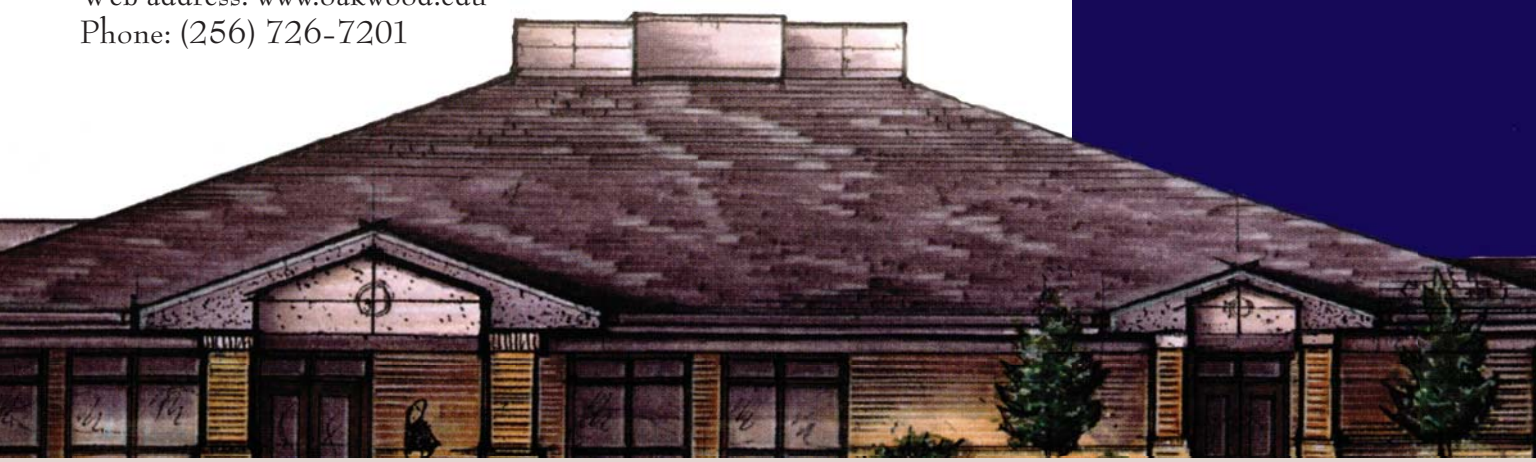
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MAKING MINISTRY MEANINGFUL

are contributing to our most essential objectives.

Do not take it for granted that the people on the committee will somehow automatically assume that what the committee does relates to the mission of the church. Take time to articulate, discuss, and decide exactly how this can be accomplished. Listen to reports that relate to how past actions of the committee have enhanced the mission of the church. Take time to pray, seeking the blessing of the Lord in the work of the committee and its relation to the mission of the church.

The primary responsibility for seeing that the mission of the church remains preeminent belongs to the chairperson. Chairpersons should have the capacity to articulate the vision and see its accomplishment. Otherwise they are no better than the airline pilot who is said to have announced, "The good news is that we are making very good time. The bad news is we are lost."

Preparing for the committee

A direct correlation exists between preparation for a committee meeting and the productivity of the meeting. How many committee meetings have you attended in which you became increasingly agitated because you were wasting your time? In discussing essential preparation, several factors need to be considered:

Know the purpose of the meeting. Have you ever asked yourself these questions: Why is this committee being held? What outcome is expected? There should be an expectation that the meeting is going to achieve results. The chairperson and the secretary should have discussed the purpose of the meeting prior to calling it so that members do not doubt that it is really necessary.

Carefully prepare a written agenda. The preparation of an agenda serves two important purposes: It clarifies in the mind of the chairperson the items to be discussed, and it communicates to the committee members vital information that should be available to them before the meeting commences.

However, a word of caution follows. While one discussion item on an agenda is good, there should not be too many such matters. By their very nature, discussion items are open-ended. If there are more than say, two or three discussion items, the chairperson will almost certainly have difficulty in keeping the meeting to time.

Give prior information. In addition to the distribution of the agenda before the committee meeting, wherever possible both the starting time and expected finishing time of the committee should be given in advance. Clearly state those who are expected to attend. Ensure that everyone entitled to attend knows the location of the meeting. Giving people adequate information before the committee meets enables them to feel valued. In fact, a wise chairperson will actively encourage committee members to be seeking the Lord in prayer as the essential preparation for discussing the matters at hand.

The meeting should be so well planned in advance that adding agenda items at the last minute rarely happens, for then the committee members are deprived of adequate preparation and prayerful consideration of the matter. Only in matters of great urgency should anything be considered without proper preparation.

The functions of the chairperson

The chairperson holds the most responsibility for ensuring that the meeting is conducted decently and in order. In fact, the quality of the meeting almost always resides on the quality of the chairmanship. The chair position carries both responsibility and privilege. Chairpersons should not approach the responsibility lightly and without due regard for the position that they occupy. In order for the chair to function effectively, several important guidelines need to be observed:

The chairperson should know the key issues to be discussed in all agenda items. Effective chairpersons prepare thoroughly and can speak, if necessary, to any item on the agenda. They are well aware of the specific purpose of the meeting and keep that purpose in mind throughout. Homework, done prior to the meeting, is essential and should include, if necessary, consultation and discussion so that the chair has been well apprised of important issues.

The chairperson should encourage discussion of all sides of an issue. Those in the chair need to be sure that all sides of the argument are examined fairly by allowing those who wish to speak to an issue to do so. If some members of the committee do not seem to be speaking to an issue, the responsibility of the chair includes empowering them appropriately by inviting them to express their opinion on the issue. If, on the other hand, someone monopolizes the meeting, the chair needs to inform them that while their input is valued, all members of the committee need to be given opportunity to contribute.

On occasions a chairperson may wish to express a strong opinion on a particular issue. When that happens, the chairperson asks another person to occupy the chair temporarily in order to make the point that needs to be made.

The chairperson should know the dynamics in the group. When a committee meets for the first time, it is not usually possible to anticipate what group dynamics will operate. As time passes, however, patterns begin to emerge in the dynamics of a group that may strengthen or, alternatively, impede the work of the committee. A good chairperson retains sensitivity to such dynamics.

The chairperson will have carefully prepared appropriate opening remarks well before calling the committee to order. The chair should prepare well both to open the meeting and to introduce each item on the agenda but not necessarily present each one. For example, the chairperson could ask and introduce another person to conduct a short devotional at the beginning of the meeting.

In presenting each item, the chairperson needs to be factual, appropriately cheerful, topical, and focused on the discussion items. In a sense, the chair should capture the interest of the committee members in such a way that each member is ready and willing to actively participate in the discussion of the issue.

The chairperson should articulate a clear and fair summary of each item being discussed before putting it to the vote. In making this summary, impartiality is

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absolutely vital with the focus on the issues rather than on the personalities involved. From time to time the chair should be prepared to ask questions seeking clarification of issues that may not have been well expressed.

The chairperson should remain courteous and in control. Never should the chairperson permit the chair position to be usurped. Neither should the chair be dictatorial or rude, even with a committee member way out of line. No chairpersons should ever increase or even maintain their authority by participating in inappropriate, unethical, or unchristian conduct.

At the end of the meeting, the chairperson should make sure that responsibilities for the implementation of the actions have been assigned. Many committees approve excellent actions that are never implemented because members are not sure who needs to do what. The chairperson should ensure that all are clear as to who is responsible for implementing the action.

Finally, the chairperson should make sure that the committee meeting ends positively. For example, make sure that you thank people for coming to the meeting. It may be appropriate to make some personal remarks about some members of the committee. A reference to the date, time, and place for the next meeting of the particular committee may be in order.

The functions of the clerk or secretary

The secretary works together with the chairperson to ensure that the committee meeting operates efficiently and effectively. There should be ready communication and consultation between the chairperson and the secretary. The duties of the secretary follow.

The secretary formally calls the meeting. The secretary, in consultation with the chairperson, usually holds the responsibility for announcing the meeting in the manner appropriate for that specific committee.

The secretary makes the physical arrangements for the meeting. The secretary, again in consultation with the chairperson, usually makes the physical arrangements for the meeting. For example, the secretary will prepare the venue, the seating, the provision of heating or cooling, any writing or written materials, and any other items deemed desirable for successfully conducting the meeting.

The secretary assists in preparing the agenda. The secretary will generally choose the means by which the agenda will be distributed before the meeting. The agenda will usually be accompanied by appropriate reference material that will provide information to assist in the decision-making process.

The secretary prepares and circulates the minutes after the conclusion of the meeting. Minutes consist of a brief formal record of proceedings at meetings. They need to be concise while at the same time providing sufficient information to be readily understood by a person not at the meeting. They include details of the type of meeting; the place, day, and date of the meeting; the names of those present; apologies; approval of the minutes of the previous meeting; and an accurate record of actions taken.

As well as providing a record for future reference purposes, minutes help those who must implement decisions to do it correctly. It is good practice for the secretary to prepare the minutes as soon as possible after the meeting. The chairperson should read the draft of the minutes to ensure that they accurately reflect the proceedings of the meeting.

Approved minutes must not be altered in any way. A resolution can be passed at a later meeting to correct any error discovered after the minutes have been approved. If so, alterations should be included in the record of the later meeting. Minutes should not contain a record of anything that happened after the close of the meeting. The secretary also holds the responsibility for the preservation of the minutes.

The duties of committee members

A number of points need to be made with reference to the role and responsibilities of those who serve on the various committees and boards of our church. I believe in the privilege of serving as a member of a group of people called to transact the business of the Lord.

Committee members conducting the Lord's business should conduct themselves with appropriate Christian decorum, not making frivolous, irrelevant, unnecessary, time-consuming, or obstructionist speeches or motions. Generally, a person should speak to a particular issue only once in order to give adequate opportunity for as many as possible to speak to an issue or motion. However, the chairperson may give a person who has already spoken the opportunity to clarify previous remarks or answer a question.

At the discretion of the chairperson, persons who do not normally have the right of attendance may attend and address the committee as invitees. However, these persons do not have the right of making or seconding motions, nor do they have the right to vote. The chair has the right to ask attendees who are not committee members to leave the committee after the item under discussion has been finalized.

All remarks and discussion should be directed to or through the chairperson. This may appear somewhat ponderous at times. However, experience has shown that this wise practice helps dif-

fuse potentially difficult situations when people who are highly committed to differing positions begin to address their remarks to each other.

Appropriate rules of order

Those who participate in committees should be familiar with the almost universally accepted manner of transacting items through the committee.

A member makes a motion. When the chairperson introduces an item, they usually also ask for a motion. If proper preparation has taken place, the chair will know who should make the motion or there will be a formal written recommendation. Motions should be worded as clearly and as exactly as possible.

In some cases, some discussion may be needed before the chair entertains a motion. In such cases, discussion should be kept to a minimum before a motion is on the floor.

Another member seconds the motion. All motions require another person to second them in order to be considered. The purpose of the second is to inform the chair that more than one member wishes the motion to be considered. A second does not mean that the one who seconds the motion also favors the motion. It means that the one who seconds agrees that the motion should be brought to the committee for discussion and consideration.

The members discuss the motion. The motion is then discussed under the direction of the chair. If in the course of the discussion it becomes evident that an amendment is desirable, a motion for an amendment must be moved, seconded, and voted independently from the original motion. If the amendment is accepted, the motion as amended can then be discussed in preparation for the vote.

A member calls for the question to be voted. When discussion has proceeded to the point where all aspects of the matter have been aired, a member of the committee may call for the motion to be put to the vote by calling question. The chairperson then asks the committee to vote on whether they want discussion to cease and the matter to be put to the vote. If the vote to put the question to the vote comes in the affirmative, the original motion can then be put to the vote. If negative, discussion continues until a vote to put the question to the vote is resolved in the affirmative.

The chair puts the motion to the vote. Before putting the motion to the vote, the chairperson clearly restates the motion and ensures that all members understand exactly for what they are voting. The chairperson needs to always give opportunity for those who wish to vote in the affirmative and for those who wish to vote in the negative to submit their vote. The vote can be submitted by voice, by a show of hands, by standing, or by secret ballot, with the method of voting at the discretion of the chair. However, the chair should keep in mind that matters of a sensitive nature or which are of considerable importance should always be decided by secret ballot.

Unless a committee's rules say otherwise, the chairperson may choose to break the tied vote by voting in the affirmative or in the negative. However, the chair may choose to abstain and thus allow the motion to be defeated. The chair may also cause the motion to be lost by voting to obtain a tie, in which case the motion would be lost. This could occur when, for example, affirmative votes number 50 and negative votes number 49. If the chair were to vote in the negative, the vote would then be tied and the motion lost.

The chair announces the vote. Finally, the chair announces the result of the vote immediately after putting the question to the vote. Every motion made in a meeting must go through this basic process. All who participate in meetings should be familiar with this process.

Objective problem solving

Robert E. Firth has written some excellent material specific to the effective and efficient conduct of our committees.* Here are the points in the process as listed by Firth:

Define and clarify the problem to be resolved. The problem should be clearly stated before further action is taken.

Gather appropriate information. If the problem is not stated correctly, the information-collecting process will be impeded. Remember that decisions are likely to be only as good as the information the decision-makers have at their disposal.

Organize and analyze the data. When analysis of the data shows the need for further information, the chair should clearly point to a solution, or suggest alternative courses of action.

Choose from alternative courses of action. Most suggested solutions have advantages and disadvantages. A decision is a judgment of the best alternative in the circumstances. Every action therefore has ramifications that should be considered and the likely impact ascertained.

Implement the decision and reevaluate it. The committee should evaluate the results of the decisions that are made. The quality of the evaluation is directly related to the quality of subsequent decision-making.

Problem-solving techniques are developed in the course of experience. The simple principles that have been annunciated by Firth are well worth the time taken to become thoroughly familiar with and to be applied in the context of the committees in which we are involved.

Conclusion

If you wish to read additional material, I suggest three books: Mack Tennyson, *Making Committees Work* (Zondervan, 1992); Roberta Hestenes, *Turning Committees into Communities* (NavPress, 1991); Charles M. Olsen, *Transforming Church Boards into Communities of Spiritual Leaders* (The Alban Institute, 1995).

We have covered many important points that will help you make your committee effective and efficient. Committees are here to stay in the church. To dispense with them would lead us in a direction that may be chaotic. When conducted properly, they ensure appropriate, broad-based participation in the work of the church. M

* Robert E. Firth, *Guidelines for Committee and Board Members* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 1973), 71–83.